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My Cuban Routes

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in English

by

Vanessa Garcia

Dissertation Committee:  
Professor Barry Siegel, Chair  
Professor Amy Wilentz  
Associate Professor Erika Hayasaki

2015



# **DEDICATION**

To

All Cubans around the world

during a time of great change

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# CURRICULUM VITAE

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## FIELD OF STUDY

Creative Nonfiction

## PUBLICATIONS

*White Light*. New York: Shade Mountain Press, 2015. Print.

“How Superficial! – David Bowie and the Art of Surfacing in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Literature.” *David Bowie Critical: Perspectives*. Ed. Eoin Devereux, Aileen Dillane, and Martin J. Power. London: Routledge, 2015. Print

“The ‘Miami-Cuban’ (and Other Hyphenated Americans) in the World-System. *The International Journal of Diversity in Organizations, Communities, and Nations* 11.6 (2012): pp. 23-30. Article: Print (Spiral Bound). Article: Electronic

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

My Cuban Routes

By

Vanessa Garcia

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Irvine, 2015

Professor Barry Siegel, Chair

This is a project of Creative Nonfiction. It employs Literary Journalism and Narrative Nonfiction as its primary operating models.

My whole life people have asked me where I'm from. Dark haired and slant-eyed, they ask if I'm Italian, whether I have Asian blood. My answer is always different. Sometimes I say: I'm Cuban. Sometimes I say: I'm from Miami, but my parents are Cuban. Sometimes, if I really don't want to get into it I simply say: Miami Beach. The question that inevitably follows when the word Cuba makes its way into my answer is: What's Cuba like? Until November of 2014, I always had to reveal, always with dismay, that I had never stepped foot on the island. My explanations were always seemingly insufficient. "It would take a book," I always end up saying.

This dissertation is my real answer to the question: Why not Cuba for so long? And why Cuba now? Why, when I had travelled to so many other places, did Cuba remain the place I could not go?

*My Cuban Routes* answers this question through a combination of story, personal narrative/memoir, and journalism. Through my family's narrative and its effects on my



own, personal experiences, reactions, and formation, I try and get to the core of the answer, which is long and winding. This dissertation is made up of the alternate routes I had to take to Cuba -- alternate routes that both took me closer and further from Cuba, until the end of 2014, when everything began to change. For years there has been an economic embargo on Cuba that is slowly being lifted, due to Obama's speech on Dec. 17, 2014, opening up diplomatic relations with the island for the first time in over half a century.

My argument in this dissertation is that this shift could not have happened without a shift in what I call the Familial embargo -- the embargo imposed by Cuban-American families on themselves and their children, due to the pain of exile, and their faith-based beliefs against the Castro regime.

## **ROUTE 1: Birds**

Cuba has always been my lie and my truth. A place that, because I could not take a direct flight to, I had to take alternate routes toward. This zigzag meandering, I'm sure, began in the womb with the white-noise whisperings of Cuba all around me – my parents' stories, my grandparents' yearnings for the place they left behind, the stuff of refugees and migrant birds, the makings of the hyphen between Cuba and America.

But the womb is too early to remember. I am not one of those people that remembers sifting through amniotic fluid, or being tied to my mother umbilically. So I have to start somewhere else, a place that is both solid and ephemeral like the trunk of a family tree. My grandparents' house, my first crooked line to Cuba, and the place where I became a reader. It was here I learned the psychology of story – that sometimes you have to pierce it in order to draw it from its depth, like you would a fish by the tail, or a rafter from the sea.

I spent a great deal of my time at Maman and Papan's house as a kid – that's what I named them, like second parents that I folded into my life and vocabulary. Part of the reason I liked going to Maman and Papan's house was because it was an escape from my huge and volatile father, who never quite fit anywhere, and whose grumbles were heard across the land that was my childhood. Going to Maman and Papan's was like climbing a magical stalk and ending up in a quiet place above the clouds, where there were no dangerous giants, at least nowhere to be seen. Instead, it was a place where you got to ride in special, red convertibles and read Shakespeare in bed with Papan. Where your grandmother froze grapes for you and called them candy, their cold hardness sharpening inside your mouth, thrilling you down to your roots. It was a world in which bright,

yellow spoonfuls of egg yolk made you stronger, and where you drank Cuban coffee from orange juice glasses, where avocado trees were birthed in the kitchen, and where you could play cards with Maman through the night until dawn. Here, you and Papan could sit to draw the queen of the house, Maman. The most fun was when she was in her rollers and didn't want to be drawn but you and Papan would catch her anyway.

It was also a place where you saved the lives of birds.

Two birds in particular, which we eventually named Pirouline and Saltarín, like two vaudeville stars. And it's these birds that make up my first Cuban memory. Or rather, my first unconscious desire for Cuba, and perhaps my first true understanding of it. Not because these birds were a Cuban species, and not because they sang a Cuban song, but because of what lay beyond the span of their wings, in the undercurrent that forced them to fly into our lives.

These were birds that appeared seemingly out of the blue. But that couldn't have been true. The mother-bird had to have been building their nest for a while without our taking notice. Even though we looked out the window of Maman and Papan's bedroom every day. Maman had always wanted to live on a boulevard, where she could watch the passersby, the cars, the people, the bustle. "If I had all the money in the world," Maman would say, "I would buy myself a little house or an apartment right on the boulevard, the biggest street in town. Wouldn't that be something?"

Instead, she had this -- a huge window facing a side street, a place where she knew all her neighbors, but where the volume was not that of a boulevard but an alternate route. We got all the wanderers, the stragglers and strays. We lied to ourselves, told each

other these types were more fun to watch, it didn't matter that we weren't on the boulevard, right?

The day Maman discovered the birds, we were sitting on her bed, talking like two old ladies, though I was only seven or eight. We were sheltered underneath her lace *mosquitero*, which I pretended was a tent in the wilderness. We were quiet for a bit, and I was counting the holes in the lace above us. Maman was sewing -- she always seemed to be ironing or sewing something. One of the most vivid images of my childhood is the white and green bottle of Niagara Starch that was always nearby, the only brand she ever used.

"Look!!" Maman said, putting down her sewing and running to the window." I followed, barefoot in my underwear and neon pink t-shirt, which I wore knotted at the waist like the 80s punk-rocker I wanted to be.

"Oh my goodness, look at them," she cooed, "Look how cute they are."

They were three little birds and a mamma bird in a nest on the palm tree right in front of our window. Brown and wet looking, so sinewy. They were babies, but they looked like old people, I thought. We looked out at those birds for days. Sometimes we'd go outside and try to get a closer look at the nest lodged in the palm. Until a couple of days later, my parents came to pick me up and said: ok, time to go home. I could've stayed at Maman and Papan's house forever. But my father would get angry, burst out saying I had to go home, why didn't I want to go home, I couldn't spend my life there, I had a home of my own. Those were the days I was dragged back to my own house, with my parents and little sister. Until Maman and Papan would come visit or we'd go visit Maman and Papan again, and I'd latch on once more.

This next time, when I walked toward the house, I noticed the nest wasn't there anymore. And the palm tree was different too, missing fronds. Skinnier.

"I have a surprise for you," said Maman, the very second I walked in the door. She turned toward the kitchen, trailing her long house dress behind her. I followed quickly, asking her what it was. Surprises for Maman usually involved food. *Yuca frita* or homemade tortilla, or French fries she'd made from scratch. But not this time, this time there were two little birds waiting for me on her circular marble kitchen table. As soon as I saw them, I was overcome with a kind of bubble-gum joy. My grandmother, I could see, had been bathing in the same kind of joy since she'd rescued them.

"Something happened," she said. "A tragedy. But I saved them."

She sat down on one of the black iron chairs around the table and the birds came up to her, chirping. They were so small I could fit both of them in my hand. "They're hungry," she said.

"Don't birds eat worms?" I asked, hopping up to another chair.

"We're not feeding them *gusanos*," she said defiantly.

*Gusana* was what they called her when she left Cuba, she had told me that. Even though I didn't understand it quite yet, it was a charged word where we lived.

"What do we feed them then?"

"You'll see," she smiled, getting up, giving me a kiss on the head.

She went about her preparations at the counter. As she did so, she explained what had happened. She'd woken up one morning and the nest was on the ground. She'd given a big yelp and woken Severo (aka: Papan), she said. She thought something had attacked the nest. The mother was gone and just two of the three babies were in the nest on the

floor. She'd waited all day for the mom to come back, ironed all of Papan's work shirts and undershirts looking out the window. Because the mother-bird might have been searching for food for them and Maman wanted to make sure not to tear the little ones from their mother, this was important. But then she got hysterical. "*Me dio un ataque*," she said. Her heart started beating very fast, and she knew. She knew the mother wasn't coming back and that their other sibling was dead. They were gone. And she couldn't sit there and watch these little babies die out there without their mother. They were orphans now and she had to take them under her own wing. So she did. She brought them inside. She and I would raise them, she said.

When she was done with the concoction she was making, she sat down with a teacup saucer in front of her, filled with tiny, wet balls of bread. Suddenly the little birds started opening their mouths wide, waiting for the morsels to be dropped in. And in they went.

"After we give them the bread, then I'll get the *gotero* and we can give them water and a little milk. They don't need much. Just a little drop and they get full."

Which is exactly what we did. We took two eyedroppers and filled them. God knows if water or milk and bread was bad for these birds, but they seemed to love it, take it right in.

"I've been waiting for you so we could name them," said Maman, carefully dropping a little water into one of the birds' mouths, like a surgeon at work.

"I'll think of something," I said, taking the task very seriously, watching my grandmother carefully, so I could learn to feed the birds the same way she did.

"I know you will," she responded.

I knew their names had to be diminutive and I wanted them to be really good. One of them hopped around a lot and the other one didn't. Which is why Maman said: "I'd thought Saltarín for this one," she said, pointing at the bouncy one. "*Porque salta tanto...*" Like a little dancer, she explained.

"Yes!" I loved it. And the other name came immediately. "The other one should be Pirouline!" I said. Not only did they rhyme, but Piroulines were my favorite dessert -- those brown, chocolate rolled wafers you put on top of ice cream. The birds were the same color as those, and just as sweet.

"Pirouline and Saltarín it is!" said Maman.

We raised those birds until they started to fly. Eventually, they were flying all around the kitchen, and then all around the house. The good thing about Papan was that he didn't mind. He knew it was important to my grandmother somehow. Knew more than I did.

"Hello Pirouline," he'd say.

"No, Papan, no, that's not Pirouline, that's Saltarín, Papan."

"Oh, oh, so sorry, so sorry mademoiselle," he'd respond in his funny Spanish accent, except when he said mademoiselle, which he said in perfect French. Papan had lived in France for a long time with his brother, Pedrito, who I'd only seen a couple of times in my life, that's why he spoke French. Then he'd make a funny face like a Picaresque clown and ask me what I wanted to do for the rest of the day. "Want to come to Avis tonight, mademoiselle?" he'd ask. Not while the birds were around. No way. "Well then we'll bake some bread on Saturday, I'll show you how to make a baguette."

That I couldn't say no to. It was a good idea, Maman thought -- that way, we could give the crumbs to the birds. "Baking bread is like meditation," he said, "you'll see."

I didn't know it yet, but it was the past that fed this story into the delicate morsel it became, a past that existed before I was born. The undercurrent of what was happening with our little birds was much darker than I'd imagined, full of a desperate need to repair gulfs. It was about my grandmother's mother, who she'd left behind in Cuba.

Maman's mother, my great-grandmother, had always been a mystery to me. More of a mystery than Maman herself at times. I knew my great-grandmother's name, an old-school name like my father's. My father was named Eustasio and Maman's mother was named Encarnación. I also knew that I wasn't supposed to talk about her. Papan and mom would both give me a look that immediately shut me up whenever I wanted to know more about Encarnación. There had always been a picture of Encarnación in the living room -- a woman, I thought, that looked nothing like Maman. A frail woman, delicate and kind-looking, with fifties-style wing-tipped eyeglasses. Not that Maman wasn't kind, it's just that Maman had a different expression on her face, one that was sad and skeptical at the same time, edged with a permanent: "you're not fooling me, asshole," look. No matter how hard I stared at that picture, I couldn't find my grandmother in my great-grandmother.

It's a black and white photo that still sits at the center of a cluster of pictures that Maman keeps on the wall of the living room. This is a different living room -- an apartment now, not the house I spent my childhood in -- but the photo is in the same exact spot respectively. It's one of those 1970s photo clusters with the frames all jammed



together to make the whole thing look like some kind of constellation -- Maman's mother the center-star.

One day, after having stared at the picture for hours while drinking a frosted grapefruit slushy Maman had made for me, brain-freezing me, my mom picked me up from Maman and Papan's house. In the car home I told mom, just because I simply couldn't get over it, that Maman didn't look like her mom at all.

"That's because everybody says she looks like her father."

"What do you mean everybody says? You mean you don't know?" I asked. I was in my tween years then, and growing ever curious about the history of my family, particularly the doors I wasn't allowed to open.

"No," mom said, "I never met him. I've never even seen a picture. But, Maman says he was very handsome. Like Clark Gable."

"What?! You've never even seen a picture?!" I was baffled. My mother didn't respond. She wasn't taking me seriously, I could tell.

"Why can't we ask about Maman's mom?" I continued.

"It's very touchy. She had to leave her behind in Cuba and she never got over it."

"But so did a lot of people and they talk about their moms."

"This is different."

"Why?"

"I don't remember the details. We knew it wasn't a good idea to ask about her..."

I couldn't take the mystery. But I would have to. I would have to for another twenty years. Until finally one day I sat down in Maman's apartment and asked her:

"Maman," I said, "tell me about your mother."

"*Mamá*," she responded, like a little girl. "*Mamá*," she said again. "I have to prepare myself for that. Another day, *Vanessita*, ok, another day." I let it go. The next time I went over though, she called me over and sent my grandfather to walk around the garage. Papan, who was in his late eighties then, got his exercise by walking up and down the ramps of the apartment building's car garage, that way he wouldn't get any sun on his freckled and onion-skin-thin sensitive skin.

Maman sat me down and she finally told me about her mother.

"I had already come sort of damaged from Spain," she told me, "my nerves were shot because of Spain and Severo's family being so horrible, and not being able to bring Mama and all that mess." Maman, I knew, had escaped Cuba through Spain and, only later, found herself reunited with my grandfather in Miami. My grandfather had been forced to take a separate route through Venezuela.

When Maman left her mother in Cuba she didn't know it would be the last time she saw her. When she got to Miami after Spain, she would write to her all the time, and call her. She would call her on the phone that was a block away from Encarnación's house and Maman would tell whoever answered to tell Encarnación to be at the phone the next day at a certain time, that way her mother wouldn't have to rush to the phone. She was old, and Maman didn't want her to fall or hurt herself. She would tell her mother that she had a room ready for her in Miami, which was true, Maman and Papan had set up a room for her in the apartment. And then it happened.

Papan came home one day and said he had some news. "Listen, it's about *Abuela*." He used to call her *Abuela*, "*Abuela* is sick, doesn't feel well it seems," he tells

her. My grandmother's legs, they went soft. She mustered up words, though they seemed to get stuck in her throat. What did he know about the way *Abuela* felt, she asked him.

He knew because someone had come from Santa Clara to the hotel. The old scraggly Cuban came up to the Avis desk and asked: "Is this the Hotel Shelbourne and does Severo Rivases work here?" Because he had a message for Severo that his wife's mother had died. Papan went pale. "Are you sure?" The man was certain. Papan knew he'd have to soften the blow, ease my grandmother into the news. He'd go home and tell her Encarnación was ill, and he'd work up to her death, little by little. This was the plan he made as he drove to their apartment by the Miami River from Miami Beach.

"Me? You're going to fool me? You're going to tell me stories?" Maman says she knew right away. She knew by the look in my grandfather's eyes and because of how she felt deep down, somewhere in the body that has not been defined yet, the spirit perhaps, some cell in the blood without a name. She got sick immediately. It was bad, she had no control over herself. She knew that in the span of a minute she'd become motherless. "This can't be," she kept saying. "I have to speak to *mamá*," and she got stuck on that, like a needle snagging on vinyl. "I have to speak to *mamá*." After Papan finally admitted to her that her mother was dead, she couldn't, she just couldn't, she couldn't understand it. Couldn't take it in, couldn't make it a part of herself. So it lived somewhere above her like a dark cloud, raining dry and cold on her for years.

"I remember I was out on the balcony one day and it was raining and raining, pouring, and the only thing I could think about -- and I got obsessed with this thought --- was that if it's raining over there like it's raining here then all that water was going to seep through the earth and fall all over my mother, and drown her. That was agony for me.

And then the sun would come out and I would think: My mother is down there, down there with this heat, this unbearable heat. How can this be? This can't be! I told Severo: I think I'm going crazy. Because very strange things are happening to me. I'm not like this. I'm a woman with a good mind.”

So she went to speak to Father Ibarzabal. She was in such bad shape that he sent her on a retreat the very next day. She went home and told Papan, tomorrow we're going on a retreat. But, no way. It didn't work. The priest would talk and it went in one ear and out the other, and everyone there was laughing and happy and some of the people there, they were sad about some things too but it couldn't compare. All my grandmother wanted to do was get the hell out of there. They were there three days. Nothing worked, but she kept telling herself: You have to deal with this. You have to be able to deal with this because you have two daughters. And she didn't want anyone else to take care of them or even touch them.

Several days later, the priest came to their house because he'd seen her so engulfed in sadness at the retreat that he told Severo that he would do what he could to help. He came over, they talked, they shared, he drank a glass of wine, but what did my grandmother care about the wine he was drinking or the words that seemed to be forming in his mouth. She couldn't hear them. She'd wanted him to come at first, but then she wanted him to leave. Nothing. Nothing worked. She knew she had to go to a psychiatrist. She had already gone to a psychologist, but the talking wasn't doing anything, they had to prescribe her something a psychologist could not.

The first psychiatrist prescribed Elavil, and a medicine that they didn't yet sell here, which they had to bring all the way from Puerto Rico. My grandmother, a semi-

hoarder, still has the syringes she applied the drug with. She had to go twice a week to the doctor. But, again, nothing.

One day, when she was at the psychiatrist's office, she thought: what am I doing sitting here with my two girls at home? What am I doing? No one can take care of them like I can. And she exchanged the obsession about her mother for this new obsession with the girls. She just kept thinking: I'm on the brink of madness, but I'm not going to go there. I'm not going to do it. What if someone abuses my girls, she thought. No, no, no, no. She went to another psychiatrist.

This new psychiatrist, he told Papan that he was going to give Maman one pill. Just one. He told Papan: Give it to her when you go home. If she sleeps for hours, if she sleeps one day, three days, leave her. Let her sleep. The pill was 300mg of something my grandmother doesn't have a name for anymore. She took it, but she didn't fall asleep. She told the shrink the next time, when she went back. It didn't do anything, she said. "No, it can't be," he said. But it could be, because what was wrong with my grandmother was stronger than anything.

The breakdown lasted a very long time. She was panicked that something would happen to her in this state and the girls would be alone. Panic, pure panic. And this was right after having to leave Cuba, and landing in Spain, which was like crossing Niagara Falls on a bicycle. It was all weighing down on her now. She didn't want to let the girls out of her sight. She didn't feel OK unless she could see them with her own eyes, all the time. But Jacqueline, my mother, had to go to school. Those school hours were torture. She would drop Jacqueline off at school and stay outside behind a tree with Ingrid, who was still very small. She would hold Ingrid's hand until Jackie would come out of school.

Visits to one psychiatrist after another, all kinds of pills and treatments, back and forth, until finally she got hold of herself. My grandfather's soft, kind patience trying to guide her away from the trip she was taking into the dark core of mourning. Eventually, he was there to help her step out of it, slowly.

But even today, once in a while, when something is going wrong, she gets a panic attack, and it takes her back to those early days in Miami, when she learned she'd never see her mother again, unless there was an afterlife.

"I used to not be afraid of anything. I picked up my stuff and left Cuba with a baby and a little girl and just got on that boat and left everything behind. I wasn't afraid of anything. Twenty-three days on the *Marques de Comillas*, that shit of a boat, without a penny and nothing happened, everyone survived. I did all that as if I were drinking water. Like nothing. And then this, this panic. So there you have it. Suffering. So much suffering, all piled up."

That is the true story of those birds. It's why the essence of those birds felt like Cuba, even if I didn't know it yet. Those birds introduced me to the loss and longing that would infuse the backdrop of my life through my grandparents – a loss of place, home, and the people one has to leave behind to save themselves and future generations. Through Pirouline and Saltarín, my grandmother was trying to save what she couldn't so many years before. Because those birds had been left without a mother, and she had to become the mother she, herself, had lost.

One of them, Saltarín, died. We woke up one day and his little bird-heart had stopped. Perhaps it was the milk. Years later, I read that birds could not easily digest milk. But the other one, the one I'd named, Pirouline, he made it through. And when he

was strong enough, we set him free. We set him out onto the world, and we crossed our fingers and hoped his flight would be swift and his journey fruitful. That he would find the nourishment he needed out there, that he could find a home, friends, and family in that great, big wilderness that was Miami. We watched him as he fluttered at our porch a while, flapped his wings up and down circling around us before he took flight, toward places we could never reach, but only dream of. After he flew away, my grandmother put her soft hand on my shoulder and led me inside. “He’ll be alright,” she said. “I know he will.”

## **ROUTE 2: The Familial Embargo**

It's 2011, twenty-four years after we rescued those birds and I want more than anything to go to Cuba, but I can't. My grandparents left Cuba in 1961 and not a single member of my maternal family has returned, though I have forever wanted to fly there, see for myself those places I'd dreamed of, feel and filter the place I come from. Over the years, there have been different restrictions, applied by different American presidents in regards to travel and trade with the island. But the greatest restriction of all has been what I call the familial embargo.

The economic embargo is somewhat simpler to explain, I can give you facts for that. I can tell you that in 1996, the Helms-Burton Act helped to codify the American embargo against Cuba, which had been in flux from president to president. I can tell you that travel restrictions themselves, however, are not codified and are constantly changing from administration to administration. I can tell you like this, in this tone of voice, the voice of an attorney, and I'm sure you can find loopholes, but the facts remain imprinted in the serpentine path of history.

In 2001, President Bush tightened restrictions on travel to Cuba and expanded the powers of the OFAC (Office of Foreign Assets Control). Earlier, in 2000, he'd banned travel to Cuba for "tourist activities" under a new Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act.

And yet, despite my factual tone, it has still always been hard to know where one stands in terms of travel to Cuba. Because of those loopholes I mention, and because of changing administrations. The constant mutability of law is not only confusing, but requires a great deal of patience to waddle through the sticky red, white, and blue tape on



both the Cuban and American sides of the fence. They don't make it easy. Despite what the Canadians and Europeans say, it's still, in 2011, difficult for Americans to go to the island, especially if you want to do it legally.

But, as I said before, to a certain degree all of this is the easy part for me. Law is law. Once it's made, you obey it or you break it – you make that decision and suffer the risks and consequences. More difficult is moral and personal law; unwritten family law – the familial embargo.

In my case, my family's refusal to go back, their refusal to allow me their blessing or permission to travel to Cuba has always been nearly impossible to explain to strangers without a Cuban background. Cubans understand it immediately. Americans, not so much. The reasons are dense and layered and more connected to the heart than mind. To start, there is fear which is, as always, so hard to shatter. It was so hard for my grandparents and parents to leave Cuba. There were others that didn't make it out. Members of my family have been imprisoned, lost years of their lives in dark Castro cells. There is also stubbornness, an older generation set in their ways, because they believe that by going, they'd be feeding a dictatorship. Would the Jews go back to Germany if Hitler were still in power? I've heard that comparison often. And then there's love, at the center of everything. Because my mother doesn't want to learn that I went to Cuba, met with the wrong person, and found myself in darkness too. In Cuba, you never know.

Up until now, I have always respected my family. That doesn't mean that my desire for Cuba has waned or that I have not tried to go. But all those infinite attempts to

make it onto the island just led me to a series of alternate routes. Alternate routes that I felt, nevertheless, would eventually take me there.

Cuba.

Just like that, a sentence and paragraph of it's own. An island. That's what it's always been for me. A place whose invisible gates I've rattled all my life, shaking its silent bars like a mime.

The last time I tried going to Cuba was in 2009. I walked into my mother's house in Miami with two plane tickets in hand and told my mother that my sister and I were going to Cuba in a week's time. It didn't go well.

As soon as I tell my mother that I'd be landing in Havana with my sister, will be there at this time next week, all hell breaks loose as if on cue.

*"Me van a matar!* Do you realize that? Do you realize you're going to kill me?" My mother hissy-fits out when she looks down at my hand, which is holding the two plane tickets to Havana, straight from MIA to the Jose Martí Airport. She moves back and forth, typically, between Spanish and English, armed with the lessons of repetition she learned from Martín Luther King Jr. (her favorite), right alongside her own Cuban mother. Then she breaks out into monologue.

"First you wanted to work with people with AIDS when you were thirteen years old; the late 80s for god's sake! You said it was important, I understood. So I signed your life away. Because, yes, it was important. I raised you that way, conscious of the world. Fine. It's my fault. I know it's my fault. If you go to Cuba and get murdered on the side of the road for your Nike sneakers it will have been my fault."

There's a knock on the apartment door. My mother rushes to get it, still yelling that *Cuba isn't America, you can't just prance around the streets, you don't understand, you have to ...*

This is not the first time I've tried to go to Cuba. But it is the first time I've held tickets in my hand.

It's my grandparents at the door. They live in the same building as my mother now, and are constantly barging in. I'm surprised they're even knocking.

"We forgot our key," my grandmother says, as she walks in, "what's with the commotion, *por dios, no estamos en la calle ocho!*" scolds my grandmother, appalled that my mother is screaming as if we all still lived in a *Solar* near 8th Street. This is a lapse of class, her voice says -- one has to be very careful about these things. "The neighbors, Jacqueline, the neighbors."

"Your granddaughter wants to kill me," says my mother, the vein at the tip of her forehead looking like a worm trapped beneath her skin.

My mother leaves the door open, knowing that my grandfather is trailing behind. Refusing to use a cane or a walker even in his late eighties, he'd rather trail at a snail's pace than submit to leaning into some metal support system. Who do those doctor's think they are? He crossed the Pyrenees at thirteen. On foot. He fled from Paris during World War II, those sons of bitches didn't catch him. He lived on *mamosillos* for days on a Havana rooftop in the pouring rain. He...

"Ay, Jacqueline, don't exaggerate," says my grandmother, grabbing my head in her hands and kissing me hard on the cheek, smothering me. "Mi *nieta bella* wouldn't kill anybody."

“Of course not,” says my mother sarcastically, rolling her eyes. “*La favorita.*”

“Don’t be silly,” says my grandmother, only to slip me a sly smile that says I am, indeed, her favorite.

"What's the problem?" asks Papan, in thickly accented English; he's finally reached the apartment door, which he closes gently behind him. He doesn't like when things boil over so quickly, especially when it happens without him.

"*Tu nieta,*" my mother says. "She tells me today that she's going to Cuba with Nicole!"

"*Que, que?!*" Maman and Papan both raise their voices in unison. They've gone choral. Forget favoritism, this they can't believe, they say. It just can't be.

"*No me digas eso,*" my grandmother says. "Don't tell me anything else, not a word," she commands. "I'm leaving. I'm leaving and don't tell me when they get on that plane, or when they get to Cuba. I don't want to know. I just don't want to know."

Maman looks like she's been punched in the gut, like her stomach might come out of her mouth. Her hand is on her cheek; total dismay. Another tragedy, she thinks. Another one. She doesn't think she can take it. She said she was leaving, but she's not going anywhere, she's still standing there, jaw dropped, next to Papan who's too shocked to even speak. All he can utter is a spurt of a word: "No!"

"I told you," my mother nods. "They're going to kill me." And then: "Take off your shoes, you know how delicate the floor is." Her marvel of a floor; black wood.

My grandparents obey, my grandmother removing her baby blue sketcher knockoffs; my grandfather his slippers. He has a thing with his feet, says he feels shoes

too much, can only wear these particular slippers. "Severo and his Holy Feet," my grandmother likes to say. But she makes no comment now, she just continues to sigh.

"Can we be calm about all of this?" I ask, putting the tickets on the kitchen table, which is near enough to the door that they can all follow me visually. They all look at the tickets like they're diseased, shake their heads slowly from side to side, and head toward the connecting living room just steps away, quarantining the tickets to the kitchen. I follow the gang, demoralized, realizing that the grand adventure I'd convinced my sister to accompany me on -- that of going to Cuba and meeting all the Cuban bloggers that have been writing about what goes on in the island, that of tracing our grandparent's steps, that of, well...etc -- is now in danger of never happening. Because once a Cuban mother starts yelling, it's very hard to go in any direction other than one she's selling.

"I wish I would have raised you normal, sometimes. Apathetic," my mother screams. "I know this is all your idea," she says, directly to me, finger waving an inch from my nose. "Dragging your sister into the mouth of the lion."

"What are you talking about?" I ask, trying to remain peaceable and yet suddenly, at the same time, reverting to the status of whining teenager, though I'm 31 years old at the moment this argument takes place. *Thirty-one*. Two years younger than the age Christ was when he was old enough to "save" the whole damned world. I'm not saying I'm Christ, I'm just saying--

--I know you, Vanessa," says my mother, still waving her finger. "You are very convincing. Just like your father. You should have gone to law school."

My grandparents are still stunned into silence, my grandmother's hand still on her cheek. "*Que barbaridad*," Maman says finally. "*Uno se mata por sus hijos*, and for what?"

"Listen to me," my mother continues, "listen to me very carefully little girl. You cannot go to Cuba, do you hear me? You have gone wherever in the world you wanted to go, *where-e-ver*. Africa in the middle of an oil war, *por dios*. I have never said anything."

My mother is pacing now, doing chops with her right hand onto her left hand like she's chopping some very hard vegetables. Like her right hand is a judge's gavel punching out: guilty, guilty, guilty.

"I know it was your path to do those things. I know," she says, now attempting to lower her voice. "I knew those things were your path and I had to sit here and sweat while you did them, pray the rosary, light candles." Her voice begins to rise again with the word "sweat," so much that by the time she gets to the next part, she's up top again, on the high registers of mania: "*Pero Cuba, Cuba no!* Not Cuba!"

It's hard to tell if this is a tragedy or a farce. I come in peace, but this gang reads my tickets to Cuba like I'm carrying two vials of Ebola.

"Ay, *Vanessita, Vanessita*," says my grandmother, almost in song.

"It's not like I'm going to North Korea or the fucking Gaza Strip," I say.

"And you think it's any different?! You are so naive. So naive." Spit shoots from my mother's tongue and teeth -- the t's causing splashes of spittle to land on my face and blouse.

"Naive!" echoes my grandfather. "Naive!" he repeats, more emphatically. And then, his favorite statement of all time: "This country is full of demagogues!"

"I'm not a demagogue," I say. "That doesn't even make sense."

"You think you're so smart. What good does it do, all your education?" my mother continues, unfettered, "Huh? What good does it do if you can't see something as simple as this?"

"Do you have any idea how hard it was to leave?" my grandmother asks this very slowly. "Do you have any idea?"

Then it's over. With this line, it's over. For now. Because I do know. I know their story, the way you know a black and white film you've played over and over again. It's distant, lacking the precision of true color, but you know it by heart.

I'll keep trying, but for now this match needs to be put away. I lost this one. I am not a sore loser; I will come back stronger.

After my mother stops screaming, she collapses onto the couch. "You do what you want," she says. "You're an adult, but know that if you go to Cuba, you will be killing your mother."

A key turns in the lock. We all turn to look. Carlos, my step-dad, walks in.

"What's going on?" he asks, taking off his shoes, well trained. He sets his briefcase down near the piano that nobody plays. "I could hear you guys all the way down the hall."

"Nothing, *Nene*, just that Vanessa wants to go to Cuba and drag her sister with her."

"What?!" Nene yells out, as if my mother has to be kidding. I couldn't possibly be that stupid.

"*Con lo difícil que fue salir,*" my grandmother repeats, "these children have no idea."

I did have an idea. But only that. Because reality was being barred from me. Which begs the question of who exactly is trapped behind those bars along the watery border between Cuban and America – the Cubans or me? The Cubans who can't rage against their government, who can't leave, who sit lethargically without hope, battling the heat and dengue fever? Those who jump into the sea because it's the only way out? Or is it the Cuban-Americans and American Born Cubans (ABC's) like myself on the other side of the Straits, who can't reach their roots, who have been, for so long, closed to the evolution of their own people because of a long-gone revolution and a staunchly selfish American government. Aren't we just trapping ourselves by making Cuba a figment instead of a reality?

"Cuba is not a nation, but a hallucination," says Pedro Roig in Daniel P. Erikson's book *The Cuba Wars*. Roig, once director of The Office of Cuba Broadcasting (OCB), which broadcasts Radio and TV Martí in Spanish from Miami to an otherwise media-cloistered Cuba, made the statement with a particular meaning in mind. He followed it by saying, "We are trying to introduce the Cuban people to reality." It's a terrible sentence – condescending and almost colonial in nature. As if we, on this side of the Florida Straits, could school the Cubans on anything.

I understand that what he meant was that what Radio and TV Martí were – are -- trying to do is introduce freedom of speech and diversified opinions through radio waves to the Cuban people, trying to combat a system in which one patriarch, old father Fidel,



cannot be refuted. I get that. But who are we to say that Miami is not the hallucination? That this magic city made up of imaginings and the stirrings of memory, of bird-stories that stand-in for great loss, isn't actually the mirage. Perhaps it is the Cubans that need to radio toward us, screeching their own reality at us until we listen. But, of course, they can't. Not yet. And this is the problem. The radio waves are still running, mostly, one way. And the only time we can reach the island is when someone manages to visit Cuba, breaking the familial embargo, or when a family member from Havana or Santiago or Camaguey finds his or her way to Miami, or when a bruised and beaten, salted fish of a Cuban drifts upon the shore of Key West after days at sea.

And yet, the idea that Cuba is a hallucination rings true to me somehow, in a different way, a sad way. It is a sentence that, after I read it, lingered in my head, making a dent. It now has a permanent home in a brain wrinkle. Because Cuba has always been a fictitious place for me. I should say here that I often consider fiction to be the most truthful of genres, by far more truthful than nonfiction or poetry. In fiction, your characters can be brutal and honest. They can say things that people in "real life" cannot say. Perhaps this is why Cuban fiction is so wonderful because the island itself is trapped in fiction. And fiction, if it's anything, is a lie that tells the truth.

I'm not the only one for which all of this is true. There is an entire generation of us American Born Cubans that know this story well.

The Florida International University Cuba Poll, conducted periodically since 1991, is perhaps the best pulse of Cuban-Americans, their beliefs, and the way those beliefs affect their own lives and that of their children. By 2000, the year of the Elian Gonzalez debacle, the poll showed that Cuban-Americans were frustrated, many thought

change would never come to the island. Only 10.3% believed change would come to the island within a year's time. And 28.2% believed change would never come. That's a far cry from the early migration waves of the 60s, when many Cubans fled the island believing they would be back before they knew it, as soon as this whole "Fidel thing" blew over. Without a change of regime, 64.2% of the Cuban-Americans still supported the economic embargo in the year 2000.

By 2011, ten years later, numbers have shifted somewhat, though more than a majority still favor the embargo: 53%. The greatest difference, however, lies in the American Born Cubans and younger Cuban-Americans, those between the ages of 18 and 44. Because in this particular demographic, more than half *oppose* the embargo, and that's a clear sign of the future. Which means there is a tug of war between generations. The economic embargo is impossible to break without the breakdown of the familial embargo. But that's already happening. The parent and grandparent may be standing ardently for the embargo, a kind of gatekeeper, but the child desires to tear down the bars that have been separating them from their past since before they were born, for 52 years, over half a century.

This book is about the breaking of that familial embargo, and what that means. It begins in 2011, because that's when I decided that, no matter what, I would make my way to Cuba, with or without my family's blessing, though their blessing would mean the world to me. This book is about my personal struggle to break the knots that bound my path, and what that means when you zoom out and look at the greater picture, that Cuban landscape, brushed as it is with the green of foreign fauna and fatigue. Because *deciding*

to go didn't mean I could just get up and go, there was a great deal I would have to slash through and absorb first.

Before you break things down, you must first see how they were made. How and why they were put together so that you can smartly deconstruct what has been so densely constructed. The first border bricks of the familial embargo were laid before I was born. Back in Havana in 1958. Which is exactly where I need to go. Where my grandmother, Maman, known then as Dulce, first felt the tremors that would change her life and eventually create mine, as I know it.

### **ROUTE 3: Gusanos**

It all started at *El Parque de las Manejadoras*, the park where Dulce realized now, it had all begun to fall apart. The turning point, that was it. The day she'd taken my mom out, two years before, to play. And a bomb exploded, just as she left the park, missing the center of the blast by nothing more than a minute or two. Word on the street was that it was Batista's gang that had planted it, the government. But she knew it was that bearded lot up in the mountains that had set it up. She didn't know for sure, but she had a feeling. This feeling was the only thing she had in fact-- a feeling that Cuba had started to transform into something she didn't recognize, that her life was about to become an agitated flash of jump-cuts made up of secrecy and deceit.

A year after the bomb had gone off, Fidel Castro and his guerilla entourage came down from the Sierra Maestra and people started to die. There were people they stopped seeing around, people that simply disappeared the way they always have in Latin America, without a trace. Severo, my grandfather, became a wanted man. To think, just months before they'd been talking about which school to put my mother in – Dulce had bowed to Severo's wishes to put Jacqueline in La Dominica Francesa, the French school. My grandmother would have a little girl who spoke French to her father, how sophisticated. But then there came that knock on the door.

That knock was the final push toward flight, away from Severo's instinct to fight. It was Severo's position in the union that was bringing them the most grief -- you can't know a baker's union until you've seen one from the inside, Severo liked to say. Brutal. Add to that the fact that Severo and his brother, Pedrito, had always been verbose,

considered themselves free to speak as they thought. This Castro character, he was bad news and they let people know it.

There'd been that one incident in particular, with the woman Severo had taken to calling *La Granuja*. The Swindler. They'd been able to get out of that one. Dulce remembered how it started -- La Granuja had come to Severo for help. Severo had told Dulce the story when he'd come home from work one day. About this woman, who lived in Cienfuegos, and had come to see Severo in Havana, trying to get the retirement benefits of her dead brother transferred to her. Severo was Secretary of the union and was, therefore, in charge of handling the retirement benefits. It wasn't legal to pass these benefits onto her, the deceased's sister, but the woman came begging, saying she didn't have a cent to live on, her children were starving out there in the countryside, and wasn't there a way to forge a wife, or something like that, fake papers? Severo eventually relented and said he would see what he could do, felt sorry for her, and helped her.

But when the revolution came, La Granuja bit the hand that fed her and made a claim against Severo, told a group of officers that Severo had "charged her" for his help, that he'd taken a bribe, had suggested the bribe to begin with, one which she was forced to comply with, given her level of need. Which Dulce thought couldn't be true. Severo gave everything away, never charged anyone for anything, it had always been one of his problems. Dulce always told him: if he'd been born a woman, he'd have been *una puta barata* -- a cheap slut.

But she'd taken care of La Granuja alright. She'd marched over to the union office and gotten her address, went straight to Cienfuegos and knocked right on her door. And Dulce told her, right to her face: "Lady, you know what the truth is, and you better tell

those officers you're a liar or my husband is going to die. Do you understand? I have a two year old and another on the way, you get me?"

The woman backed down right away. Dulce wasn't sure why, maybe it was the sight of her sweating, pregnant, panting body standing at her door. La Granuja told her she was sorry, that she'd gotten scared, intimidated by the officers that had shown up at her home asking about corruption in the unions. They wanted blood, so she protected her own and gave a name, any name. She turned the story on its head, against the union organizers, its Secretary in particular.

La Granuja ended up confessing to her lie, and they let Severo off the hook. For the moment. Because other claims against Severo followed suit. Some claimed he was a communist, others an anti-revolutionary in arms. Nothing made sense. There were no consistencies in the claims. Until one day, there came that dreaded knock on their own door, the one they'd heard so much about.

When Dulce opened the door, it was one of her neighbors, one she recognized from downstairs, but one she didn't know by name. She was miniscule, a tiny woman Dulce had noticed because she was so bird-bone-thin.

"Does Severo Rivases live here?" she asked in a whisper.

"Yes," said Dulce, cautiously. "Who's asking?"

"Listen, there are some officers downstairs, they're looking for your husband, they're coming to get him...they say that...well, the way things are...I just wanted...I wanted--"

"--Thank you, thank you," Dulce replied, reaching over to touch the woman's slip-of-a-hand in appreciation, her mind reeling toward the quickest getaway. She closed the

door on the woman, as politely as she could under the circumstances, and called out to her husband.

"Severo, listen to me," started Dulce. She told him what had happened. Told him to get himself up to the roof. She would try and lead the officers astray. She wasn't sure what she was going to do, but he had to make it up to the roof, keep an ear out. He would be able to hear them from up there; it was not that far up. When she let the officers in the house, he would have to run down the stairs quickly, into the street, and on towards his brother's house. She would meet him there later.

Severo did as he was told. Minutes later, the two officers came knocking. They were thin, yet tough, stern and stiffly uniformed, just as she'd expected.

"*Señora*," said one of the officers, "we're looking for Severo Rivases."

"That son of a bitch," she said. The words just came out. She hadn't planned it. It was the grace of God.

"Excuse me?" asked the other officer.

"Come in, officers, come in," said Dulce, leading them inside and closing the door behind them. Jacqueline was playing with a doll on the floor. The officers greeted the child with a smile.

"Can I offer you a glass of water, anything?"

"No ma'am, as we said, we're looking for Severo Rivases."

"I have no idea where that man is, and good riddance, I never want to see his face again. The further he is from here the better."

"Do you have any idea where he may have gone?"

To which Dulce answered with a sad story of betrayal and abandon. Severo, she explained, had cheated on her, and left her alone with her daughter, and another bun in the oven. It was just her and the two girls now, and she was all the better for it -- better than having a two-faced-cheater around. That bum.

"We're so sorry for your situation," said officer #1, who seemed to be buying the story whole.

"So sorry," echoed officer #2.

"Thank you officers, but I've learned to take care of myself."

Again, they asked if she had any idea where he might have gone.

"Out to the country I think," she said, "I don't think he's in Havana. At least I've been lucky enough not to run in to the bastard. He could be anywhere by now."

The officers eventually left, and as soon as they did, Dulce called Pedrito and Raquel's house. Raquel picked up the phone, told Dulce that Severo was there. They spoke in code, left out names. "Good," she said, "tell him not to come back. To stay there, I'll meet him there."

From that moment on, until the moment of their escape, this lie is what kept Dulce and the girls safe. Severo did not return to the apartment, could not return, due to constant surveillance. Instead, Dulce played out the story of his infidelity and bashed "that son of a bitch" every chance she could, meeting him nightly at Pedrito and Raquel's, to plot their truth, their escape.

Days went by as they tried to find a way out of the island. A way they could fly under the radar, or tag onto someone's boat. But they had no luck at first. They were exhausted, but they kept trying, until finally it seemed there might be an out. There was a



guy named Ruiz. A friend of a family member. He had connections with the Venezuelan embassy. Severo and Dulce knew people in Venezuela, people they'd been friends with in Havana, so they'd have a place to stay once they got there. But only one of them could escape through the embassy, so the plot thickened. It would have to be Severo, because it was his life that was in danger. They had to find a way out for Dulce and the girls separately.

Soon, it became a two-fold plan: Severo would escape through Venezuela, and Dulce and the girls would get on a ship to Spain, to Sant Cugat, where Severo's family lived. Eventually, they would rejoin in Miami, where everybody else was going.

Once they'd figured out the steps, it would be all about the execution. The day finally came when Severo was to meet Ruiz. They were supposed to meet a couple of blocks away from the embassy in an alley, where Ruiz would scoop Severo up in a limo, which belonged to one of the consulate members. That's how they'd get inside. Once inside, Severo could ask for asylum.

But Ruiz didn't show. The seconds went by, the minutes, the hour, until Severo knew it wasn't going to happen. There was Cuban time, and then there was this. He'd been stood up. On the single most important day of his life, on that borderland-day between life and death, chaos entered into the plan, that pebble that could veer the whole carriage off its course. Severo had told Dulce that when he got inside the embassy he'd stand in the upstairs window on the right hand side of the building at 5pm the next day. That way Dulce would know he was ok. Now what? Dulce, alone, with the two girls... She was a tough broad, she'd got them out of trouble before, she could take care of herself. But what if they caught him. Could she do it forever? Could she enter the blind

bullying blow of a new country by herself? He couldn't get caught. He couldn't stay here, and he couldn't go back home, that would surely lead to capture. No. The only thing to do was try to make it into the embassy anyway, on his own.

Before he knew it, he was climbing, one fence, and then another, his 40-year-old body recalling the limberness he had at 13, when he'd sprung across Spain's national borders like he was whistling and smoking a cigar. Well, not exactly, but that's what it felt like now. Like that had been easier somehow. And now he was back, the escape artist. He could do this, he told himself. There were two, three, four backyards between him and the embassy. A traipse through a luncheon, "excuse me, pardon me," spilling cocktails as he went, just like in the movies. Another fence, another yard, empty, and then a third, a labyrinth through a parking lot. And then, finally, the embassy's yard was in sight. A spiral staircase that led to the roof, where the water tank was, a small room enclosing the tank. That's where he would hide. Up, up, up. All action, no thought, just movement. And, finally, a breath. At least there's water, he thought, leaning his back against the water tank. At least there's nightfall. The sun was setting, cooling him, he was grateful. And now? Again, he had no idea.

His watchful eyes stayed peeled for hours until sleep won over and he dozed, head leaning against the water tank, hiding himself behind the body of the large reservoir, only to wake to the chatter of officers patrolling the embassy courtyard, right beneath him. Shit. Where had they been yesterday? He'd been lucky. So lucky not to have run straight into them. Could it be, that some deus ex machina had made them take their break, made them disappear at the exact moment he entered the embassy yard the day before. He was supposed to be here. It was right that he was here. Fate. It would be ok, he

told himself, hearing the growl of his stomach for the first time. Right above him, the branches of a *mamonsillo* tree caught his eye. At first he was afraid to extend his hand to reach for the fruit, but hunger won out, just as sleep had done the night before. He camouflaged his sound, like a bird or a squirrel shaking through the tree. There. He'd done it. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight...They were tiny, and like all *mamonsillos*, they were more seed than meaty pulp. Nevertheless, it was something. Here was a fruit he could admire, he thought -- a fruit that fought for its own existence, that cared more about being replanted than anything else -- these were fruits with more fight than flight. His own fight, on the other hand, was actually a flight. What would happen to Pedro, he wondered, who refused to leave. This would be the first time he left without his brother. It'd always been them, together, and now they were each alone. Why hadn't Pedrito listened to him, why couldn't he convince him? It was all Pedrito's wife's fault. She was a damn fool.

He didn't know how it'd all turn out, all he knew was that he had to be on the lookout for an entry, a way into the embassy. He waited and he watched. For days he waited and watched. Hungry. Bored out of his mind, and still every muscle in his body was contracted, tense and tight as a fine-tuned violin. Still trying to make only the kinds of noises animals make, he moved little, attempting to make himself smaller, pissing right there, right on the roof, in a way that would trickle down away from the guards, through the gutters. Until on the fourth day, two opportunities arose at the same time. First it started to rain. Rain like it does in Cuba, warm and with full force, gushing from the sky. So much that the guards went for cover. As soon as that happened he knew this would be his only chance. Immediately, his eyes started to dart around the building, landing on an

open window. Now or never. He garnered all the balance he could and walked on the thin ledge that lined the building, all the way to the open window, silently, like a nimble clown on a trapeze. And then he jumped. Jumped right into the building through the open window, falling on a man taking a shower. It was a bathroom. The man screamed, Severo placed his hand on his mouth. It was a Cuban, an escapee just like himself, he could tell. "I'm Cuban," said Severo, "I'm Cuban, I'm Cuban, I'm not going to hurt you." The man, naked, slippery, lathered in soap, calmed down, scared witless. Severo removed his hand from his mouth. Soaked and bruised, he told this man the micro version of his tale...

He was inside the embassy. He was safe. As it turned out the whole top floor of the embassy was full of Cubans, waiting. Leaning against walls, chatting, trying to make the hours pass before they could make it out. They were all on the run, just like he was.

The next day, at 5pm, Severo showed up at the window. Battered, bruised, and skinny. Head and arm bandaged from the fall into the embassy from the open window. It was hard tile he fell on. And then he saw her. Dulce, pretending as though she was taking the girls for a stroll. A quick look up and a flash of relief and shock on her face all at once when she saw him, injured but alive, finally standing there.

Now it was her turn. Now she could leave. She could say yes to those tickets she managed to get access to, on that ship that was carrying all the priests out of Cuba. There were rumors about what was being done to the religious. Communism had no room for it and the priests knew it, they knew it was now or never. It was escape now, or they'd be facing a firing squad.

Those days were a whirlwind, one meshed into the other. Dulce and the girls stayed out in Cienfuegos at an inn for a while, until it was time to sail away. Until she was standing in front of the ship, *The Marques de Comillas*.

Dulce looked up at the steps, they were made of rope. How was she going to make it up there with her two girls. Ingrid, silent, 11-months and strapped to her hip. Jacqueline holding that leather alligator she wouldn't let go of. "*Gusanos! Gusanos!*" they yelled around her. *Gusanos* were what Fidel had named all the "traitors" that were leaving Cuba, those who didn't believe in his regime. *Gusanos* because of the shape of the duffel bags they left with that looked like worms, filled with the little bits of life they could save. Dulce could hear the word repeated over and over again in the background. It was the chant that had lined their path here, the song of her saunter to the guillotine. She felt the words on her body, as if they were trapped in her sweat beads, lingering on the surface of her skin. But now, the chant grew distant as she buried herself in the anxiety of getting up on that boat, a boat that would lead them away from here, from this hell, away from home.

Severo had always been trouble, right from the start, he had his hands in everything like a fat kid in a *pastelito* shop. He wanted to "help," he'd said. But who was he helping? What he really wanted was anarchy, he wanted danger, she knew it. He wanted the system to disappear, for there to be no system. He wanted to get away, to live on the edge, as he always had, it thrilled him. He didn't know anything else. She should've known she'd, one day, be caught in one of his escapades. Ever since he was 13 years old and he had to cross the Pyrenees on foot with his brother, Pedrito, he was always fleeing. Stubborn Pedrito, who wouldn't leave with them now. Yes, she should've

known not to marry a man like Severo. But what did she know when she met him, she was just a nineteen year old country girl from Santa Clara, a girl without a father, a bastard. And wasn't she the one who had chased him, the seasoned Spaniard, the union organizer. His mustache, like a Hollywood Don Juan. What a fool she'd been. A *Gusana de mierda* indeed.

"Let's go, lady! *Dale!*"

The shouts came from behind and in front of her. Pushing her forward. She glimpsed back to catch the line of Cubans curling round the bend, as far as her eye could see. They made it hard on purpose, she thought. So there would be no stowaways, so it would be hard to leave. So you would remember. One look down through the body-sized gaps in the rope and it was an abyss, especially for a five-year-old girl, not to mention the infant.

"Jacqueline, listen to me. *Me oyes?*"

She could see her daughter looking at her with weary eyes. She'd never used that tone with the girls before. A tone that rasped at the edges like an old map, sharp and yellowing, seeped in what would soon become their past.

"Follow me and hold on tight. Hold on the tightest you can to the rope when we climb up. When we get on it, it's going to sway, and if you don't hold on you'll fall and die and we'll never see each other again. You hear me?"

Dulce wondered if she was traumatizing the child, but she had to do it. She had to talk to her like that. Up until now and for the rest of their trip, it had been, and would be, an adventure for Jackie. Dulce didn't want her daughter to know the depths of her own suffering, so she smiled, she carried on, she told them they were going on a fun trip to see

their *tietas*, their aunts in Spain. But every once in a while, she said something like this, something that disclosed the hidden danger just beneath the thin veneer.

Dulce turned to her other daughter, who'd been named after Ingrid Bergman, and who never made a sound. The name on her birth certificate was Dulce, just like her mother's -- not Ingrid because it wouldn't have been a good idea to give her such an imperialist name legally, the name of a movie star. But subversive and angry as Dulce was, she always called her daughter Ingrid out loud. Ingrid, who she felt so guilty about - - so much turmoil around her birth, so many revolutions and counter-revolutions. Not like Jacqueline's tranquil first years of beach and sun, those idyllic years.

"Listen, Ingrita," she told her infant daughter. "Be still and hold on tight to Mami, we're going for a ride."

And like that they began their ascent, swaying left and right, feet gripping as best they could. Amateur mountain-climbers hiking up air. "Take her," she said to the man at the top, "please take her." It was the only way she could hoist herself up and help Jacqueline behind her. When she got to the top she felt immediately trapped in the nauseating smell of that dirty God damned *Gallego*, how she hated those damn Spaniards. He stunk like fried onions left out in the sun; his crooked teeth, his hair matted with oil, not of pomade, but nature's oils accumulated to a thick crud, like petrol. His breath a smattering of pork rinds and fried potatoes. She felt as if her stomach would betray her, push its depths up to the surface in due battle against the Spaniard. But there was nothing to push up, she hadn't eaten in days.

"Thank you," she told the Spaniard, once she and Jacqueline were both up on board.

"Let's go," she said to Jacqueline.

"Not so fast, said the Spaniard. What's that on the girl's hand?"

"What? That trinket," said Dulce, nonchalantly.

It was a tiny diamond ring on Jacqueline's finger -- a real diamond -- but it didn't look like one. Dulce had taken care to lather it with soap the night before, making it look foggy and dirty, nothing like the pristine stone it actually was. Small, but clear. She'd given all her own jewelry to Severo so he could sell it and survive once he got to Venezuela, on his way to Spain. The journey to meet them would be a long one, just as theirs would be. They had twenty-three days at sea, but Severo had God knows how many days of waiting and wandering before he got to them.

"You know how little girls are, it's just a toy from a piñata."

Jacqueline didn't say a thing, she just smiled at the man with her missing front tooth. Jacqueline looked like a little Spaniard too, the Dirty Gallego surely thought. Because little Jacqueline looked exactly like her father.

"And in the bag?" asked the Gallego, letting go of Jacqueline's hand and looking now, instead, at their one single duffle bag, which had been thrown on deck before them.

"Look for yourself," said Dulce, "nothing but the necessities." This much was true. There was nothing in that bag but some clothes, cloth diapers for Ingrid, canned milk, necessities, as she'd said. The man looked inside the *gusano* and let them go.

She headed straight for the top deck, away from the stench of this man, past wherever it was their room was to be, they would take care of that later. For now, they needed the tropical breeze across their faces; they needed to look at the sky.



Finally on the top deck of the ship, they looked up and out. Forward to the sea; back toward the land. Jacqueline stared at the stack, black smoke fuming out in massive gusts like the charcoal dust that would rise from the paper she drew on with her father at home. But darker, and thicker, and more of it.

"Where's *papi*?" asked Jacqueline, holding her alligator, rubbing its rubbery spikes.

"He's going to meet us in Spain," said Dulce. "He's going to take a different way because they ran out of tickets for this boat." This was a lie. There were 1,500 Cubans leaving on the Marques de Comillas, and they could've fit one more, just not Severo. Severo had to follow the path they'd set him on, through Venezuela.

Dulce took out two cans of evaporated milk and looked around for her niece, Pilar, who she was supposed to meet up on the deck. They'd planned it like this. But Pilar was nowhere in sight. Dulce leaned against an iron pole for a second, taking the full weight of herself and her infant daughter off her feet, just for a moment. "Drink the milk, Jacqueline," she told her daughter, "Drink up, *mamita*."

Then they heard the horn blow and Dulce looked at the island, clamored as it was in the foreground with people still trying to make it on the ship. But as the boat was untied from the port, after the last passengers had climbed aboard, the island began to take shape and color -- it's green half arc, a map of the life that was now her past. She brought both girls close to her and told Jacqueline to wave. "Wave goodbye to Cuba," she said.

"Goodbye, Cuba," echoed Jacqueline.

As it turned out, the ship was not in ship-shape, but on its last legs. From the start, it felt like it would collapse, cartoon-like, in the middle of the ocean. That's all they needed now. Dulce could feel a great weight piling up on her as the days passed.

After a week at sea, Dulce didn't feel she could take it anymore. Particularly the hot sardine-can room they'd given her, where she'd been fanning the girls to sleep at night. If you turned on the roof fan it fizzed with electrical sparks that looked like fireworks in the night. Except these were the deadly kind, the kind that could land on your bunk and tear the whole place up in a sudden blaze. She'd rather fan the girls by hand, even if it was a futile battle -- Dulce against the kind of heat that lived only in the bowels of a ship, the inside room they'd given her despite her first-class ticket. There were too many refugees on board to accommodate everyone, they'd told her. Plus, this was an escape wasn't it? It wasn't supposed to be comfortable. Meanwhile the priests and the Spaniards partied up top. They were in danger of nothing, except perhaps the wrath of God. Pilar too, when she'd finally found her -- her niece had abandoned Dulce and joined the party. She didn't have children, she was young, so why not? "I'm not wasting my time," she'd told Dulce. The world was beginning to turn into a lemon, a bitter, neon yellow lemon that made every part of her body pucker.

They had water in their room, but the water that came out from the sink looked like dirt. Thick and crusty, bringing pieces of pipe with it. They also had a bunk, but the sheets were made of flour sackcloth and were cruddy with something that looked like old blood. Anyway, they only used one of the bunks because Dulce was afraid Jacqueline would roll over and fall if she put her on the top bunk, go thud in the night. And there was no way she'd go up top, God forbid she crash onto the girls and kill them. That bunk

couldn't possibly be strong enough to hold her -- it screeched as though eaten by a trillion termites. That's why she'd placed both of the girls on the bottom bunk while she slept on her *gusano*. Until one night she looked over at the girls, red-faced and panting in the night and she thought: they're going to suffocate.

"Ok, that's it, let's go girls." She got the girls up, took the mattress from the bunk and dragged it out of the room. Jackie's pattering feet followed, carrying her sister, all the way to the deck above where they were, all three, hit blissfully with a gust of fresh air. If only all smacks left such gentle bruises.

"You can't do that, *Señora*," said a crew member, as soon as they'd surfaced. Dulce ignored him, making the girls their bed on deck, the sea breeze cooling them, the girls' faces fading back into normality.

"*Señora*," he repeated, "*Señora, no se puede*, this can't be done --"

"You know what can't be done." Dulce turned to the man, sharply. "What can't be done is leaving us down there to dehydrate. What can't be done is giving us rotten meat. What can't be done is what you're doing."

The crew member turned away, realizing he would need help to deal with this woman. Shortly after, and before the crew member returned, other Cubans followed Dulce. By then she'd made friends with her next-door neighbor, a woman named Rosita and her daughter Tamara. They, among others, followed Dulce after hearing the commotion on deck. Soon there were a group of Cubans and their mattresses around her, but soon too there was a group of Spanish crew members not too far away.

"You know, Fidel is there for a reason," said one of the Spaniards, looking at the Cubans.

Dulce tried to ignore him. Tried to stay talking with her friend Rosita, but the Spaniard persisted.

"Fidel's there because the government was stealing from its people, they deserved it, I agree with Fidel. Look at them, they're a bunch of --"

Dulce couldn't help herself. With a fume as sudden as the sparks from her fan, she got up and marched toward the Spaniard. "Why are you talking so cheap," she said, pushing him toward the railings, right up against them. She had no idea where her strength was coming from, but she didn't question it, she accepted its grace. "Can't you see that we are all leaving because of Fidel? That I have to go to mother-fucking Spain because of Fidel?"

"People get what they deserve," persisted the sailor.

"I just abandoned my life," she yelled, "left everything behind." This time she pushed him so hard against the railing that the other sailors started grabbing at her, pulling her away from the Spaniard she held in her grip. "Don't worry," she said. "I won't push him over, he's such a shit of a man that I won't torture the sharks with his putrid meat."

The whole thing got so out of hand that the rumor-mill reached the Captain, who finally made his appearance on the scene. "You people can't act like this here, this is a ship. You simply cannot do that here," said the Captain.

"What can't I do?" asked Dulce.

"A lot of things," said the Captain, keeping his cool.

"You mean like mistreat people. You mean like giving us green meat?"

The Captain explained that the meat was not their fault, that the Cuban government had not let them refuel at port, and, therefore, they'd had to shut down the freezers where the food had been for several days while they docked and waited to board. They were doing the best they could under the circumstances, he said.

Dulce stopped listening, turned around, and walked away. The other Cubans around her told her to be careful when she went back to her room, that the Spaniard she held over the railing might come get her.

"Just let him try," she said, defiantly, "just let him try."

Perhaps it's needless to say, but the sailors she hung over the railing never came after her. She knew he wouldn't. Her rage was visceral and he knew better. Then something serendipitous happened. *The Marques de Comillas* had to make an emergency stop for fuel, and the captain made arrangements to stop in Venezuela, of all places. Dulce looked up at the sky and thought: Really? This is where we're refueling? Passengers weren't allowed to leave the ship, the crew explained -- they'd have to move on quickly if they wanted to remain on track. Still, perhaps this was a good sign.

She had no idea whether Severo had made it out of the Venezuelan embassy and onto Venezuelan soil by now. And there was Venezuela, right in front of her. If she disobeyed, she could run off, search for her husband. It was wholly possible that he could be minutes away on foot, but he could also be...Better not to think about it. Better just to breathe. She'd learned that on the ship. How to control her body. She learned that if you looked out at the horizon, your stomach swam less; your head grabbed onto the single line that marked the seeming end of the world and stopped spinning. It was a paradox, she knew it, but it didn't matter.

The fuel stop came and went and as the days passed she continued to stare out onto the horizon, as others received news from land. The telegram service was the only thing that still worked properly on the ship, the only thing that didn't turn her skirt yellow with rust when she leaned up against it. Technology. Every day her fellow Cubans decoded new arrivals, departures, escapes, and she waited. Until one day, a sailor tapped her on the shoulder.

"Excuse me, are you Dulce Rivases?" Another stinking Spaniard. At least this wasn't one of the ones she'd fought with. She was tired of fighting. How long had it been since this man picked the crud from his beard, she wanted to ask, but she held her tongue.

"What's it to you?" she said instead, narrowing her eyes.

"You have a telegram."

And that was it. Severo had arrived in Venezuela. Thank the Virgin Mary and all the Saints, he was free. She wouldn't have to fight the images that battled to surface anymore-- images of Severo being kicked out of the embassy and dragged to the firing squad, his bandages blooming with new blood. Now she could file those images away. Made archival, they no longer carried the same guttural weight they had just moments ago.

The days that followed the telegram ran so quickly it was hard to catch their essence. And she was grateful for their speed. Because the thing about speed is that if it's fast enough, it can feel like stillness -- a place where happiness can take root, even if it's only an illusion. These were the days she'd started to make friends. Apart from Rosita and Tamara and Tony, there were others too now. Fast friends made of similar circumstance and close quarters. She knew she'd never see some of these people again, but for now

they were there to talk and listen to, to gather round when there was something to celebrate. Like Ingrid's first birthday -- a day that had started with a mission and the first smile in a long while.

On the morning of September 12, Dulce went searching for a candle. But, of course, none of the Cubans had such a thing. So she went to a cook she'd talked to before, and who she remembered because he had kind face. He said they didn't have any candles either, they were down on almost everything in fact. But he could give her some soap.

"It's that yellow kind," he said, "the kind that has a lot of potassium. You could probably use that to make a candle."

Dulce had no idea what Potassium had to do with anything, but she took the offer and between herself and Rosita, who contributed a match, they forged a candle -- wrapping and molding the soap around the match.

"Okay, everybody, here we go," said Dulce, holding the candle in front of Ingrid. Ingrid giggling at the wonder of the huddle around her, singing in unison.

*"Happy Birthday to you...Happy Birthday to you...Happy Birthday dear Ingrid..."*

And just like that, Ingrid's clock ticked one.

"Well, now that we're all gathered," said a young man, after the applause and birthday hugs. "I think we should all exchange addresses, at least we'll have somewhere to start to look for a friend, if it gets too lonely."

They all agreed and rummaged for writing instruments and paper -- napkins, scraps, old telegram sheets whose news they'd already memorized -- anything that would hold a set of letters and numbers.

"What about you?" Dulce said, after she'd gathered everyone else's information. "Where will you be staying?" Her pen was poised, ready to jot down the young man's digits.

"Write this down," he said, following with a poignant pause. And then, smirking: "Central Park. Two benches to the left."

Everyone laughed. For a long while they nudged the young man and repeated the joke: "Central Park. Two benches to the left -- that's funny."

"That's where I'll be, Dulce," he said, more soberly now, taking Ingrid's little fingers into his hand. "Figuring out what the hell I'm going to do with my life."

This time, when she looked into the young man's eyes, it stopped being funny. She swayed Ingrid's tired body to sleep on that first day of her second year of life, and she felt her temporary footing start to float away.

It had been a long journey, but they had indeed, finally, reached their destination. There was Spain, in plain site. Her friends and acquaintances began to disappear, port by port, as the ship made its registered stops all along the coast. They said their goodbyes, she said her good lucks. Some of them left little notes under her door: "Looks like I made it. Hope you reunite with your husband soon..." "Don't worry, all will be well... If you're ever in Madrid..." Others took her warmly in their arms, patted the girls on the head. "We'll be back home in no time," they said. Many thought Fidel was probably just a shooting star in the Cuban stratosphere -- a fast luminous flash that would evaporate into history, just another blip in Cuba's complicated legacy of leaders.



Goodbye, and goodbye, and good luck, and be careful, straight through to her stop -- Bilbao. The last leg of the journey. If she never saw this ship again, it would be too soon, she mumbled under her breath as she made her way off *El Marques De Comillas*. A fancy name for a dreg of a thing. "Damn this ship, damn it to hell," she said a little louder. A curse that perhaps had more power than she realized. She didn't know it then, but this trip was to be *El Marques's* last. Slated for repairs, the ship went up in flames that very year, never to sail again. Little too did she know that what lay ahead was not much better than the old vessel that had brought her here. It was land, sure, but it was just as shifty. After all, land too could split apart and swallow you whole. Isn't that what happened when the earth wanted to shake people off parts of its back -- continental shift.

Bilbao was nothing like she thought it would be. It was dark, the way she pictured the Industrial Revolution had been -- all black smoke and soot. Looking out into the night, she searched for Severo's sisters and brothers-in-law. She'd sold her last piece of collateral -- two bottles of rum -- in order to send a telegram to San Cugat, notifying the family of when she would arrive and where. All around her, others caught sight of loved ones and acquaintances and, once again, she was left waiting. And just as the passengers had begun to disappear from the ship, port by port, so too did the last of the ship's stragglers begin to dissolve into cars and other people's arms. Toward shelter.

"Where are *las tietas*?" asked Jacqueline, holding tight to Dulce with one hand; her toy alligator in the other. Jacqueline had met her aunts once before, and knew them by name. Marina was her favorite, which was who Jackie planned to give the toy alligator to, she'd told her mother. *Tieta Marina*. Where was she now indeed?

"I'm sure they'll be here any minute, why don't you sit on the *gusano* and eat some of those yummy crackers I gave you on the boat."

Jacqueline did as she was told and Ingrid was quiet as usual, her head leaning on her mother's shoulder. Where the hell were they? Could they have gone to the wrong port? Could the telegram have gone astray? She didn't have a cent to her name, not a red or green or blue one. No country's currency; no directions to her husband's hometown. Her internal Havana compass no longer worked here, dizzied by the sea. Not too far away, the glow of a distant building called to her.

"We're going to walk toward the light," she told Jacqueline, who tried to lift the *gusano* and follow her mother. "No, no, leave the *gusano* there. Don't worry, nobody will take it."

They walked briskly until they ran into a port official. Out of breath, Dulce told the man her story. He listened sympathetically. "Let's see what we can do, let me think..." When suddenly he didn't have to think anymore, because a couple appeared. An elderly man and woman. Dulce knew they were Cuban. She could tell by the lilt of their almond eyes, the sway of the woman's hips, still rhythmic despite her age. As soon as they spoke she confirmed it: "We heard what you were telling the gentleman," said the woman in a Cuban accent, "perhaps we could help." Were these angels?

They didn't have much money, explained the couple, who had not been in Spain so long themselves. But perhaps they could help her find her way, they could remember how lost they'd felt, their own first night. They knew where there were a group of hostels not too far away, they could show her. Dulce nodded, almost dumbstruck at the miracle of the couple, as they went back for the *gusano* and walked, together, sharing the load of

luggage and children. They knocked hostel by hostel, telling their story. Begging for a room for the night. Just the night; just a couple of hours. In the morning, the couple would come back for Dulce and the girls and take them to the train station. That was the plan. But someone had to let them in first. Over and over they were denied. Dulce was beginning to feel like Mary and Joseph on their donkey, begging the innkeepers for a place to stay. Denied and dejected, they continued on. Until finally, one woman said: "Fine, you can stay the night, but I want you out before the sun rises."

"No problem, no problem," said the old Cuban gentleman. "I'll be here to pick them up by six am."

When Dulce finally laid herself down that night, on a bed, after tucking Jacqueline and Ingrid into the other, she couldn't believe the mattress. She had forgotten what this felt like -- this soft, cushiony hold. It didn't lead her straight to sleep -- there was so much in the air -- but still, it was a comfort she hadn't felt in 23 days. Perhaps even more than the bed, the clean of the shower she was able to take lingered on her skin, eventually soothing her into a short rest.

The next morning, the couple appeared, just as they had promised. At the train station, Dulce learned the route to Sant Cugat. Before saying goodbye, the old Cuban woman leaned in and placed 100 pesetas in Dulce's hand. It's all we have, but please take it. Dulce couldn't afford to be graceful. Instead she embraced the old Cuban woman and thanked her. Thanked her with the same force she had cursed the ship with, just hours before.

Once settled inside, Dulce looked out her window and waited for the whistle to blow, thinking of the young man, probably sitting on his bench in Central Park already, pondering: What the hell am I going to do with my life now?

## **ROUTE 4: Prison**

My grandparents were lucky. They managed to get out. Maman made it to Sant Cugat, Papan made it to Venezuela, and both of them eventually made it to Miami, where they met again and the family was reunited. Hard times were to follow – factory work, fumbling through a new language, the deep dark cloud that would shower my grandmother for years with the loss of her mother -- but they were alive, and they were together and they would continue to survive, and thrive even, as many Cuban-Americans would.

According to the Pew Hispanic Survey of 2006, those early waves of Cuban migration met their new worlds with great success. By 2004, they held higher incomes, higher home ownership rates, and higher levels of education than any other group of Hispanics in the United States. This might have had something to do with their class status upon being booted from Cuba – it is a well-known fact that the rich, educated, and well off were the first to leave the island when Castro took power. Those are the stats, but if you've ever met a Cuban, then you know they'll tell you all that success was not luck, but a matter of the indelible spirit and strength of character embedded in the DNA of every Cuban. "Cubans are the best," you often hear Cubans tell each other among themselves. I myself have uttered these words, plenty of times with zero degrees of irony.

And yet, the fact remained that others were not as lucky as my grandparents. Papan's brother, Pedrito, didn't make it out for a very long time. He was captured and imprisoned. Almost every Cuban family has a political prisoner in their lineage. And it's this fact, I believe, that instills the most fear and is the hardest brick to break of the familial embargo. In our family, we have two political prisoners: Pedrito and Armando.

Armando, my step-father's father, is who I want to focus on because he is the most notable, having been imprisoned for fifteen years. Also, because he is someone who I have spoken to, interviewed, and come to know better than my uncle, who has now passed, and who, for most of his life post-prison, lived in Spain.

In the moments that I feel angry with my mother for giving me the old hardline Cuban guilt trip about going to Cuba, I think of Armando. I think of his story, and of the fear my mother must hold tightly in her chest, about the same thing happening to me if I visit. It is not so unheard of, she tells me, just look at Alan Gross, an American contractor arrested in 2009, for "subverting Cuban society." At first, Gross claimed he was just bringing cell phones to the Jewish community in Cuba. The Cubans, however, said he was a spy. By 2010, he was charged with "acts against the independence or the territorial integrity of the state." I wouldn't be subverting anything if I went to Cuba, I'd only be trying to see where I came from, and so I think, partially, that my mother's fear is unfounded, exaggerated, blown-out of proportion; very Cuban in its largess. But another part of me aligns itself with my mother's fear because "subversion" is a flexible word in Cuba. I have an outspoken uncle – Kique is his name -- in Havana who is consistently taken in for shouting in public that the government is a "piece of shit." That too is considered subversion, an act punishable by imprisonment. He suffered two years in prison the last time he decided to speak his mind. He'd been in line to take his rations, when he called out that he'd had enough of the crap the government was giving its people to eat.

Armando, many years earlier, was charged with much more serious crimes against the state. In a world before cell phones, what Armando was dealing with were artillery weapons. After my mother blocked my entry to Cuba in 2009, I spent the following year trying to understand her. Trying to gather stories that would explain my mother to others who asked why I could not go to the island. By 2009, President Obama had lifted restrictions on family travel and remittances. Which meant that, because I had family in Cuba, I could go legally according to American law. Americans at-large were still restricted from travel, but I wasn't. This made it difficult to explain to others why I hadn't gone to Cuba the second I was allowed to enter legally.

In order to understand my mother, I went in search of Armando almost immediately, so that he could tell me his story himself. It was a story I had the overall arc of, bits and pieces I'd picked up from family conversations over the years, but I wanted details. So, on Thanksgiving Day that very year, 2009, I asked Armando if he'd be willing to let me interview him. He smiled broadly and eagerly told me he had journals, prison journals. That he could share these with me. "And boy do I have stories!" For the remainder of Thanksgiving we went about mingling and celebrating and eating, but every once in a while, his eyes locked to mine and he smiled tightly, which made me feel trapped somehow. I wouldn't understand this feeling fully until much later. When the night was over, Armando took me by the arm and looked straight at me. With his permanently red face and translucent aqua blue eyes, his thin, blonde eyelashes, he told me, "I haven't seen Cuba in 46 years. We are the forgotten ones. This is important. Come to the house next week." He whispered all of this in my ear, making it feel like a covert operation.

His house is deep in *La Sawesera*, which is what Cuban-Americans call southwest Miami. What this mean is that there will be the smell of Cuban food cooking in the kitchen, black beans and rice, *ropa vieja*, *yuca*. And, of course, the scent of garlic stamping the air. I'll be able to smell it from outside.

When I arrive, it's just as I expected. The sweet, dense smell of *frijoles*, that hint of bay leaves mixing with the Miami heat. Outside, the house is painted pink with sea-green accents (Armando re-paints the house himself every year). I ring the doorbell and immediately Carmen, Armando's wife, greets me just seconds after I buzz. She must have been waiting by the door. She is coiffed and powdered and perfumed, wearing a green and white floral-print silk shirt and pants. One step inside and I'm hit with the frosty bite of the AC on full blast. I imagine that if I were to walk barefoot in this house, the uber-clean white tile floor would be cold as an arctic fish.

Inside, everything is impeccably clean, though crowded with an excess of furniture. Big leather couches, frames on the walls, a portrait of Carmen, which I will soon learn was made by one of Armando's prison-mates in Cuba.

"Come on in!" Armando calls out from the living room. He's just undergone hip surgery, and is limping. I hadn't noticed it as much at Thanksgiving, but his hobble is clearly visible now. Still, he manages to walk toward me and kiss me on the cheek. As he does this, I can feel his hard belly brush up against my body, as if his organs were made out of metal.

Carmen wants to know what I'm going to eat. When I tell her I've eaten, she frowns, but then offers me cookies and beer, you don't have to be hungry for cookies and beer. "I'll take a beer," I smile.



"So you are interested in Cuba?" asks Carmen. "Well, you've come to the right place," she says, "because once you get Armando started, you won't be able to stop him." Her voice implies that this isn't altogether a good thing. "Well," she continues, "I imagine there's no one else that will talk to you about Cuba, right? What a pity. Well, maybe Severo, he probably talks to you about Cuba..." This statement is bizarre, given the fact that everywhere you go in Miami, people will talk to you about Cuba. You have to work hard to have a conversation that doesn't involve Cuba in some way. In my family, hardly a day goes by without the subject entering common chitchat. But, Carmen and Armando don't leave their house much.

"Ok, Carmen, Ok. Enough," says Armando to his wife. "Here, here, sit here," he tells me, pointing to the couch right next to his armchair. Suddenly I dislike him. The way he is belittling his wife, the way he's brushing her aside. I'd say something, but I know I have information to gather, so I put on my reporter hat, and ignore the misogyny, an act that goes against every fiber of my being.

"Why don't we start?" he asks. "We have a lot to cover."

"Here's your beer, darling," says Carmen, placing a *Presidente* in front of me.

"Ok, I'll leave you two alone now..." And Carmen disappears into the backrooms of the house.

Armando nods and starts right in. It almost seems like he's been practicing what he was going to say to me. Slowly, he begins to paint a picture. He'd studied in Havana before becoming a surgical and orthopedic nurse. He worked in military hospitals.

"Inside the military there were a lot of communists, but there were a lot of us implanted there too," he tells me.

“Whose “us”?” I ask, pointing my iPhone at him, making sure it’s picking up his voice properly.

“We were counterrevolutionaries,” he says, looking at me as if I’m stupid, “We were trying to knock down Fidel Castro. During the Bay of Pigs there were about 2,000 Cubans from inside the island, you know, that were fighting in line with the CIA, and the idea was that they would be dissidents if things didn't work out, and they would go to the US. But the problem with the Bay of Pigs was that instead of dropping the Cubans, these were other Cubans, Cubans that were already exiled, on dry land, the Americans left them in the middle of the swamp in la *Sierra de Zapata*. And they had to start combating there, it was impossible, but then they started advancing, and just as they were doing that, advancing, Kennedy pulls back. And what happens, Fidel's men eat them up, they killed so many people, it was barbarous.”

It’s not strange that he would start here, at the Bay of Pigs, but I need him to go further back. This is the reason the entire Cuban-American community despises the “Kennedy Clan,” but I know a great deal of this already. What I want to know now is what it was like inside one of Castro’s cells, what it was like to be put away.

“What about before that, what about before Carlos was born?”

“Yes. Maybe we should start with that,” he says, nodding. Understanding what I want. Even though, time-wise, it was all happening around the same time, he explains. It wasn’t a linear thing, it was more like a ball of twine.

1961 then. The same year as the Bay of Pigs, the same year Maman and Papan fled Cuba, just two years after Castro took power.

That was the year Armando met Carmen. It seemed to be a regular afternoon, or what had become “regular” in those days, except that his car had broken down and he needed his car. You see, at the time, he was working in *Cayo Largo del Sur*, about 90 miles from Havana. He had to get it fixed, pronto. That’s where he was going when he met Carmen, to the mechanic with his friend, Marianito. On the way there, Armando catches sight of a *trigeñita*, and boy did he like those brunettes. She was sitting on a ledge, a nose cute as button. “Whose that?” Armando asks his friend.

“Calm down there cowboy. I’m close with that family. I’m their protector, that’s the kind of girl you follow through with if you know what I mean, and I know you Armando, so calm down.”

Armando was a bit of a player, buzzing from flower to flower. His blue, Sinatra eyes always managing to get him into the hearts of women. And though he couldn’t sing, he could definitely coo a *piropo de amor* with the best of them. At 34, he’d been around the block a few times, had already married and divorced the love of his life. In his ex, he had found his match. She had, it seemed, been unfaithful and broken his heart.

“If you did anything to harm her, I’d kill you,” reiterated Marianito. “So why don’t you just leave Carmen alone.”

But Armando couldn’t. He was smitten. He got his car fixed and the next time he was in Havana, about fifteen days later, he went in search of his friend. “Marianito, tell me how I can see that girl again.”

“So you wanna meet her?”

“What do you think?”

“Don’t make me look bad, I’m warning you!”

“How old is she?”

“21, maybe 22,” said Marianito. “A baby.”

“A baby.”

A couple of days later, Marianito came back with the verdict. “I pointed you out,” he said, “and she doesn’t like you. You’re too short.”

“Too short?”

“Well you are, aren’t you?”

Armando responded with a Napoleonic retort. He might be short, but he was big where it mattered. Nearly needless to say, Armando didn’t give up. He concocted a plan instead. If he got in with Carmen’s mother, he’d get in with Carmen, he thought. That was always the way into a Cuban girl’s life, if her heart was not open at first. So he called up his friend again.

“Listen, Marianito, I’ve got an idea.”

The idea was to invite the family to a restaurant where they made a really nice roasted pig and *moros*, because Carmen’s mother, he’d heard through the grapevine, really liked roasted pig. Who didn’t? Marianito was to invite Carmen and her sister and her mom to the restaurant Armando told Marianito about. Then, they would pass by *Mazorra*. At *Mazorra*, Armando would be there, just standing there, waiting for the bus. Marianito would see him and call out to him, “Bro, what are you doing there all by yourself on a beautiful night like this? Why don’t you join us for dinner?” To which Armando would respond, “Naw, that’s ok, I’m tired, and plus I don’t want to intrude!”

etc, etc. Until Carmen's mother, out of politeness, would say, "No dear, it's no intrusion at all, come along..."

And that's almost exactly what happened. Except for the pitter-patter of improvised conversation, the script went off almost exactly as planned.

When they arrived at the restaurant, Armando tried small-talking Carmen, but Carmen was closed to it. Sort of snobby, Armando thought. Plastic. But no matter, there was a dance floor and if anything could loosen a girl up it was a slow dance. Problem was that Carmen wouldn't accept his invitation. "No," and "No thank you," she responded, until her mother, again out of politeness, convinced her daughter to accept "the gentleman's invitation."

"Why don't we go to the Victrola and pick a song?" asked Armando. To which Carmen agreed. By then Armando was smiling ear to ear, it didn't matter how he'd gotten her here, the point was, she was here. He picked *Verano de Amor*. And Carmen smiled for the first time since he'd met her.

"I was going to pick that song!"

The couple made their way to the dance floor and Armando whispered sweet nothings into Carmen's ear, which Carmen didn't seem to like very much. But then, as luck would have it, it started to rain. The dance floor was outside, and just as the rain started to gain power, a frog jumped right by Carmen's feet in the commotion of the run for cover. She grabbed onto Armando.

"*Armandito!* Don't leave, oh don't leave, hold me." And like that, Armando got his first little squeeze.

The rest of the courtship was hard though, Carmen played really hard to get, until one day Armando had enough and told her she simply had to decide. It was now or never, and he went to talk with her father, who was very, very strict.

Carmen's father put Armando through the ringer. He asked Armando to show him his divorce papers and asked when he planned to marry Carmen. He told Armando that he could court his daughter on Thursdays and Sundays from 8-10pm. Those were visiting hours. They couldn't even hold hands, a chaperone with them at every turn.

Armando was not a man of great patience, so he rushed things along. Four months later they were married. A year after that, they had Carlos, who they called Carlito. He weighed 10.5 pounds at birth, but he wasn't the biggest thing in Armando's life.

Armando couldn't be at the birth because he was taking care of a patient that was dying. "I couldn't leave, you understand, it was my duty to stay with the dying patient," he proclaims years later, protesting too much. "Plus, Carmen had her mother and her sister by her side... When he finally saw Carmen," her remembers, "her lips were pale and swollen. And there was Carlos."

In the back of Armando's mind, there were other things overshadowing his new marriage and the birth of his child, things his new family knew nothing about. He was at war, conspiring. He had no other words for it, though he would never admit any of this out loud to anyone, everything in Cuba was beginning to grow ears, and people were not to be trusted. Specifically, he was infiltrated at the military hospital, picking up information about weapons, arms, where they were, and where the communists had them hidden, all of which he would pass on to counterrevolutionaries. He would also steal supplies from the hospital -- syringes, gauze, antiseptic washes -- to cure the

counterrevolutionaries that were injured. And he'd even moved weapons himself from one place to another when necessary. Inside him there was a drive toward these actions that he couldn't control, a drive to lift the yoke he could see tightening around the Cuban people, that of Fidel Castro. Fidel had said he wasn't a communist when he took Havana, that he and his men were simply fighting against the ills of the American-operated puppet president, Batista. But, Armando and his gang knew better. Just as Severo had known before. By December 1961, Fidel would declare it himself: "I am a Marxist-Leninist and shall be one until the end of my life." Little did anyone know that his life would be so long.

But even before that statement, the regime was murdering people left and right. It was rumored that in Oriente, Raul Castro had killed more than 600 soldiers. That was on January 1st, 1959, when the lot of them came down from the mountains. Everybody saw it. The men in green fatigues fired and their captors fell back into their own graves. Armando figured there were about 100,000 political prisoners by now in Cuba between *La Cabaña*, *El Principe*, *Los Alamos*, and *Isla de Pinos*. This might have been an inflated number, but it's a number he believed.

The night they caught him, the 20th of May 1964, he was on his way to the naval hospital he was working at. They caught him at a red light. Three cars, guards with weapons in hands, bayonets. Armando didn't have any idea they were on to him, but Castro's secret service has always been notoriously sharp. All Armando had on him was a pistol, but he couldn't even move to grab that, because before he knew it they had him cornered. The guards ran up to his vehicle and hit him on the head with a rifle while he was still in his car. He froze and the guards pulled him from the car, tied his arms and

legs, and took him away. They started to ask him questions, but all Armando kept saying was, "I don't know anything. Nothing. I don't know anything. You'll have to kill me," he said, "because I know nothing. I just don't know what you're talking about." There were about 400 people in Armando's cohort – 400 people moving weaponry from Pinar del Rio to Camaguey, all counterrevolutionaries, all ready to die for the cause --- but there was no way he was giving up their names, he wouldn't be the bullet that killed them. One of the men Armando worked with had started out with Fidel, had been with him in the Sierra Maestra, but he had problems with Raul because Raul fell in love with him. That guy was his boss now. A firing squad would eventually get the best of him, but we're getting ahead of ourselves now.

The day of Armando's capture, all he kept repeating was, "I don't know anything." To which the guards would respond, "We're going to kill you." Over and over again like a mantra.

"Well, at least that would be liberty," Armando replied once, breaking the call-and-response pattern, to the great ire of the guards.

That very night, they took Armando out, tied him up, head covered. He didn't know where he was going, he just knew it was a dark, and that there was bush all around. The guards taunted: You gonna talk, huh? You gonna talk now? You have a young wife, and you have a son. You want your son to be an orphan? They lifted the covering from his head. Still he didn't know where he was, he was turned around after being led in the dark.



“I don't know anything. How can I tell you what I don't know?” Armando uttered once more. But inside he was coming to terms with death. I'm going to die, he told himself. He was already facing it, he was already praying for his own soul.

At one point, one of the guards tells the other to point the rifle at Armando. “Prepare,” Armando hears a voice call out behind him. He looks up to the sky and it was so strange, the sky was so blue and starred, there was a new moon, and it was as if his life had become a film. Inside him, a surge of faith, for God, for things bigger than him, like this, the cause he was fighting. It was just like people said it was, those moments before death – his life, rolling before him, from the time he was a kid, until now. Then the guard's voice jolting him from his reel: “Point...” And then Armando lost consciousness.

“Armando, Armando...Armando...” Someone was calling his name. It was morning. He was in a swamp, deep in water. I'm not alive, he kept telling himself. This is death. The afterlife. I know I'm dead because those men killed me last night. Am I in hell? Armando feels pain everywhere, in his ribs, his legs, his arms, chest, face, everywhere, from the beating they'd given him. The guards from last night appear and pick him up because he can't walk. Will hell be a reliving of last night? Will I have to see the faces of these guards forever?

But he wasn't dead.

What had happened was that one of the men in his cohort, who had also been captured, had talked. The worst part was who. It was his son's Godfather, who was living with Armando, Carmen, and Carlito at the time. They'd done the same thing to him as they'd done to Armando, but Jorge had talked. He got scared. Several days later, at the trial, which was not a trial at all, but a sentencing without justice, Jorge sat next to

Armando and started shaking. The judge was a Fidel sympathizer, and it was obvious where they were all heading.

“What’s going to happen, Armando? What’s going to happen?” Jorge shivered next to him.

“I’m prepared to die. I’m prepared for *El Paredón*,” said Armando, stony faced. A response that brought Jorge into a jerking stream of sobs.

“Don’t cry to me,” said Armando. “I forgive you, but you’re a traitor.”

All Jorge could do was shake and cry. Despite the fact that Jorge had given up names, he and Armando were both sentenced to 30 years. They wanted to give Armando the death sentence, but they couldn’t find any hard evidence against him, they said. Not that they needed hard evidence. It was luck really. They threatened to kill him, then they threatened him with life in prison, but they settled on a 30 year sentence.

For the next fifteen years, Armando was moved from prison to prison. He went from *Combinado del Este* to *La Cabaña* to *Isla de Pinos*... *Isla de Pinos* was the worst. The day he arrived there in the middle of the night, there was a Captain that pulled him aside and said: *Listen to me, Armando Diaz, I've read up on your story, and you're lucky to be alive. But here, listen to me, and listen to me carefully. Be careful what you do, how you act, because I have orders to kill you.*

Armando was tired by then and he thought to himself: *Shit, I have to be good here or this might be the end of my road.* He had already seen people get murdered, and he’d heard many more shot to death, anonymous shots and screams in the night through prison walls. With rifles and bayonets, they shot some prisoners and beat others, punching them in the stomach, then in the back, until death came, slow for some, and swift for others.

Some of these men he knew, some he had heard about, and some he would never meet now.

When Armando entered *Isla de Pinos*, he could see how crowded it was immediately, it looked like there were 80-100 prisoners sharing one space, lying on newspapers, on the ground. This is where he'd be spending his days from now on. During the day they worked, planted citrus, things like that. Cut Pangola. The prison was round in structure, comprised of four, six-story circular blocks, arenas around which the guards would walk, both inside and outside.

The design was the brainchild of Jeremy Bentham, a British philosopher and social theorist. Back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when he created the model for this Panopticon style prison, as he called it, the idea was that it would achieve utmost functionality and utilitarianism. Because of the shape of the building, the guards could walk around the center like bulls and toreadors, or stand at the watchtower in the middle of the circular buildings and see everything. The cells themselves had walls that separated the prisoners from the world, and one group from another, but there was no walls facing the center. The prisoners never knew who the guards were watching and when, meanwhile the guards had full view of all the prisoners at all times. From afar, the buildings look like granaries or refractories, and at times like multiplied copies of the Roman Coliseum.

During the time Armando lived at *Isla de Pinos*, inside the walls of the *Presidio Modelo*, or "model prison," there was great fear among the guards that there would be an American invasion. That was the penchant in those days, and for many years after. The United States had already tried to invade during the Bay of Pigs, hadn't they, back in 1961. Not to mention all the governments North America had helped to oust in

Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, Chile and Peru through the support of right-wing, U.S-friendly regimes. The United States had turned into what Juan Gonzalez, in his book *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*, would later call the “regional policeman” of the Caribbean and Central America, out to protect American business and influence.

So what the prison did, as a precaution, and to counter the monster-to-the-north’s threat, was place dynamite inside the columns of the circular structures, so that if the Americans came, Fidel could make the call and blow up the buildings and all the prisoners in it.

But among the prisoners, they had members of every craft – there were electricians, and there were experts in explosives -- prisoners that knew about dynamite. And so, in the dark of night, the prisoners would make holes in the columns that led to the dynamite, go down into the columns, two by two. Once there, they would disconnect and disable the dynamite. Then they would come back up and patch up the hole they'd made. The guards couldn't figure out how they did it. After years of being watched like lab rats, the prisoners had become wily. At least this way the men knew they wouldn’t suddenly go boom in the night.

One of the things that blighted Armando most was the food, it was awful, a kind of farina or grits with worms and roaches, water and salt, the vermin swimming right above like curd. Every once in a while they'd serve spaghetti and that was very lucky. Carmen would bring Armando powdered milk when she visited. But what she brought never lasted long; the guards always ruined it by the same night she'd brought it, poured water all over it, intentionally messing up Carmen’s hard-earned gift to her jailed

husband. The new guys, young guys that came in during Armando's time at the prison, would go crazy when they saw what they had to eat. But Armando would tell them the same thing he'd been told: "Listen, this is what's going to keep you alive, just move the bugs aside and eat. Take the grits and close your eyes and eat."

Visitations were every two months or so. Once, Armando went a whole year without seeing anyone from the outside. Often he'd find himself thinking: *We're forgotten. Completely forgotten. International governments know what's going on and they aren't doing anything.*

And like that, he continued to go from prison to prison until President Carter was voted into power in the United States. Armando was eventually released because of Carter, who put pressure on the Castro government to release prisoners. His release came toward the end of these negotiations. Armando believed that the first twenty or so prisoners to be released under this pressure from the north were the people with connections to lawyers, America, the Pope. Perhaps this was true, but Armando would get his turn too.

In a chapter called "Carter: Close but No Cigar," William M. LeoGrande and Peter Kornbluh, authors of the book *Back Channel to Cuba*, detail Carter's negotiations with Cuba during his presidency.

Carter, who became president in 1977, put Cuba at the top of his agenda immediately. By March 1977, Carter had written a Presidential Directive (NSC-6) to the Vice President, Secretary of State, and Secretary of Defense stating the following: "After reviewing the results of the meeting of the Policy Review committee held on Wednesday, March 9, 1977, to discuss U.S. policy to Cuba, I have concluded that we should attempt

to achieve normalization of our relations with Cuba.” In this same directive, Carter pointed to the need to address Human Rights in Cuba, under which the release of political prisoners like Armando fell, given their lack of a fair and just trial.

The challenges to such open relations with Cuba were manifold, however. Among them, there was Cuban foreign policy, which stood adamantly against the United States in its support of left-leaning Latin American revolutions. There was also Cuba’s role in Africa, primarily in Angola. It was the wars in Africa that entangled negotiations, particularly the complications emanating from Angola’s Civil War, for which Castro had deployed military forces to protect their ally. Castro’s refusal to pull back from Angola caused great delays in diplomatic progress between the US and Cuba. According to LeoGrande and Kornbluh, the State Department “fully expected Cuba... to reject any discussion of political prisoners ‘as an infringement of national sovereignty’.”

Enter the likes of a Cuban-American banker named Bernardo Benes, without whom Armando might have spent many more years in prison, possibly the rest of his life. Because as official channels continued to attempt and fail normalization between Cuba and the United States, Castro had asked to meet with Benes, who was then vice chairman of the board of the Continental National Bank of Miami, and a prominent Cuban-American figure in Miami. Proof of that socially and economically rising Cuban-American population that the Pew Hispanic Survey later recorded as a norm. It was through Benes and Castro’s “back channels,” that Castro began to agree to the release of political prisoners.

By 1978, they notified Armando that he would be released.

He was in *Combinado Del Este* when they brought him a paper to sign, right at the last minute, around November, 1978. It was the 4th of December that he was actually released, the day of Santa Barbara. "She's my girl, that Santa Barbara," says Armando.

But when they gave him the paper to sign, Armando saw that Carlos wasn't on there. They weren't going to allow his son to leave the country, despite the fact that the U.S. had negotiated that the prisoner's released would be allowed to leave Cuba with their families. And yet, Armando was being told that he could leave with his wife, Carmen, but not Carlito.

"Why isn't my son here?" he asked.

They explained that he was of military age and needed to serve his country.

"Then I'm not going anywhere. If Carlito doesn't come with me, I'm staying right here."

"No, no, Armando, you have to go, everyone is going. We've got orders."

"No," said Armando, as he ripped up the papers and threw them at the officer's face.

They beat him for this lack of respect, for his disobedience.

Four days later, they brought him the papers again to sign.

"You have to go, all the prisoners are being released."

But again Carlos wasn't on there.

"Why isn't my son on here?"

"Because he is not your son, he is a son of The Revolution."

“What fucking son of the revolution, you mother fucker, he’s *my* fucking son!  
‘Son of Revolution,’ son of a bitch, what the hell does that mean? That boy is my son, my blood. My wife didn’t fuck Fidel. He’s no son of The Revolution.”

They beat him again. This time it was worse. Much worse.

A couple of days later, they sent a higher in command.

Armando, calmed down from the last time, was ready to try a new approach. The officer comes in and tells him, once more, that it’s time to go.

“You have to go, you’ve suffered a great deal and now it’s time to go. You can come later for your son.”

“*Commandante,*” says Armando, “you know very well that’s not true. I can’t come back here, if I come back here for my son later, they’ll kill me. You know that. It just isn’t the way it works. If my son can’t leave with me now, then, I’m sorry, I can’t sign.”

“You’re not going to sign?”

“I’m not going to sign,” Armando said. And like that, peaceably, they spoke for a while and there came a moment when Armando saw a crack, for a second, a soft spot, in the higher-up’s character. Because if there’s one thing you learn in prison it’s human psychology. The officer turned to Armando and told him, “You know little man, if you were slightly bigger, just a little bit bigger, you’d be pretty dangerous. As it is, I think you’re almost more dangerous, like poison.”

“*Commandante,* would it be possible to ask you a question?”

The officer nods.

“Do you have any children?”

“A boy and a girl.”



“Do you love them?”

“I adore them.”

“I congratulate you. You're a good father. *Commandante*, if you were in my place, would you leave your children behind while you went in search of freedom in another country?”

“*Me lo has puesto en Chino.*”

“No, I've put it to you right here, right here in *El Combinado del Este.*”

“Listen, little man. I know what you are, you are a real man. And we'd have to kill you to talk, and this is between you and me...No. No, I wouldn't leave my kids behind. Tomorrow, I'll bring you your papers. I will include your son.”

Armando can't believe it.

“Is this real *Commandante*, or is this just another form of torture?”

“Father to father, little man, father to father I'm giving you my word. You will leave with your son.”

And the officer was true to his word.

This is the story Armando told me, over a series of weeks. He also shared his diaries with me so that I could better reconstruct the pieces of his story. There were times that I was right there with him in my imagination. When he was in the bush, a gun pointed to his head. When he thought he was dead. I could envision the darkness -- I could feel the constriction of all Armando's muscles, the thought that death would release everything, all consciousness and the tight grip of a life that was not fully spent. I could envision the circular, Big-Brother-like structures of the prison in *Isla de Pinos*, and the

community Armando built with other prisoners, out of necessity and the human need for kinship. But there were also moments that I didn't believe. Like that moment when he explained to me that he wasn't at his son's birth, my step-dad's birth -- I don't believe he was seeing another patient. He might have been "conspiring," as he calls it, but he also might have been having an affair. Even in Miami, many years later, Carlos knew his father was unfaithful, even to the woman that had stood by his side while he was in prison for so many years.

And then there are the histrionics of that last scene, the myth making of the "bold little man" who stands up for his son. I'm fairly sure there are embellishments to his truth telling. And yet, when I set Armando's tale against that of famous prisoners such as Armando Valladares, who detailed his imprisonment in a book called *Against All Hope: A Memoir of Life in Castro's Gulag*, there are a great deal of things that align, almost perfectly. For the sake of clarity – as they both have the same first name -- I will distinguish them here by calling my step-grandfather Armando, and Armando Valladares by his last name.

The firing squads Armando told me about, for instance – they are everywhere in the literature about Cuba. And in Valladares' book as well. Valladares explains, in a chapter called "The Year of the Firing Squad," that Fidel Castro had promised that there would be no more than "four hundred henchmen and conspirators against the revolution that [they would] execute." But there were many more. As early as January 12, 1959, "on a firing range located in a small valley called San Juan, at the end of the island in a the province of Oriente, hundreds of soldiers from the defeated army of Batista had been lined up in a trench knee-deep and more than fifty yards long," writes Valladares. "They

were machine-gunned there where they stood. Then with bulldozers the trenches were turned into mass graves... Many of them were hardly more than boys, who had joined the army because money and food were scarce at home.” And that was just the beginning. As the months went by, the “terror tactics,” as Valladares calls them, grew worse until the country became cloaked in a silence born of fear.

Valladares’ description of *Isla de Pinos* and its “model prison,” also hits the same key that Armando’s stories do, registering it as a place of pain and inmate camaraderie, a place that has to be forgotten in exile, in order to survive in a new land, but a place too that must be remembered in order to write the pages of history. “Political prisoners,” writes Valladares, “were being concentrated in unimaginable numbers at *Isla de Pinos*.”

The description of his entry into the prison is very similar to Armando’s. When Valladares gets to the prison in his narrative, one of the sergeants calls him out and tells him, “Now you’re going to see who it is you’re dealing with.” Shortly after, Valladares is taken to a punishment pavilion. This idea that, on *Isla de Pinos*, you couldn’t get away with what you had prior, is present in both the oral and written histories of the two Armandos, and many others.

The food in both narratives is also similarly described. According to Valladares, “the mess we ate at those times...we jokingly called it La Boba – “The Old Maid” – nobody really wanted to try it a second time.” He then goes on to describe the split peas with worms in them, and the boiled cornmeal, above which “a layer of tiny animals floated...” But in prison, he explains, as does Armando, you eat to survive.

Valladares is probably among the most famous political prisoners from those captured early on in the revolution’s long course, mostly because of the wide-reaching

distribution and popularity of his memoir. Other well-known prisoners of the time include Pedro Luis Boitel, who had not only been a dissident, but also a poet. Boitel had been as opposed to Batista as he had to Fidel. He was arrested by Castro's henchmen in 1961, but he met a different fate than that of the two Armandos ultimately. On April 3, 1972, he began the hunger strike that would end his life, after 53 days of self-inflicted starvation and protest, a tactic that has been emulated often in Cuban prisons, the body being the only tool left that a dissident could brandish.

As for Valladares, he was not released until 1982. The epilogue of his book is a simple quote by Fidel Castro, a statement made to journalists on July 18, 1983, the year after Valladares' release. "From our point of view, we have no human-rights problem – there have been no 'disappears' here," posited Fidel, "there have been no tortures here, there have been no murders here. In twenty-five years of revolution, in spite of the difficulties and dangers we have passed through, torture has never been committed, a crime has never been committed." It is evident, once you reach this, the very last page of Valladares' book, that the quote is backlit in irony, standing firmly in opposition to the pages that precede it, Valladares' own tome of tortures received and murders witnessed.

Because Miami is a small world, it turns out that my aunt Ingrid is Valladares' dental hygienist. He's told her many a story in the chair, she says. But she won't share them, out of respect. "Patient confidentiality," she tells me, as if she were the man's shrink.

But you don't have to know Valladares or have a personal connection to these famous prisoners, to hear their stories. On any given Sunday, a walk down Calle Ocho in Miami will still provide you with the presence of ex-political prisoners, members of the

Brigade 2506 that fought in the Bay of Pigs, and Cubans unwilling to forget the things Armando thinks have been forgotten. And yet, it must be said, that this is a dying generation. And it's this very generational shift that's creating change.

It's the younger generation's turn to listen and re-tell the older generation's stories, but it's also our turn to differ, to veer, to meander until we are strong enough to write our own pages in Cuba's complex story.

In 2012, I stopped interviewing Armando. After just a year, Armando expected that I have a full book written on his narrative. "I'm not writing just about you," I told Armando on the phone one day after he'd left a number of messages on my voicemail, asking how "his book" was coming along. I explained that I was writing about my other set of grandparents as well, and other Cuban-Americans, American-Born-Cubans, and Cuban dissidents – the people that could help me understand why I couldn't go to Cuba. I explained that the book would not revolve solely around him. He seldom responded when I told him this on the phone. When I finally told him in person, he nodded and said he understood, though I was not sure he did. He continued to call. He had more journal entries for me, more things to tell me. I knew he'd been transcribing his prison journals. And that because of this, the best view of the journals were the originals I saw while interviewing him. I didn't trust the transcribed journal entries – entries he said he wanted to transcribe because they were illegible. But I felt he was also adding and subtracting to these, as he transcribed. And perhaps that was ok. Didn't he have a right to organize his own story? And yet -- though I did take copies of these transcriptions home to read -- I didn't find them as helpful.

On Christmas Eve 2012, Armando kept eyeing me across the dinner table in my parent's apartment. But not with a smile this time, with a strange intensity instead. At the end of the night, he cornered me. Literally, his tight, hard body walked toward me until my back met the wall of my parent's apartment. I could see my mother and step-dad watching from the corner of their eyes. They knew the trouble I'd been having with Armando.

"Listen, Vanessa," he whispered. "I want my story. I think you should give me the pages you've written about me."

"I can't do that. That's not how this works."

"I'll do something with them, just give them to me."

"But they're not your pages, that's not how --."

"They're my story."

I tried to explain how journalism and memoir and publishing worked, at least in the U.S, but it all came out jumbled because I felt that this tiny, old man was trying to threaten me. I started to dislike him again, just as I had when he told Carmen to find her place in the backdrop of our conversation, make way for "his story." To a certain degree, if Carmen had been willing, I'd almost have preferred her story. But she didn't feel it was important enough to tell. A mistake, I thought at first. She, after all, lived in the Cuba I'd wondered so much about. Until I realized that Carmen was perhaps trying to move forward, instead of holding onto a page of the past.

Armando, on the other hand, felt the need to record. He had lived in a cell, locked away, and it was important to shed a light on that dark corner of Cuba's past. This thought, imagining Armando in his cell, not knowing when his last day of life would be,

or if he'd ever be set free brings me back to empathy. I now feel a sudden rush of sadness for the tiny man in front of me, red-faced, begging for his own story. Begging for the possession of his history. This was a lack of control I could connect to my grandmother's, at the loss of her mother. This was a lack of control I could connect to Cuba's own history, colonialized, tyrannized and embargoed as it was. This cornering of me, I told myself, it was just a tactic Armando had learned in order to survive. It was his way to try and grasp onto the thread that had been his life for so long. And here I was, running away with it. Taking his story and making it mine. Who was I to do that? Who was I to tell him he could not have these pages?

And yet I did not give them to him. I told him the writing was on hold. That was when he stopped talking to me about Cuba, he stopped talking to me about himself. I imagine it was Carmen who convinced him to forget it. None of that, she told him, was important anymore. Just be her grandfather, just talk about other things, your plants, the life you live now. I can almost hear her saying these words.

All of this is heartbreaking to me.

I think of Joan Didion, who herself has written about Miami, and who famously penned in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* that "writers are always selling somebody out." Though I'd try to explain again, I knew that in Armando's eyes I was a sell-out.

I think of the Cuban poet, Heriberto Padilla, who wrote, "It is always the children who distance themselves...At night they cling persistently to our bodies, but they always distance themselves, jumping about, singing in circles..." Had I done this? Padilla, who himself had heard that dreaded knock on the door, alongside the cry of "State police!"

Padilla, who just like Armando, had found himself jailed, but for words instead of actions. Words that became as powerful as actions in Castro's Cuba.

I think of Miguel Barnet's book *Biography of a Runaway Slave*, about Esteban Montejo, a man who had once been a slave. Except that Barnet allows Montejo to tell the story himself, as he looks back at the age of 103. Barnet cobbles together his interviews with Esteban, using only the words Montejo himself used, giving Montejo the microphone. Perhaps I should have let Armando tell his own story in first person. But that wouldn't have fit here, would it? And isn't Barnet's the biggest manipulation of all? His claim at *testimonio* – isn't that an equivocation? Barnet tells us that it is Montejo writing his own past and coming to the present, foretelling the future. But it's Barnet's name in the place of authorship. It's Barnet who decides which statements of Montejo's go where, and what effect that will ultimately have on the reader. Given that Barnet was true to the Castro regime and writing out of Castro's Cuba at the time of the book's publication in 1966, isn't his book just a brilliant form of propaganda? And yet, it remains one of the books that have had the greatest impact on me. Still, I cannot take Barnet's form to tell Armando's story. The narrative I am trying to sculpt here may seem like fiction at times, drawing as it does from fiction's toolbox of metaphor and simile, but it is full of the facts I know to be true.

I must, therefore, make peace with this. Make peace with my clash with Armando. I must take my suitcase and go, away from Armando, away from all of this. I must take it straight to Cuba myself. I must pack the bags the children of Padilla's verse pack, suitcases made, as Padilla writes, of both "dreams and horrors." I had to get out, or I might be drowned, like poor Saltarín, by the thick milk of exile.



## **ROUTE 5: Yoani**

Throughout all of 2011 and 2012, as in years before, my family's stories kept me close to Cuba in a roundabout way. They kept me curious, full of desire, and allowed me to comprehend why my family had to leave the island. These stories also helped me to understand why my family stood so adamantly in the way of my going to Cuba. The irony, of course, is that the closer I got to understanding the oral history, the further I moved from the island itself, the very place I truly felt the need to touch. The closer I got to Miami, the further I was from Cuba.

Miami -- that candy-colored city that got stuck in your teeth, but that tasted so sweet -- where Cuba was everywhere and nowhere all at once. I understood my parent's love for Cuba because of the way I loved Miami. It's the one place I always went back to, despite wherever else in the world I traveled and lived. She called me back because she was home, but also because of her infusion -- passion and heat -- embraces that took you in no matter what. She was the song of Spanish heard everywhere, as well as the hands of my grandparents, freckled and full of Havana. Sometimes, during those years, I thought about how Miami was sinking, and I wondered, would I wail for her the way my parents did for Cuba? It was different though, wasn't it -- the slow crawl of global warming versus the fast slap of a government takeover -- it was a different kind of sting.

In the moments Miami and my family barred me from the island, I convinced myself that these alternate routes -- this digging deep into the past -- this was my reality. This was the only Cuba that could exist for me as long as the United States maintained its embargo, and as long as my family held strong to its own, private blockade.

I also realized that my family's stories were frozen in time, trapped in the cryogenic sleep of exile. I absorbed them and felt their ferocity while, at the same time, recognizing that I would have to be the one to break the sleep chamber. It was no longer enough to sit back and hallucinate, I wanted to reach the real thing – get on a ship and see whether the Earth was flat or round. But I did not want to plant flags. I wanted to uncover, not dis-cover, there's a difference.

I also believed that the urge I had inside me to break the familial embargo was important, that there was no way any American president could shift US-Cuba policy without getting the exile community on board. The exile community had clout. Everybody knew this. Because of Cuban-Americans like my parents and grandparents, Florida was the Republican-leaning state that voted Reagan in. The state, it could be argued, that assured in George W. Bush's 2004 election with 78% of the Cuban-American vote.

The Cuban-American vote was powerful because it had always been staunch, influencing Florida's hefty 29 electoral votes. For years, politicians took note of this power and pandered. As late as 2012, presidential candidates were doing this. Anya Landau French published an article in *The Atlantic* on January 31, 2012, called "*A Brief history of the Ludicrous, Doomed Politics of Florida Cuban Votes.*" In it, she explained how presidential candidates "[fell] all over themselves" during presidential debates, when asked about Cuba, specifically Fidel Castro. About the Republican debates of 2012, she wrote: "They couldn't wait for Castro to meet his maker; no, wait, he won't be so lucky -- he'll go to the other place; and if we could help Libya's Qaddafi get there, why not Castro? From the debate stage to the stump speech to the multi-point plans, the

candidates rushed to prove their anti-Castro bona fides, and they hop[ed], win the Cuban American vote.”

In 2012, I had a very clear and conscious thought that moved me toward action: *I have to do my part, as the child of these exiles, I have to move things forward.* As a Democrat-leaning Independent, I coerced my mother to vote for Obama back in 2008. This was huge, and very much linked, I believed, to the kind of change that would eventually break the embargo. What I had to do next, then, was convince my family that it was time. Time to see that nobody had won this war. Not Fidel, not America, not the Cubans, not the exiles. It was time to go back to Cuba, as Cuban-Americans and American Born Cubans. Not to reclaim, but to learn. Exchange. It was time we stopped screaming, and started talking to each other.

In 2013, exchange is exactly what started to happen. This was when I began to truly talk to Cuban born Cubans of my generation, because this was the year that Cubans were allowed to travel without an exit Visa. Before this, most Cubans had been denied travel outside the island. They had no idea what it meant to buy a ticket, get on an airplane, and simply see another part of the world. Those of them that could travel, because they were artists for instance, with shows in other parts of the world, had to go through an exhausting thicket of bureaucracy, paperwork that would often be denied.

But in 2013, now that Fidel’s little brother, Raul, was in charge, the rules were starting to change. Suddenly, Miami was full of Cuban dissidents, and this time they weren’t escaping. Their intent was to go back to Cuba, at least that’s what they said. They weren’t exiles, or refugees, or Marielitos, or Balseros, they were travelers spreading their

dissent, though I would soon learn that they hated that word: “dissident.” They hated it because it was a catchall that labeled them. In Cuba, it implied that they were bought by America, and in the US, the exiles thought it meant they were hardliners. But this was a new generation, my generation, and though we all shared certain principles across space and time, everybody was different, and therein lay the thrill of it. They were people not figments -- each with their own complicated layers of truth.

I told my mother all of this, and though she still opposed travel to Cuba, she was not blocking my words – she listened. There was a move I could hear squeaking quietly inside her, as if her heart were furniture, leaving marks as it began to stir.

“Don’t trust them, you don’t know how many of those ‘dissidents’ belong to Castro,” she told me. But she wasn’t red in the face this time; we had begun talking.

“It’s like we’re on a path,” I told her, “a path of tests that started with Yoani Sanchez.”

“We’ll see,” my mother responded. “I don’t like her very much either.”

Yoani Sanchez, the Cuban journalist blogging out of Cuba through her blog *Generación Y*, operating out of the portal *Desde Cuba*. Whether you liked her or not, Sanchez was crucial – a symbol, a stone on the long path toward aperture. It’s impossible to talk about a change in U.S.-Cuba policy without talking about her.

She was the reason I had wanted to go to Cuba in the first place, back in 2009. I’d first heard about her in 2008, when she was named one of Time Magazine’s “Most Influential People,” and won Spain’s prestigious Ortega y Gasset prize for digital journalism – a prize she could not accept in person, because she was not allowed to travel. When Sanchez saw she could not receive the prize herself, she sent her words

instead: “I didn’t know that this act of ‘taking the information in hand’ was something that already had a name,” she wrote in her speech, “citizen journalism.”

*...My blog posts were going to deliver a blast of everyday life, marked by the emotional outbursts that the official newspaper never published. Then came the commentators. In their own texts, they believed that I was the Joan of Arc of cyberspace, an agent of the CIA or part of State Security. I savored, then, the unknown taste of freedom of expression, the vertigo of everyone able to say what they were thinking...I have finally arrived on this raft-blog, at a territory that is both gratifying and painful, where civic responsibility will no longer let me go back. Now I have two lives, one real, compartmentalized and controlled, where I listen to orders, slogans, and calls to battle; the other virtual, immense and free, where I begin to feel myself a citizen.*

I wondered how she did it -- how she managed to get this blog out in a country where the people had no access to the internet; managed to speak her voice in a place where you could be beaten and imprisoned for such an act. And yet, there she was.

Writing things in her blog like:

*Those who today form the UJC [Union de Jovenes Comunistas – Young Communist League] were born at the beginning of the Special Period, when toys were not seen in the ration shops and they could only drink milk, legally, until they were seven. They grew up thanks to the black market and wore shoes because their parents diverted State resources or asked an exiled relative for help in buying them. This is a generation that came of age in the midst of the tourist apartheid that blocked Cubans from entering hotels or accessing certain services; children nursed on empty slogans in the schools and the language of monotony at home. Despite their promises of loyalty, I suspect they nurture thoughts of revenge, of that moment when they will break all the promises they made to their elders.*

Wow, I thought to myself when I first read that. She’s talking uprising here. A Cuban Spring. She’s also talking about the very same thing I had been feeling for so long, about breaking the promises I’d made to my own elders. I’d never read anything coming out of Cuba like that. Well, at least not from people allowed to live freely there. There

were plenty of writers, past and present, with bitter tongues that found themselves in Castro's prisons, or exiled in Spain, France or the Americas. Reinaldo Arenas, Zoe Valdes, Los Orishas. But here was this woman, living and writing in Cuba, out of Cuba, and with all the sharpness that should have landed her in jail. The Cuba I'd heard about was the Cuba where my uncle was locked up for complaining about the meager food his miserable leader was giving him. So why not Sanchez? Why wasn't she in prison? Was she a tool of the Cuban government perhaps, forcing me to believe that there was, in fact, freedom in Cuba, when there wasn't?

Another story went that Sanchez's external popularity, her fame outside of Cuba, was the thing that was protecting her. The Cuban State couldn't do anything to her because the world had its eye on her. So did she belong to a foreign power?

Or was she simply a woman – a writer, an independent journalist, risking everything -- longing for change?

I became obsessed with the blog.

Sanchez had actually made it out of the island at one point. In a fit of frustration and disillusion with her native home of Havana – or worse, what she often described as a kind of suffocation -- she'd managed to find refuge in Switzerland, where she hoped to build a better life for her family -- herself, her husband, Reinaldo Escobar, and her son, Teo. But then, just two years later, in an act many would call insane, she decided to go back to Cuba. Why? She wanted to work for Cuba, from within – this was her answer.

Once back in Cuba from Switzerland, things started humbly. According to Sanchez's version of events, she bought a laptop from a rafter six months before she started writing the blog. The rafter, she wrote, "needed money to buy an engine."

Although the rafter never made it out of Cuba, it's clear that Sanchez believed her laptop was her little engine that could. Not her engine out of Cuba, but her life raft from within. She often referred to the blog itself, as she'd done in the Ortega y Gasset speech as her "raft-blog." Her "raft made of binary code."

As for why she called her blog *Generación Y*: "[It is] a blog inspired by people like me, with names that start with or contain a 'Y.' Born in Cuba in the '70s and '80s, marked by schools in the countryside, Russian cartoons, illegal emigration and frustration. So I invite, especially, Yanisleidi, Yoandri, Yusimi, Yuniesky and others who carry their Y's to read me and to write to me."

The irony, I'd heard, was that more people knew about Yoani outside the island than inside. Yoandri and Yusimi had no idea who Yoani was. And yet, when I asked my friends in Miami, New York and LA if they knew about her, no one knew what I was talking about either. I was beginning to realize that she had a strange kind of fame, fame with holes in it. Sanchez was supposedly well-known enough, globally, that she couldn't be imprisoned, and yet everybody I asked in my day-to-day life had no idea who the hell she was. Yoani who? And many of these were Cuban-Americans or American Born Cubans with connections to the island and, therefore, interest in Cuba. Sometimes, I'd get friends that would say something like, "oh yeah, that blogger lady...I read about her, what's the name of the blog?" Needless to say, my Anglo friends were even more clueless about her existence. And yet, we were being told, by the likes of Time and Ortega y Gasset, for instance, that we should know.

I felt I needed to do something about this, help get the word out that this blogger that was writing out of Cuba, and so bravely. It seemed important. More than that, it seemed necessary, a part of a process, a process that was already in motion.

So I decided to write a play about Sanchez, both as an excuse to research her, and in order to spread the information I learned. My initial desire was to go to Cuba myself and interview her, face to face, hence the tickets to the island I held in my hand in 2009. My sister and I were going to act in the play, so I'd pulled my sister along on the ride. To a certain degree my mother had been right about that: It had been my idea, and I was dragging my sister with me.

When my attempt to go to Cuba was blocked by family, I made it my mission to research around Yoani. If I couldn't get to her directly, then I'd circumnavigate, I was used to that, an expert at alternate routes after all.

In early 2009, right at the start of my Yoani journey, the first thing I learned, almost right away, was that the top scholar studying Sanchez was Ted Henken. He'd recorded long face-to-face interviews with her in Cuba, and posted them on YouTube. These videos were perhaps the first visual introductions to her in the United States. In them, Sanchez faces the camera, with a particular kind of focused intensity in her eye. Her frame and lips are thin, her face long, her neck glistening with a thin layer of sweat. Immediately, what you noticed was her poise, her absolute perfect diction, which walked alongside a particular kind of *Cubaneo*. Her ease with language, her manipulation of sentences – she was a verbal ninja.

I found Henken's information online, he was a professor at Baruch College in New York, so his email and phone number were easy to locate. When I wrote to him, he



immediately agreed to talk with me. He seemed interested in the play I wanted to write, and told me he would like to come see it when it was produced. He then went on to give me all kinds of leads. He told me that Sanchez wasn't the only blogger writing out of Cuba, something I'd also learned from the YouTube videos, and a number of articles. She was maybe the most well known, but there were others. There was, in fact, an entire Cuban blogosphere. And those other bloggers, Henken told me, were more in danger than Sanchez because Sanchez had her protective following, made up of Time Magazine's honor, and other international journalism awards that put her on the radar. I knew that Henken was telling me this because it was important to the process of aperture that other bloggers come out into the world as well. And I could be a tool for that.

Still, I'd seen that some of the other blogs would appear one day and then, suddenly, disappear. Perhaps it was because these other bloggers were being threatened at home and they were getting scared, I didn't know. There was another blogger I'd become interested in named Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo, or OLPL. In some ways, OLPL seemed the opposite of Sanchez. He was scruffy and bearded, his hair was big and curly, and he was not as watchful of his words as Sanchez. He was full of puns and had a great command of language, but he was, as I would later hear him say, a "provocateur," more than a journalist. He was also a photographer. Sometimes, his images would accompany Sanchez's blogs.

OLPL interested me but, for the purposes of the play, I told Ted that I would like to focus on Sanchez, which was when he put me in touch with Sanchez's English language translator, MJ Porter.

MJ was chipper and exuberant on the phone, to the point that I wondered if her excitement was feigned, or whether she was just one of those cheerful, optimistic Liberal Americans. She told me to call her “Maria.” I asked her if she was Cuban or had any link to Cuba, even though by the sound of it, she seemed 100% gringa. No she confirmed, she was not Cuban. In fact, she had not even met Yoani yet, at that point.

She started translating in 2008 when Fidel finally gave over to Raul. A friend’s daughter was doing a reforestation project in Cuba and she’d asked MJ if she wanted to go. “Hell yeah,” said MJ. Back then, she thought you could get to Cuba and not notice the politics. “Boy was I wrong! You get off the plane and you notice them.”

Before she left for Cuba, she’d been Googling stuff about Havana and found Yoani. When she came back home, she saw the site wasn’t running anymore in English and Yoani had posted something saying that she needed an English translator again. “I thought, oh great! Someone will take it up and I’ll be able to read it again.” But no one answered. “So I said, you know what, I can do this. I took seven years of French and two of Latin, I can learn Spanish!”

Sometimes it would take her two days to translate a particular posting. “Now that’s different, now I know Spanish. But it’s funny, I call it Yoani Spanish. I don’t know all the foods and colors, but I know Yuca; I might not be able to order tapas at a Spanish Restaurant, but I can talk about Cuban politics all day,” she laughed. “Translating forty/fifty hours a week will do that to you.”

“And you’re doing this for free?” I asked her, not quite understanding the drive behind it. Here was this woman, with no real apparent connection to the island, nothing

visceral or inherited, having only been there once, and she was spending the equivalent of a part-time job translating Yoani Sanchez?

She told me that sometimes she felt there was so little she could really do. To help, you know. “I can’t fix the problem in Iran. But I can translate this blog. And this has changed my life. I’m sixty and I still work full time designing public transportation projects that I believe can change the world. But Yoani has changed me. I used to be a stupid American who believed all the nonsense people say like that Cuba had good education and healthcare and was working somehow, and now I’m like No. I wasn’t so stupid that I didn’t realize they had a dictator, but now I know the truth. And what I also know is that Cubans on the island have the power to figure out how to create a free democratic process from within. The Cubans inside can solve this.”

*Does MJ-call-me-Maria work for the CIA? USAID? It crossed my mind. Does Ted? Does Sanchez?* I wouldn’t be the first to ask. There were counter-blogs, some of them coming out of Cuba, apparently run by the Cuban government, that were accusing Sanchez and her lot of just that – of being supported by American and foreign money. According to a blog called the *Havana Times*, Castro himself had called the bloggers “special envoys of capitalism, who carry out undermining work, and of the neocolonial media of the old Spanish metropolis, which rewards them.”

I questioned everything, but no matter what, I felt that it was more important for Sanchez to be blogging, than for me to answer the question of whether she and her entourage were sponsored by the United States or foreign powers. To a certain degree, it didn’t matter. I knew the thought was controversial and complicated, but it was true.

Sanchez herself knew she was going to be asked the question, and often laughed off the response, ridiculing the very idea. In Cuba, they blame everything on the CIA -- it's a big joke. Make a statement of your own, voice an independent thought against the government, and all of a sudden you're a CIA agent. In Miami, hardline exiles might even call you a double agent -- someone who seems to be anti-Castro only to grab the attention of dissidents, all the while working for the Castro brothers secret service. It can all start to feel like a circus. So I put the three rings and the fire aside temporarily, and I kept reading and interviewing.

Eventually, MJ lead me to other foreign translators of *Generación Y*, who were getting Sanchez's work into China, Poland, Canada, and Brazil. I called all the numbers she gave me, and talked to anyone and everyone that would let me interview them.

The Chinese translator, a student who called himself Vincent, was particularly interesting. He'd gone to Cuba to study Spanish from October 2008 to June 2009. By the end of 2009, he'd discovered *Generación Y*, which he thought was a great blog, true to what was happening in Cuba on a daily basis. "Tourists, they really have to know," he told me, "what is behind the beautiful beaches, bottles of *ron* and *Salsa* [music] and Cuban cigars." Yoani's blog, according to Vincent, was showing the world what Cuba was "really like." This was important, he told me. It was true that her blogs were vignettes into a world we couldn't really access otherwise. For me, reading them was a strange kind of voyeurism.

Vincent's feelings about Sanchez weren't so different from the statement President Obama himself made about her in 2009. Obama said her blog "provide[d] a unique window into the realities of daily life in Cuba." Then he went on to praise her for

“empower[ing] fellow Cubans to express themselves through the use of technology.” Because not only was Yoani blogging, but by 2010 she was already well into leading what she called her “blogger academy,” teaching students about WordPress, Wikipedia, twitter, and other social media platforms, often without direct access to the internet. Let’s just say the USB flash drive was a crucial element in learning how to blog without a connection. You could write as many blogs as you needed at once, save them on a flash drive, until you made it to an embassy, where they had computers and a connection. Or to a hotel, where you could use the internet, if you’d saved enough money to pay the hourly rate. These rates were often the equivalent of about a third of the average Cuban’s monthly salary, so it could take a while.

As for twitter and social media, Cuban bloggers were known to follow a list of instructions on how to send messages to people in other countries that would then post their tweets live. Suddenly I felt connected to these Cubans of my generation. They too were seemingly going in circles because they were not allowed a direct line outside the country. They couldn’t reach the world, and I couldn’t reach them, so we were doing everything we could to get around what restricted us. I was obviously in a better position, given the resources at hand and given the fact that I could, even in 2013, technically go to Cuba through Mexico or Canada, or even with a proper journalist visa, for instance, or to visit family. There was that stubborn familial embargo, but it was a great deal less dangerous for me, where I stood. I lived in a country where speaking my mind wasn’t a crime.

Hailing from the People’s Republic of China, the kind of circuitous action the bloggers had to take was something Vincent also understood. So, when he saw that the

Chinese translation of the blog had been deserted, he decided to start translating it himself, moving it away from WordPress, which was significant, given that WordPress was blocked in China during the period he was translating. He didn't want the blog to be censored in his country, so he did everything he could to keep it alive. It lasted a year and a half, he told me proudly, before the government caught on and took it offline.

Vincent and I went on like this, emailing back and forth for a while. I was particularly attentive to the comparison points between China and Cuba. There were those that said that if Cuba ever strayed from "Fidelismo," what it would veer toward was China's capitalist-happy version of communism – it was a sentiment that was appearing in OpEd pieces, and on the tongues of those who liked to talk Cuba over *Cafecito*, as well as on the media. When I asked Vincent what he thought about that, he wrote that "Cuba and China shared many similarities in the modern history and the political system, but I do have to say that when I was in China before going to Cuba, I personally complain[ed] about China's human rights and liberty of the people, but after my stay in Cuba, I felt the progress China has gained in the recent two decades in the aspects of not only economics, but also human rights and politic[al] structures." He then went on to tell me a story from his time in Cuba.

He'd visited places outside of Havana's center, had been to 13 of its 14 provinces, in fact. One day, he found himself in Diezmero, S. Miguel del Padron, on the southeastern outskirts of Havana. Here, he heard the people complaining about their lot in life, but in a low voice. "*Bajito, Bajito*," was very important, he explained. You had to whisper everything; you couldn't be caught speaking badly about the government. Apparently, that particular neighborhood had never seen a Chinese student, and so they

were all very excited and happy to welcome him.

He visited with a lovely family, but after only two hours, a neighborhood CDR [Committee for the Defense of the Revolution] member stopped in to talk to his hostess. The CDR worker wanted to know what the family had been talking about with the young Chinese man, and what exactly he was doing in her home. “In China, these years, people can criticize their leader personally without a problem,” Vincent wrote in another email. “When you’re not satisfied about your leader, you don’t have to lower your voice when you talk to your neighbors, and you don’t worry if your neighbor will report you because there has been nowhere for them to report. In China there is no organization equivalent with Cuban CDR that ‘take care’ of your everything.”

During the Mao years, from 1946 to 1976, there had been neighborhood watch committees in China, but since then, the government had loosened its grip on what the citizens could say in private. As long as they were not organizing against the government in some way, a person could usually say what he or she felt within their home. Different parts of the PRC were bound to different rules and restrictions, of course – Hong Kong was not Tibet for example. But Vincent could see a great difference between Cuba and China, overall.

The Cuban CDR, often referred to as the “eyes and ears” of the revolution, are like the deadly tattle-tales of the neighborhood, reporting any act against the revolution, whether written, spoken, or acted upon. According to the *U.S. Department of State’s Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2008*, 5,000 Cuban citizens served time in jail for the charge of “dangerousness.” This “dangerousness” umbrella was apparently quite large, given that the prisoners were not charged for specific crimes.

And yet, even though China did not have the likes of the CDR, there was still a great deal of control. The government wasn't about to let the people read Sanchez's blog either. The last time I spoke to Vincent, he told me he had to withdraw from his indirect work with Cuban dissidents like Yoani Sanchez because he was about to graduate and take on a job with the Foreign Ministry of the People's Republic of China.

Is this where Cuba was going? Maybe it was better than what existed on the island, but was it a good thing, was it the best we could do?

As the months rolled by, and I continued to gather information, I found myself staring at Sanchez's phone number, which I'd gotten from Ted. I knew I'd call her, but I was hesitating. I was putting it off, telling myself I wanted to read more of her blog, gather more information. Then I received a writing residency at the Vermont Studio Center (VSC), which gave me all the time I needed, I was running out of excuses. It was time to call Cuba, despite my silly jitters.

The first time I called was from my small dorm-like room at the VSC. It was cold and rainy outside, the peaceful gloom of Vermont's spring months wrapping themselves around me. It had been snowing outside, and I couldn't help but note the difference between where I was standing and the place that would receive my call. Cuba, hot and tropical, not quiet at all.

"Hello?"

It was Reinaldo on the other line, Yoani's husband. Yoani wasn't there, could I try her tomorrow? She'd love to talk to me about my play and about what she was doing with her blog. Of course, yes, yes, I said. Reinaldo was nicer on the phone than I thought



he'd be. His picture online was of a stern man, tired, much older than Yoani, pock-marked by life in Cuba. A man who had turned from his life as a journalist to elevator-repair work, because it was the only thing left to do. But on the phone, he was kind, and amicable, familiar and warm. The feeling of home rushed in on me, in this cold Vermont room, as I spoke with Reinaldo. Every Cuban embrace I'd ever received informed Reinaldo's voice. Either that, or he was a really good faker. We arranged that I would call back the next morning.

The next morning I decided to call Yoani from a laundromat, walking distance from the VSC. I'd been there before and it was always pretty empty. I liked the monotonous buzz of the machines humming around me, the scent of linen and powder, *Tide* and *Downy*. It took me away from the other writers for a bit, from the chilly quiet of my room, and the stillness of my borrowed writing studio.

This call was harder to make than the first – literally. For some reason, it wouldn't connect. I kept calling but, every time, a machine answered and I had to leave a message. "*Hola, soy Vanessa Garcia, Reinaldo me dijo de llamar a esta hora.*" Hello, I'm Vanessa Garcia, Reinaldo told me to give you a ring at this time. Different versions of that message, several times over. Then there were the near-connections, the clicks that signified someone had picked up, but then a dropped line. This happened for about twenty minutes, maybe more. For a moment I thought: "Great, I'm sure they're tapping her line, so now I'm blacklisted in Cuba for calling Yoani Sanchez." At the very least I was on their radar now. My family's paranoia seeped its way into my consciousness. It wasn't totally unreasonable to think this, Yoani had just recently written and tweeted about a beating she'd received at the hands of government "thugs." London's *Telegraph*

reported a story on the beating on Nov. 28, 2009 called, “Yoani Sanchez, Cuba’s popular blogger, has been beaten up for describing life.”

She was on her way to a protest with some friends, including OLPL. “A black car pulled up,” she told *The Telegraph*, “the three men inside called out my name and told me to get in.” When she refused, they pushed her in and beat her, calling out, “It’s all over.” Sanchez thought this was the end of the line for her. It was altogether possible that her life raft had been punctured, that she’d run her last mile across the World Wide Web.

As I sat there in the warmth of the laundromat, trying to connect with Cuba, I thought of Sanchez crammed into that car, thinking of her young son. I also thought back to Armando and I wondered how long Cuba’s stories would involve black cars and men that appeared out of nowhere to drag people away for being “counter-revolutionary,” which is what the thugs called Sanchez and OLPL.

“Hello,” a woman’s voice finally answered.

“Can you hear me? Yoani? Can you hear me?” I asked over the weak connection, covering my left ear to tune out the washing machines. Maybe this place wasn’t such a good idea after all.

“Yes, of course, I’ve been waiting for your call.”

Tension pressed itself up against my body and I felt rushed, like I had a hundred questions to ask her, but so little time. Like I could be disconnected at any moment. I was also a little nervous. We made small talk for a bit, and then we pretty much jumped right in. I asked her why. Why she was doing what she was doing, why she started the blog, why she continued it...

“Three years ago, April 9, [2007]” she said, “I started this blog. We just had our three-year anniversary. I began this venture because I felt saturated with an accumulation of history that needed to be told. When the blog became a channel, which was viewed by many, it then became an act of responsibility. I have a responsibility. I wanted to show the reality of Cuba, without verbal violence, simply as it is, I wanted to show this reality in a society where reality is manipulated constantly; I wanted to show it to a community that was aching. Every day of my 34 years, I ask myself why – why this country is not the country that we were promised as children. This is an accumulated history that needs to be revealed and transcribed, that needs an outlet.”

“Are you afraid?”

“Afraid. I’m afraid every day. But, look, there are many ways to confront your fears. You can hide from them or you can do what I’ve done since I was little. Whenever I feared something when I was a child, I would run, head-on, until I butt heads with the thing that brought me terror, thereby confronting fear. But fear, fear I feel daily. Fear of the police, of the government, of the regime, of the loops in our laws, of everything. This is a system that can kill me, both socially, and physically. But I have a responsibility.”

“A responsibility to a Cuba Libre?” I asked her, almost embarrassed. Those words, “Cuba Libre,” they were so grand and sentimental, so empty for so many years, used by everyone from Fidel to the exile community, like a dirty rag. But I asked because I knew “*Cuba Libre*” was the name of a book she’d written, banned, of course, in Cuba. In fact, when copies of the book had been sent to her from Buenos Aires, customs seized them, sending Yoani a note in place of the books.

She posted the note on her site: *The content of the book entitled 'Free Cuba' transgresses against the general interests of the nation, in that it argues that certain political and economic changes are necessary in Cuba in order for its citizens to enjoy greater material well-being and attain personal fulfillment.*

Yoani was not embarrassed to use the words. "Cuba libre," she told me, "is the call of the Mambises, those long ago guerillas, who used to sing out from the mountains against the Spanish, and it has remained in our genes, in our pluralistic diaspora, wherever you may be. For me, a Cuba libre is a free Cuba, a place you can publish a book, any book you want, and not be persecuted. It is a place where you are free to express yourself; this is what I imagine."

"You were in Switzerland, studying, several years ago, you were in a place where you were free to express yourself. Why did you return to a place where you couldn't? To Cuba?"

Many of these questions I'd read her answers to online, but I wanted to hear them from her. I wanted to see what she would say to me.

"I'll tell you what the reasons weren't first," she said, "Why I returned. It wasn't because of black beans and rice, it wasn't the nostalgia of a game of dominos, and it wasn't because of salsa music. No. I consider myself a citizen of the world in the sense that I could have adapted to anything, anywhere. But my family brought me back. My family was here. And family is greater than nationalism any day."

When she said this, I thought of my own family. I thought of the thousands of exiles not so far from her that *would* return for nostalgia. In fact, they returned every day in their minds. There's a famous line by the poet Ricardo Pau-Llosa that reads, "The exile

knows his place, and that place is the imagination.” What Yoani was trying to tell me was that she did not live in the imagination. She lived in today’s Cuba -- “Havana Real,” as the book that collected her blog would later be called.

...And like that, we talked for about thirty minutes. At times, she felt distant, and far away. Some of the answers seemed canned, like an author on book tour who has had to repeat the same ideas over and over again. Or, like a politician on the road, gathering votes. But just as the phone call was about to end, she said, “*Bueno, un abrazo.*” A hug. As if she were my friend, my buddy. And it was this verbal embrace that, again, as with her husband before her, made me feel warm, and sad for her at the same time. Sad for myself too. There we were, nearly the same age, both writers, both talking to each other from across a great expanse that was somehow sewn up and made less great because of our conversation, but still, she didn’t know me, and I didn’t know her. She didn’t know Miami, and I didn’t know Cuba. We were still standing on two separate islands.

I also felt exhausted for her. This selling of the real Cuba – we’d talked about how dangerous it was, but it could also be extremely tiring, it had to be. I couldn’t imagine she had many close friends. It’s hard to represent an entire people. How can anyone really do that? If the people of Cuba didn’t know about her, or her writing, could she still speak for them? Of course she could, that part I was sure of, as a writer. But, couldn’t it also be true that she might be an American puppet? Or, was it Sanchez that was using the Americans? Or, were both sides benefiting mutually here. Was Sanchez’s blog simply a result of the alternate routes she had to take to get to the place she wanted to go? In that case, was she really that different from me?

These questions arose alongside a series of events that pushed the questions even further. Right about the time I spoke to Yoani, and was continuing the research for my play, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) was trying to spread a “Cuban Twitter” called ZunZuneo among the Cubans. A Zunzun is a humming bird. So, instead of a “tweet,” it might be said that this twitter facsimile was meant to mimic the buzz of an invisible bird all over Havana, the almost inaudible chatter of a people made visible. Completely subverting Vincent’s *Bajito, Bajito*.

The intent of ZunZuneo was to, first, create a network that would gather members. This was not difficult among a people starved for connection. Then, it would instigate unrest from within. It would be a program that “renegotiate[d] the balance of power between the state and society,” read one USAID document. At least this was how the AP reported the story that broke the news later, in 2014.

In September 2009 when the Columbian Spanish Rock musician, Juanes played his famous and contentious “Peace Without Borders” concert at the Plaza de la Revolución, ZunZuneo ran a little test to measure the Cuban people’s pulse. They sent out a message asking whether the concert should include bands that were unpopular with the government, but popular among average Cubans. 100 people responded. Little did the Cubans know that they were being polled by the United States. Again, this is according to the AP.

USAID responded to the AP’s story by asking Americans to please get their facts straight before commenting. Matt Herrick, spokesperson for the organization wrote a response entitled, “Eight facts about ZunZuneo.” In it, he explained that:

*USAID work in Cuba is not unlike what we and other donors do around the world to connect people who have been cut off from the*

*outside world by repressive or authoritarian governments. USAID's democracy and governance work focuses on strengthening civil society, governance, and promoting human rights.*

In the piece, Herrick pointed out the difference between discreet and covert, and then went on to, one by one, address all of the “accusations” the AP was pointing at USAID. The content of the social media platform, he said, was initially about “sports scores, weather, and trivia.” After this, the Cubans themselves were generating the content. He also said that all funds for the project were “congressionally appropriated for Democracy programs in Cuba.” It even pointed out that the AP got its numbers wrong. At its peak, ZunZuneo had 68,000 users, not the 40,000 reported by Desmond Butler, Jack Gillman, and Alberto Arce, the writers of the AP piece.

Ted Henken also had his say in the opinion pages of the *New York Times*, in a piece for the “Room for Debate” section. His response was entitled, “When U.S. Aid undermines local voices.” In it, Henken wrote that “no U.S. foreign development program is politically neutral. Apart from humanitarian motivations, foreign aid is a form of “soft power” and proto-political influence.” He then went on to say that the Cuban government was, itself, an expert at “soft power.” The Castros sent over missionaries for their cause, he explained, in the guise of doctors meant to aid in developing countries every day. Then he asked: Instead of creating a Cuban twitter, why not open up Obama’s “people-to-people” travel program and expand it, allow more access to the isolated island?

Little old me over in Miami, researching Yoani, and about to take my show about her on the road in 2010, didn’t know any of this yet. No one did. The story about ZunZuneo wouldn’t break for another four years. But I could feel something happening

beneath the surface, an intuition. There were also, even at the beginning, questions arising. About who Yoani was and whether she was really a “spontaneous blogger” or not – whether this mattered, why or why not.

Because I didn’t have any concrete answers, I decided that I would let the questions drive the play. I wanted to inform – point to the fact that Yoani existed, rather than comment on her. Not that any information ever comes without commentary. Still, what I really wanted to do was to illustrate the relationship between Cuba and myself. By writing a play about a young, American Born Cuban writer outside of Cuba (myself) trying to understand and connect with a Cuban writer inside the island (Yoani), I was really beginning to write the story that marks the path toward the breaking of the familial embargo. And, eventually, toward the breaking of the economic embargo.

I did, by the time I finished writing the play, make mention of the CIA accusations towards Sanchez, but the play was, overall, a Yoani-happy introduction to the Cuban blogosphere. She was too new, and I was too excited for the possibilities she was opening up. The best way I can describe it is to say that what the play ended up being was a kind of performed, reported memoir of a moment in time. Or, perhaps more accurately, what the play did best was provide the seedlings that would grow into this book.

Eventually, the play did find its way to New York City and Edinburgh, Scotland. We played at 59E59 in New York to a full house, and in Scotland, we performed at a venue called The Space at Surgeons Hall during the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, the largest arts festival in the world. At the fringe, there were about 3,000 other shows playing simultaneously. We had to fight for an audience. Fringe festivals, especially the Edinburgh Fringe, are a kind of right of passage for theatre artists, who are forced to



roam the streets like clowns, painted and screaming, trying to lure crowds into their shows. One day, during our run, I ended up Hula-Hooping with friends all along the festival's main drag, handing out flyers, calling people to see a show about the Cuban blogosphere. There were nights when we had a measly three or four people in the audience, and there were other nights when the audience rose to a whopping 10. We were not discouraged though. This was not altogether an anomaly at the Edinburgh Fringe. And regardless of how many people were in the audience, every single night someone came up to us and said things like: "I had no idea all of that was happening in Cuba."

Given that my sister and I actually acted in the show every night, I could feel the difference between researching, writing, and performing the piece. It felt a little preachy when I was acting it out, for one. But, there was one scene that got to me every evening and matinee, no matter how often we did it. It was a scene that revolved around a dissident and his mother.

As I was writing the play, the jailed Cuban dissident Orlando Zapata Tamayo (not to be confused with the other Orlando I've mentioned here before, Orlando Luis Pardo Lazo, very different people) went on a hunger strike. It was December 2, 2009, when he stopped eating. Tamayo was a bricklayer by trade, a plumber. He was one of the 75 people arrested during what was called the Black Spring of 2003, when the government corralled journalists, activists, librarians, and members of a group called the Varela Project, a freedom movement aligned with the Church. It was in response to this mass imprisonment that the now well-known Ladies in White, or *Damas de Blanco* formed, taking to the streets peacefully, attending mass every Sunday, dressed all in white, and demanding for the release of their loved ones.

When the pleas of his loved ones did nothing for the release of the prisoners, Tamayo stopped eating in protest. He'd been sentenced to 36 years in prison for opposing the regime, for "disobedience," a term that was almost as vague as "dangerousness." He was protesting the broad actions taken by his government, but he was also protesting against the daily abuses of his jailers. His body, as his mother said later, was tattooed with blows. All of the pictures of him on the news showed him skeletal and fragile, black and blue. On February 23, 2009, Tamayo's body gave in and he died.

In the live performances, we played a recording of Tamayo's mother, her voice moving me every time, tired and full of tears as it was, sorry and sad and nearly broken.

*I am Reina Luisa Tamayo, the mother of prisoner of conscience Orlando Zapata Tamayo who was interned in the hospital of the Habana del Este Prison. Last night he was moved to [another] hospital where he passed away at 3:00 PM.*

*I can tell you I feel a horrible pain, but I am holding on, enduring through this pain. I was able to be at his side until he passed away and now hope to have the courage to dress my son Orlando Zapata Tamayo.*

*We will leave for Banes, Holguin Province, Embarcadero road, house number six, where we will hold the wake before our family altar, at my home, for as long as required.*

*My son dies after an [85-day] hunger strike.*

*In the midst of deep pain, I call on the world to demand the freedom of the other prisoners and brothers unfairly sentenced so that what happened to my boy, my second child, who leaves behind no physical legacy, no child or wife, does not happen again.*

This recording came straight from Yoani's blog. After the funeral, Yoani continued to attempt to report life out of Havana. But, "Life never returns to normal," she wrote, "it does not go back to that time before the tragedy that now – illusorily – we evoke as a period of calm."

*I open my datebook, try to resume my life, the blog, the twitter messages... but nothing comes out. These last days have been too intense. The face of Reina Tamayo, in the shadows in front of the morgue where she prepared and dressed her son for his longest journey, is the only thing in my mind ...There is no one who writes a coherent and restrained line. I so want to scream, but February 24 left me hoarse.*

The idea that all of us Cubans have prisoners in our families, this thought filled me with burden and, like Yoani, with a sense of great responsibility.

Perhaps, I thought, we were all part of a bigger plan, all of us playing this game. Yoani, her audience, USAID, the AP, my sister, me, our audience, my mother. Constructed by who exactly would be left for history to uncover, a web of many is my guess, all with agency, and all giving up a certain amount of that agency for a greater ideal.

Whatever Yoani was doing, she was definitely, little by little, blog by blog, making inroads into the hearts and minds of those who read her. She most certainly made a dent in the heart and mind of this American Born Cuban.

In his Pulitzer-nominated book *Next Year in Cuba*, Cuban-American writer, Gustavo Perez Firmat, writes about his children, also ABC's, although he says he rather call them CBAs (Cuban-bred Americans). "My children," he writes, "maintain a connection to their parents' homeland, but it's a bond forged by my experiences rather than their own... [For them] Cuba is an endearing, hopefully an enduring fiction – as ethereal as the smoke and as persistent as the smell of their grandfather's cigars (which these days are not even Cuban but Miamian)."

For me, as an ABC, reading and communicating with Yoani was the beginning of my *own* conversation with Cuba, my own story. Not an imagined story, not my parent's story, but my real story, my true connection with the island. My mother, my family – they

had no idea how far I was going with my roundabout research, my alternate routes, and that helped to make it more mine. I was moving at a different pace than my family and, thereby, growing closer to and further from them every day.

In another section of *Next Year in Cuba*, Firmat differentiates between the exile and the immigrant, placing himself clearly and firmly (Firmat-ly) in the “exile” camp. “The exile and the immigrant go through life at different speeds... If the immigrant rushes, the exile waits.” I am not an immigrant, and I am not an exile. I am the daughter of exiles, and I will not wait. How American of me. Firmat should not underestimate the children of exiles, for to underestimate us, is to underestimate himself -- is to forget we were raised by exiles.

In 2013, three years after I wrote and performed the Yoani play, Cuba squeaked open its tightly closed rusted gates, and let a little freedom ring. As of January 2013, Cubans were allowed to travel without an exit visa. Raul, it seemed, was loosening the reigns. Cubans and Cuban-Americans wondered if this would last, but many were enjoying the ride while it played out. Yoani was one of these many.

By February 2013, she was granted permission to travel abroad. She’d been denied an exit visa for years, but she was about to take full advantage of her capacity to step outside Cuba’s watery border by embarking on an 80-day world tour.

In late March and early April of 2013, she was scheduled to hit Miami, after stints in Sao Paulo, New York, and Mexico City. I was living in Los Angeles at the time, but I bought myself a ticket to the MIA because this was not something I was going to miss. She would speak at various Miami locations, which included Florida International

University, and The Freedom Tower. I wanted to make sure that I was at The Freedom Tower event. The tickets were going fast -- by now she was a celebrity. Her world tour, and the press that followed it, made her a household name.

The Freedom Tower, often called the “Ellis Island of the South,” is a terracotta-colored beauty of a building that is also a historic site in downtown Miami – and the place my mother, aunt and grandmother were processed as immigrants when they arrived in the city, along with thousands of other Cubans. It is the place, too, that my grandmother went for aid -- big blocks of cheese and, notoriously, cans of Spam. From 1962-1974, the building served as the Cuban Assistance Center, meant to ease the transition into a new country. For many Cubans, the building was known as “El Refugio,” their place of refuge. By the time Yoani got there, the building was seeped in symbolism.

On March 29, 2013, I wrote a piece for the Huffington Post called “Yoani Sanchez in Miami to Measure Cuban-American Pulse.” I believed that there was a great deal that depended on how the Cuban-American community received Sanchez, particularly the hardliners.

I grew up in a Miami where hardliners threw Molotov cocktails into restaurants if a Cuban singer believed to be sympathetic to Fidel was set to croon there. This actually happened to a family I know very well. One of my sister’s best friend’s family, the Saizarbitorias, owned the restaurant *Centro Vasco*. They owned it in Cuba and had created a near-clone of it on *Calle Ocho*. For years, the restaurant, with its Spanish fare and Cuban flare, became a Miami staple. Apart from the *mejillones* and *manchego*, the ambiance and the location, the restaurant also invited singers to come in and play at

night, livening up the evening hours. The well-known Cuban singer, Albita got her American start at the restaurant, filling the place with her deep, percussive voice, until Gloria and Emilio Estefan signed her on. I remember the *Centro Vasco* days clearly. My sister, her friend, and I would play there all the time, when the place was empty, or as they prepped for events. We strutted down the stage meant for that night's entertainment, took microphones in hand, and gave concerts for the waiters and servers, as they set up the room.

Until they invited Rosita Fornes, and all hell broke loose. This was 1996.

Fornes was born in New York, but was of Cuban decent, and not vociferously anti-Castro enough for Miami Cubans. For this, the Cuban-American community revolted. I still remember the raucous roars of complaint around the Fornes scandal. The Saizarbitorias decided to cancel the event, but this was not enough – too little, too late. Cubans in Miami boycotted the place, and defaced the side of their restaurant with a Molotov. Eventually, the restaurant was forced to close.

Several months after the *Centro Vasco* affair, a firebomb hit *Marazul*, a travel agency providing charters to Cuba. A couple of years after that, in 1999, a riot broke out in the Miami Arena, where the Cuban band Los Van Van were playing. 4,000 people came out to protest against the band's presence in Miami. Los Van Van, the Cuban-American community protested, were sending money back to Castro, how dare we support them in the United States, especially in this city of refugees.

When Los Van Van returned, however, in February 2010, the crowd was more subdued. A younger generation was interested in the sound of the band now. I had friends that attended. One of them was a new-wave Cuban arrival to Miami who had grown up

listening to the group. Going to the concert was, for her, a way of remembering where she came from, a nostalgic kickback to her teen years. Christine Armario, who often wrote on Cuban Miami for the AP, reported the 2010 concert, quoting the band's bassist Juan Formell saying that he "didn't come to do anything political... We came to play music." And play they did, despite the protest of some, like U.S. Representative Lincoln Diaz-Balart, who compared inviting Los Van Van to inviting a spokesperson of Apartheid to come perform "during the final stages of apartheid's grotesque existence." And yet, the very fact that the concert happened and no one made a terribly huge fuss was proof that things were changing in Miami. New waves of Cubans were coming in, and my generation was growing up, changing the beat.

This was the backdrop for Yoani's visit in 2013. My guess, in the HuffPo piece, was that it would go off more smoothly than expected, regardless of the fact that Yoani was against the economic embargo and most Cuban-Americans were still for it in 2013, at least those over the age of 44. The older generation was aging, and the middle generation, my parents' generation, those most torn by the hyphen, were starting to feel the influence of their children more and more. I could see it in my mother, who was softening. Papan was aging, and he didn't play such a big part in my mother's decisions anymore. You couldn't hear my grandfather's loud anti-Castro cry in the house anymore. Instead, everybody was happy if Papan made it a day without falling on the hard tile floor of his apartment, or if he made it past a couple of hours without a fit of dementia.

By March 29, the media had already started heavily reporting on Yoani's Miami trip. By March 31, Lizette Alvarez reported a piece for the *New York Times* called "New Breed of Cuban Dissident Finds Changed Miami." The story told us of a warm welcome

in Miami, and how certain Cuban-Americans had come to see Sanchez as a symbol of the future, a “positive” force. As for Sanchez herself, she felt “like [she was] in Cuba, but free.” The article ends, significantly, with the following:

*Over the weekend, though, Ms. Sanchez grappled with a far less ambitious agenda: She spent time in Miami with her sister, her brother-in-law and niece. It has been two years since her sister left Cuba for Miami.*

*“For two years I haven’t been able to hug them,” she said.*

Alvarez, the reporter, is Cuban-American and you can see her Cuban-self filtering through to her conclusion. By ending this way, Alvarez was pointing to the most difficult and painful of all the damages Cuban-Americans have had to face as a result of Cuba’s long isolation, that of familial separation. The rift between a father and son, between sisters and brothers; the separation of a mother and daughter. The fissure between Maman and her mother, which could never be repaired.

By the time Sanchez got to the Freedom Tower, people were ready for her. And she was ready for them. The place was packed. I had a press pass hanging around my neck, so I slipped through to the press box, which was a cordoned off square toward the back of the room. Cubans of all ages were present, dressed up and perfumed. Their chatter resounded, filling the high ceilings of the space, like churchgoers on Easter Sunday. There was not a sour face in the hall. The vibration was, as Alvarez had reported, “positive.”

Outside there was a tiny band of Brigade 2506 brothers chanting in unison against Yoani’s visit, but the spectacle was measly, tiny in comparison to the crowd that had gathered inside. When Yoani walked on stage, dressed all in white, hair split down the



middle and flowing at her back, a heckler cried out from the audience, a single voice. But the audience shushed him, embarrassed that the old-man would do such a thing. The old man sat down. I couldn't quite hear what he said at the time, but someone closer to him later told me it was: "liar." He had called Yoani Sanchez a liar.

Soon, the heckler was forgotten, and Yoani was speaking, starting with an anecdote, a story. A technique that was both clever in its parabolic nature, and characteristic of her style. The story was called *Cubano y Punto*. Cuban, period. It was about one of her earlier travels through Germany, Berlin actually. She was on a train, had struck up a conversation with a fellow traveler. When the traveler learned she was Cuban, he asked: "Are you from Fidel's Cuba or Miami's Cuba?" Her response: "*Chico, yo soy Cubana de Jose Martí.*" I'm a Jose Martí Cuban, man.

Martí is yet another symbol, like the Freedom Tower – a Cuban patriot and poet who fought for liberty against the Spanish during Cuba's war for independence. He died on a white horse, trying to fight against the Spanish. He is also one of Cuba's few unifiers, because it doesn't matter what kind of Cuban you are -- whether you are a revolutionary or a counter-revolutionary – all Cubans are Martí Cubans. They stand proudly behind the man who might not have been equipped for physical battle, but who was always armed with intellect, leaving a legacy of free thought behind in his writing.

It was a perfect way to begin. The audience ate it up. And Yoani's expression was one of full satisfaction, almost arrogance. She had managed to tame the beast that was the Miami Cuban with a clear message. "There is only one of us," she said, "Don't let them continue to separate us." Instead of antagonizing the Miami-Cuban crowd as so many Anglo-reporters had done in the past, only raising the misunderstood Miami Cuban's ire,

she called to the Cubans for help. “We need you,” she told the Cuban-American audience, and god knows Cuban-Americans love themselves a good mission. Sanchez was giving them just that. “We need you,” she said again, “for the present Cuba and for the future Cuba.” This unifying message was the message she was clanging out in Miami from the start.

This was perhaps what most captivated me about her visit, the fact that she knew exactly what to say at every turn, as if she had been very carefully trained. I am not saying the woman is not smart, I’m just saying she must have had some pretty good advisors too. As Tim Padgett reported for Time Magazine, “impressively, she seems to have charmed the Cuban-American hardliners on Capitol Hill and in Miami, who didn’t have missile crisis-grade meltdowns when she reiterated her opinion that the U.S. should drop its failed 51-year-old trade embargo against Cuba, and let Americans Travel there again, so as not to let the Castro regime use such measures as excuses for its political repression and economic ineptitude.”

What she was giving the exiles, in essence, was a shit sandwich, something every good writer knows how to deliver. And the exile community ate it hungrily, like a Special Period *bocadito*, devouring it through to the bone. *I’m just like you, we are the same. The embargo must end. But, Cuba needs you. Very much. You are important.* “Help us to unify her.” Help us “to tear down this wall that, unlike the one in Berlin is not made of concrete or bricks but of lies, silence, and bad intentions.” Castro used the embargo, she told the Cubans. He used it to divide Cubans into the two camps her German train companion perceived. Is that what Miami wanted? Two Cubas forever? It was a clear message, a straight line, and a brilliant dose of political maneuvering. I wondered, as I

listened to her, whether she felt used, repeating this message over and over again. Or, if instead, it was she that felt sorry for the people in the crowd, who had been worn down by time.

As I watched her in Miami, and for the rest of her 80-day trip, I continuously wondered what she really felt. I didn't ask her directly this time because she had an entourage now. Ted Henken had asked me if I wanted to talk to her in New York, but I had chosen to see her in Miami, and when I tried to speak with her behind the curtain when the event was over, a guard pushed me away. "No reporters past this point, no one past this point," he told me. In this kind of environment, I doubt she would have told me what she "really felt" anyway. So instead, I watched and studied her.

Her facial expressions varied throughout her journey, even throughout her trip in Miami. She sometimes looked like she was proud, like she had achieved the impossible. Other times she looked like a leader, like Martí himself, on his white horse. And then there were the times she looked exhausted and concerned. She often held her hands up, her fingers forming two peace signs in the air. Sometimes she looked like an angel; sometimes she looked like Nixon doing that, though this last comparison is not altogether fair. It's always hard to look pure from the pulpit, whole from the soapbox. Some were already saying that she should run for president of Cuba, when Democracy opened up. Perhaps Cuba would have a woman at the helm before the United States.

Sometimes she simply looked like a writer who got caught in the wave of all this. Who got tangled in her own hippy hair, in her sense of responsibility.

At the Freedom Tower I felt both the thrill of change, and the sadness that comes with manipulation. If this was a test, if Yoani was a test, and releasing dissidents onto

Miami's shores, and the world, was also a test, measuring how close we were to being able to lift the embargo, then Miami-Cubans were passing with flying colors. They were ready for change. Even if the U.S-Cuba aperture met with some resistance, it wouldn't be enough resistance to make a difference. This, it seemed, is what U.S. leadership was monitoring.

Listening to Yoani throughout her journey, my thoughts raced. *This is the beginning of the end of the economic embargo – it's more palpable and closer than ever. The powers that be are probably already talking, making plans behind our backs, have been for years. Yoani is a leader, but she's also a pawn. And as for Cuban Miami – she is both in total control of herself, and absolutely out of control. This is history, unfurling its long tail. Its push and pull, its tug of war. And what Yoani is trying to tell us, wherever it comes from, is that we all want the same thing. That it's time to stop pushing and pulling, it's time to build the bridge we've spent so many years standing in line at a municipal office trying to pull a permit for. As Cubans and Cuban-Americans, we have been denying ourselves our own permit for years; it's time we get out of our own way.*

When I left the Freedom Tower, I went to my mother's apartment, to tell my family about the event and share my thoughts. My mother listened, once more. Then she repeated what she'd told me many times before: "I don't like that woman, there's something about her I don't like." But then she sat down and watched the news broadcast about Yoani's event, without the vein popping from her forehead. She was not a heckler, and she was not an enthusiast – she was an observer, watching, listening -- an expression on her face that was harder than ever to read. It was neither resistant, nor submissive; not

hot or cold, but somewhere in the middle, the place she had always lived – that thin line between Cuba and America.

## **ROUTE 6: 2013, A Year of Dissent**

There's this thing people in Miami say when they go to Cuba, or come from Cuba, or are talking about travelling to Cuba. "I'm not political," they say. "Yeah, I went to Cuba, but I never got political." "If you go to Cuba, you'll be fine, as long as you don't get political!" My mother tells me all the time: "Vanessa, I'm telling you, stay out of the politics when you write about Cuba."

The saying, in its many iterations, drives me insane because the reality is that everything having to do with Cuba is political, whether we like it or not. To reduce it to less is often ignorant, but more to the point, it is evasive, fearful, and ultimately dangerous. Dangerous because when we reduce Cuba to its "great people" -- that ubiquitous phrase of white privilege tourism -- to its hot spots, and its salt-sprayed surface, we lose the underpinnings of politics that punctuate the day-to-day life of the Cuban.

And yet, like everything having to do with the island, it's complicated, because I also completely understand the phrase. Not being political has been the only way Cubans across the Florida Straits have been able to communicate with each other. Families that were already torn by differing ideologies, or as a result of a system carved out of someone else's ideology, knew better than to stray into personal philosophies. When you talked with those Cuban cousins that might sympathize with Fidel, or when you drank with that Cuban-American uncle who was such a hardliner you'd end up throwing a jar at his head if he started his spiel again, it was better to stay out of the political fray.

"Hush, hush," or Vincent's "*bajito, bajito*," was also the only way Cubans inside Cuba could operate, and the only way Cuban-Americans felt safe when they went to visit

family in Cuba. Whether you were Cuban or Cuban-American, the fear was that if you talked too loudly about something that could be considered even remotely counter-revolutionary, you'd get snatched up and questioned, maybe even sent to one of Castro's jails a la Black Spring of 2003.

But, of course, this statement, this chorus-claim of being "a-political" is in fact deeply political, because the reasons behind it are so profoundly linked to the politics of not only one nation, but two – Cuba and the United States. This very denial of politics is a political statement.

You could say that Yoani was successful in Miami because she spoke of "unity" instead of "politics." *We all want the same thing.* But who are we kidding, wasn't she also making way for the breaking of the embargo?

Throughout the first half of 2013, as dissidents made their way into Miami, and people like myself started meeting my Cuban counterparts, the very first rule of thumb was still to stay a-political, even on this side of the sea, on American shore. You didn't know which of these dissidents were really sent by Raul Castro, for example, or how many of them were actually the eyes and ears of the regime. So what to do? What could you call it instead of "politics," when you wanted to talk about Cuba, but couldn't? How about "spirituality?" Why didn't we say we were going to talk about spirituality and the fulfillment of self, instead of politics? I mean, wasn't the expression and fulfillment of self what made up a "civil society" anyway? And wasn't that what everybody wanted for Cuba?

In late March of that year, Janelle Gueits, the filmmaker of the documentary *13 Million Voices*, a behind-the-scenes look at the Juanes "Peace Without Borders" concert

in Cuba, invited me to what she called “a spiritual retreat for young Cubans.” The retreat was meant to bring together ABCs and some of the young Cuba-born-Cuban dissidents that were in Miami due to Raul’s new permissiveness.

The idea was to meet at her friend’s house, Christian de la Huerta, a self-improvement guru who helped people tap into what he’d termed their “soulful power.” Gueits was also, I should say, the co-founder of Roots of Hope, or *Raíces de Esperanza*, an organization whose mission it was to “empower youth in Cuba so [that] they may become the author[s] of their own future.” The organization described itself on its website in more detail like this: “We are an international network of students and young professionals working to inspire young people across the globe to think about Cuba and proactively support our young counterparts on the island through innovative means. As a nonprofit, nonpartisan movement, we seek only to provide youth in Cuba with the tools and skills they deem necessary to build a better future for themselves.”

The invitation for the retreat came via email. The subject line read, “*EVO13: Invitación Retiro de Conciencia.*” A consciousness-making retreat. The “Evo 13” part was supposed to be an extension of Gueits’ documentary *13 Million Voices*. The number 13 referred to the 13 million Cubans both inside and outside the island; the Cuban Diaspora. At the top of the e-vite there was an image of hands holding, forming a circle right at the center. Below it: “1 Cuba.” The same message Yoani had hammered out during her visit. When you scrolled down a little more, there were fun, artsy pictures of “The Participants” that would be at this spiritual retreat, tagged by their first names only. There I was: “Vanessa,” in a picture Janelle had pulled from my website. I was happy to participate, even if the invitation made me feel a little bit like I was on a reality TV show



about “Young Cubans,” filmed, of course, in Miami and Havana, hip-hop playing the in background, or as my fellow retreat participant David D Omni called it, Free Hop.

The rest of the invitation was written in inaccurate Spanish, the Spanish that many of the children of Cubans spoke in Miami. Second generation Spanish, Spanish I also found myself falling into, from time to time. The invitation promised an experimental retreat, where “artists and creators” could come together to talk about expression and the creation of a “new day among Cubans.” Janelle promised a “sacred space,” where we would be free to meet each other, get to know one another, and engage. I, of course, was all in.

Christian’s house was a big, wonderful house in Coconut Grove, facing Biscayne Bay. A breeze rushed in from the water and spread itself gracefully through the grounds, touching everything. There was green and bush; flowers all around, orchids and Asian-inspired art, sculpture everywhere, images that evoked peace and tranquility, colorful floor cushions to sit on in the living room, and *Do please leave your shoes at the door*.

Christian was a calm cat, generous and friendly from the get-go. I arrived early, so we had some time to chat before the rest of the crew got there. He would be the oldest person in the group and the only member of another generation, my parent’s generation. He held the expression of someone who had finally found himself after a long-hauling effort. Maybe this wasn’t true, maybe he knew exactly who he was from the time he was born, some kind of old-soul, but this was the first impression he gave me. He was not terribly well informed on contemporary Cuban anything, he told me, admitting this from the start. He was a little embarrassed by this fact, and not sure his house was the best place to hold this kind of thing because of his lack of information. But he was very

interested in learning about these kids that were coming over today. When Janelle arrived, she assured him that everything would be great, that his home was divine, and that he was giving us all a wonderful gift by allowing us to hold this retreat in his home.

After helping Christian set up a tea station, the rest of the gang arrived. David D Omni, Diddier Santos, Edgaro, and MariAng Almaguer. MariAng was another ABC, like Janelle and myself. She was cute, and among the youngest in the group, one of the few still in her twenties, as was Edgaro. MariAng had come along to help Janelle out, she told me.

David was an artist and a musician, who talked like the Dalai Lama. He was skinny in a tight tie-dye t-shirt and hip-hugging baggy khaki's, with Rasta-colored sandals on his feet. The front of his hair was shaved like a monk or a shaman, and the rest of his dreadlocks were pulled back, his beard long and scruffy.

Edgaro was also a hip-hop artist, though he had a different look than David. His hair was tied in a bun with some Geisha sticks, and he was wearing a blue Andre the Giant Shepard Fairey "Obey" sweatshirt, jeans, and colorful sneaks. He was part of the popular duo *Doble Filo*, though he was going solo for the retreat, without his musical partner, Yrak Saenz, who was much older than he was. In fact, Edgaro had been going solo a lot lately, calling himself *El Productor En Jefe*, which was a kind of ironic twist on the self-aggrandizing trend of the late 20<sup>th</sup>/early 21<sup>st</sup> century hip-hop scene. He was the "producer in chief" of his own life these days, or at least that's what he was trying to be. It also, I think, played on the "commander in chief" that was Fidel.

And then there was Diddier Santos, who made documentaries and who played a big role in the controversial *Rotilla* music festival in Cuba, alongside his friend Michel

Matos. He walked in wearing a snug polo shirt, aviator glasses, jeans, hip sneakers, and an old school rectangular watch. His hair was short and spunky. It looked a lot like mine at the time actually. His front teeth were crooked, but this just added charm. His air was one of overall seriousness, but every once in a while his outer shell cracked a smirk.

I liked all of them immediately, and I was eager to hear what they had to say.

It all started out kind of slowly -- we were all sizing each other up, and wondering what this was going to turn out to be like. But, because the crew was chatty, the chill blew over almost immediately, melting into a warm Miami sway. Somebody asked for Cuban Coffee. Christian, embarrassed again, said he didn't know how to make it. Janelle didn't either, so I offered up my *cafecito* skills. I couldn't cook for shit, but I'd been making Cuban Coffee since I was a kid. Easy.

Eventually, we found ourselves on the floor of the living room, sitting in a circle, like the one made of hands on the e-vite. Janelle wanted us to talk casually. She knew, she said, that it could be awkward sometimes. That she herself got nervous. She admitted that there were times when she was visiting Cuba, when she was talking to people her age, and she wondered whose side they were on, whether they were infiltrated, working for the government, or authentic. It was hard to know who to trust, she said. But still, she wanted this to be a circle in which we could talk to each other. It was clear here that she was talking to the Cubans, trying to welcome them, make them feel at ease.

David, Diddier, and Edgaro said they were not afraid to talk. That they made that decision, like Yoani had, to be free in Cuba, no matter what that meant. And they would do the same here. And yet, for a long time, everybody talked in symbols and extended metaphors. Everything was cushioned by the soft padding of spirituality.

David talked about personal freedom. For him, freedom was something we held inside, something you could always tap in to no matter how trapped you felt, he said. He then produced a long analogous story about a river near to where he grew up in Cuba. There was a clean spring that poured into the river. Over the years, that river had become polluted, but he knew that when he went there, polluted though the river itself was, he could still find the clean source, and the source itself was always abundant and pure. Despite what went on around him, how muddy everything got, he tried to hold on to the notion that there was always that bright source within, that strength, that inner freedom.

At some point, however, the metaphors fell away. This might have happened more quickly if we were sitting around drinking, but we had coffee and tea instead, so the social lubricants were slow to work their magic. Eventually, Diddier told us what it meant to act “freely” inside Cuba. It meant that you sometimes got jailed, that your phones got tapped, and you got followed until you were forced into a permanent state of paranoia. He talked about how the police picked him up when Pope Benedict came to town in 2012. “They thought we were going to protest,” he said. It was a preventative measure.

Pope Benedict was set to visit from March 26-28, 2012, and by March 23, Human Rights Watch had already posted that “Dissidents in Havana, Holguin, Guantanamo, Matanzas, Palma Soriano, Pinar del Rio, Sancti Spiritus, and Santiago de Cuba” had talked to Human Rights Watch about the tactics the Castro regime was using against them. “They said that when they sought to exercise their basic rights to speak up about human rights concerns and hold rallies over the past few weeks [prior to the Pope’s visit], the authorities responded with beatings, detentions, harassment, and other repressive measures,” reported Human Rights Watch regarding the dissidents.

Afraid that the dissidents would rally, the government gathered them all up and put them behind bars. “We were all talking about what we would do if they didn’t let us go,” said Diddier as he sat, cross-legged in Christian’s living room. The hope was that as soon as the pope was gone, the government would set them free, but what if they didn’t? “We were already talking hunger strikes,” said Diddier. And so it unfolded that as Pope Benedict visited the island, called for “authentic freedom” in Cuba, and prayed for “those deprived of freedom,” Diddier and his friends sat in a Cuban prison.

“As soon as the pope left we were released,” said Diddier. “Like I said, preventative measures.”

On the way home to Rome, Pope Benedict denounced the system Cuba’s government continued to adhere to, explicitly claiming that it was no longer in sync with contemporary culture. He told Reuters reporters that “it is evident that Marxist ideology in the way it was conceived no longer corresponds to reality...” He also criticized the United States’ embargo on the island.

As the day went on, and we continued to talk at Christian’s secluded temple-home, everybody started to feel a little safer and what became clear was that these were young people longing for a space to express themselves. Sitting outside at one point, someone on the Cuban-American side, I can’t remember who – it might have been Christian or Janelle – asked how we could help, how we could help them be more free in Cuba, from over here. Money, they all said. They needed money to make inroads. David immediately said he wanted an investor to help him create his own art space in Cuba, where he could invite whoever he wanted, to play their music and show their work, whether the government liked it or not. He lingered in the fantasy a while, his spindly

arms outspread as he described the place, and I could almost picture it. A big warehouse where people could come and hang out, play what they wanted to play, say what they wanted to say, look how they wanted to look. Be Buddhist or Christian or a Jehovah's Witness if they wanted to be. No restrictions.

The *Rotilla* festival, which Diddier had been instrumental in co-producing with Matraka Productions, a Cuban production company, had been something like David's vision, except bigger and outdoors. *Rotilla* invited unofficial musicians to play, meaning that the roster was uncensored and sometimes these musicians had something to say that was unsavory to the government. "Not just the kind of art that's been sanctioned by the approved media outlets," Diddier told me, "but [art and music] that is really Cuban, that we believe to be interesting, that transmits a positive message to the community about our independence, about growth...this was important to us." There were different stages at *Rotilla* for different types of music from rock to emerging fields, kind of like a Cuban Coachella, but more socially engaged. It was quite an undertaking. "You don't understand," explained Diddier, "doing something like that in Cuba is like saying, I'm going to derail a train, it's not easy."

The festival started out before Diddier got involved with it, as a kind of Rave between friends, but it grew. 2008 was a height for Diddier, personally. It wasn't the most popular it would get, that would probably be 2010, but in 2008 Diddier remembered that he was both a producer and a participant. He remembered jumping in the ocean at dawn, "doing all the kinds of things you do at those festivals, you know." I knew exactly what he was talking about. The thrill of being young and full of music, invincibility rushing through your veins, that clean sense of freedom David referred to, beating inside.

And so it went, until the government took the festival over – “stole it” -- a process Diddier helped document in a film Matraka made called *Ni Rojo, Ni Verde, Azul!* (*Not Red, Or Green, Blue!*).

MariAng, who knew Janelle from *Roots of Hope*, was mostly quiet, as was I. Janelle wanted us to tell our stories too, but both of us were more interested in listening to Edgardo, Diddier, and David. We didn't know when we'd make it to Cuba, after all, and these guys might be here today and gone back to Havana tomorrow. A year later, most of them would still be in the United States, but we didn't know that yet.

At the end of the day, we all started to head home, the Cubans to whatever couch they were crashing on for the night – a family member or a friend's –and the rest of us back to our apartments and houses. Before everyone got up to go though, I asked if it would be ok if I wrote about them, could I call them all later, another time, talk more. All of them said yes. David dug into his messenger bag, and pulled out a CD. It looked homemade, very DIY. As he handed it to me, my memory tunneled back to all the DIY CDs I'd been handed in my life, mostly in college and straight through my twenties. The pleasure I used to get, holding something so close to someone's heart, untouched by a big conglomerate. In a sense, the Do It Yourself ethos carried the same connotation in Cuba as it did in America. In a bizarre, contradictory twist, the underground punk-rock DIY undertaking meant you were subverting an established social and political aesthetic, taking it into your own hands. So even though the systems, Capitalism and Communism, were diametrically opposed, they still created the need for an artist like David in Cuba, or an unknown artist in the U.S. to figure out a way to get his or her music out, exactly the

kind of music he or she wanted to produce, not the one the system was forcing him or her to release.

Except that in Cuba, this was infinitely more risky. In America, it was about the luxury of subculture, and the need to break the machine by doing what the machine did so well—produce and market. But, sometimes, it could also be about a marginalized people who needed to rise above a single-toned majority and be heard. And maybe there was a kind of danger to it after all, even in the U.S, the danger of never making it, not being able to feed yourself from what you did, sinking, not being counted, getting swallowed up, having that clean source of internal freedom dry out. “It’s funny,” said David, nodding his head, “how Americans think they’re so free.”

On the cover of his CD, David was standing on a floating stone, smiling broadly, his dreadlocks drifting at his sides. He was wearing a long white garment and had his arms outstretched, which made him look like Jesus, watching over the poor tenement buildings of his native *Alamar* in *La Habana*. Above it all, the name of his album and his movement: “Free Hop.” As he gave it to me, he said, “this is me, this is who I am.” He said it earnestly, and I believed him.

Even though I wasn’t far from home, I drove in circles so I could listen to the whole album. The songs fused electronica, what sounded like an Indian sitar, American hip-hop, Reggae, the soul of Bob Marley, and something completely original, something completely his, completely David D Omni. It was his “*sonido Cubano, armado a pedacitos,*” as one of his songs said, a sound cobbled together from the pieces he could get his hands on, from the self-same pieces that armed the music, gave it life and protected it. This music excited me the way Yoani had excited me when I first read her.



If an American dude from California stood before me in his Rasta sandals and started talking to me about love, a higher power, and the struggle to be free bro, I'd think he was full of shit. But this guy, David, I admired. More than that, I loved his music. It moved me. Because he'd made this album in Cuba, he'd drawn so much into it, sewn it together with his own hands, and it was brilliant. You could feel his rage, his love, and his true desire, as it reverberated over every word, every note.

As I listened to his songs in the car, the lyrics astounded me in their clarity and their fierceness. "*Atrevete y veras cuando te safes de la soga que te ahoga, cuando te salgas de lo establecido y te conviertas en algo prohibido. Ya lo veras. Vas a pagar el precio. Sobre tus hombros vas a llevar el peso de tu libertad...*" Which translates loosely into: "When you dare to remove that noose around your neck, the one that's choking you, you'll see. When you step outside what's been established and you, yourself, become something forbidden, you'll see. You'll pay the price for your own liberty." The entire album was a call for freedom. "*Revolución personal 2012. Individual. Nadie es igual.*" Personal freedom. Individuality. No one person is the same. That was a far cry from Fidel's "*Socialismo o muerte,*" a slogan that did not allow you to cross the line into originality or personal identity. Instead, you had to choose: socialism or death. David's songs, his poetry, and his art, were about a new generation coming to "reap what's theirs," one song said. "Don't cry, father," he sang in this song, "we're not that bad, it's just evolution. It happens everywhere...Open the doors!"

Later, at home, I looked him up and found a video on YouTube taken in *Ciudad Habana* at the *Festival Proposiciones* in 2010. He was reciting a spoken word piece that was as powerful as the music I'd heard in the car, if not more so. "*No me paga el*

*gobierno Cubano, no me paga la CIA, ando en la libertad, en mi poesia, aprendiendo a ser dueño de mi vida.*” He was not paid by the CIA, he told his audience, or the Cuban government. He walked freely, writing his poetry, and learning to be the agent of his own life. Like Edgardo, David wanted to be “*el productor en jefe*” of his own destiny, tapping together the beats of his own life. Did this mean he was a “dissident?” He wasn’t sure. That word, it was complicated.

It was Edgardo, whose real name was Edgar Gonzalez, that would first explain to me why he hated the word “dissident,” and the reasons had everything to do with his desire, like David’s, to be in control of his own life. Edgardo was young, younger than David, younger than Yoani, perhaps another generation altogether that didn’t have a name yet, not *Generación Y*, but *Generación Zeta* maybe. Zed, the end of Fidel’s line; the zenith of Y’s movement toward change.

Edgardo and I were sitting at Steve’s Pizza in Miami when he explained it to me. It was a couple of days after the retreat, a weekend at 11am in the morning. We were sipping beer and looking out on to Biscayne Blvd, the buzz of the boulevard shooting by, filling the few silences, and otherwise providing a backbeat. Inside the pizza joint, the sweet smell of dough drifted above old arcade games and graffiti, dirty wooden booths – this too was backbeat. It was way too early for Edgardo, I could tell immediately when I picked him up. He’d been out late. Still, it didn’t take him long to start talking, and before I knew it, he was alive with narrative.

In his hipster glasses, Edgardo told me about growing up in *Alamar*, which he described as a Cuban ghetto. His partner, Yrak Saenz, once told guest-blogger Romina Ruiz-Goiriena for *The Havana Note*, how hip-hop came to be in in Alamar. Partially,

Saenz said, “we were closer to the U.S. [in Alamar] and could listen to music in Miami with short-wave radios. We started hearing this genre [hip-hop] and realized that people were using this as a way to voice their concerns and we decided that we could do that too.”

“Alamar was a magical place,” Edgardo told me, “Hip Hop kept us alive. Now when I see documentaries about the Crips and the Bloods, or even worse about El Salvador and the Salva Maratrucha I think: Wow that could be Alamar. Easily. Easily. There was nothing there to do, nothing to put your mind to. The thing that really saved you was hip hop. In my case, I only had my mom, and I say that the man, the father figure in my life, was hip hop.” A father figure to replace both his own father and the State’s patriarchy.

Then he told me that he actually spent some time in the Netherlands, in an American school, which explained his stellar English, slightly accented but otherwise really good. He said things like “supercool” and “*de pinga*” in the same sentence. “*De pinga*,” for those unfamiliar with the term, literally translates into “of dick,” but really means something more similar to “like dick.” It can mean that something is amazing, but it can also mean it’s downright awful, covering the opposite ends of the spectrum, from godly to ghastly.

“*De pinga*, you know what I mean?” Being called a dissident, Edgardo said, basically sucked. Because everybody in Cuba thought you were bought by the U.S. even though what you were doing was just trying to speak your mind, your own mind, but here in Miami it sucked too because they thought dissident meant you were going to preach

against Fidel all the time. He didn't want to be part of any label, he just wanted to be himself, wanted to make music, and that was it, see the world, be free.

As he said all of this, I could see the turmoil the word caused in him: "dissident." He was just a musician, man. And this word, ugh, it was so heavy, a burden he didn't want to carry all the time, a responsibility he didn't want to have to bear. But also like it was just one bad label replacing another. Dissident replacing the communist *compañero* wasn't any better. At the same time, he had always wanted his music to reach further than he was standing, and perhaps one had to be a dissident to do that. To be called a dissident was a double-edged sword, a "*doble filo*," the name of Edgardo and Saenz's hip-hop group.

Diddier was perhaps the one of the group who showed the least conflict with the word. Not that the conflict wasn't there, but there were times that he himself used it to describe himself and others that were fighting for the cause of a free Cuba. If Edgardo wanted simply to play music, Diddier had a heavier mission. He wanted to make art, but he wanted more than anything, to live freely inside Cuba. This meant that he wanted to live in a city where he wouldn't be jailed before the pope came to town, where his friends wouldn't be beaten up for standing up against human rights abuses.

Diddier was also the one of the group that I interviewed the most and got to know the best. There were certain things about him that aligned themselves with my own life, all of which made it easy to speak to him. Apart from his seriousness and determination, which I could understand clearly, there were also the specifics of our lives. He was born on April 8, 1979, and I was born on April 3, 1979. When he was 25, his mother died, and he dropped out of the world for two years. When I was 28, I too dropped out of the world

for two years, finding myself again in the pages of a novel I wrote – a novel driven by my father’s sudden death. So there were similarities, but there were also great differences. We were, after all, born on opposite sides of the Diaspora. Which meant that while my mother fled Cuba with my grandmother in 1961, his was educating Cubans through the Cuban Literacy Campaign, Fidel’s year-long attempt to obliterate illiteracy in Cuba. My father was a shoe salesman. His father was a chauffer for the Iranian embassy.

I didn’t tell Diddier about all of our connections, I simply listened.

During our very first interview, Diddier told me all about the Rotilla festival, how it came about, and what it meant to him. I wanted to do a short interview piece for the Huffington Post about his documentary *Ni Rojo, Ni Verde, Azul!* and he said he was on board.

It all started around 2006, he told me, he’d been doing production independently, specifically related to music and shows in Cuba, but then he started going with a group of friends that were involved in the cinema. So he started taking workshops and classes, learning how to make movies. This was around the time that he met Michel Matos, the founding director of Matraka productions, who became a good friend and invited Diddier to join Matraka. Diddier would eventually help direct the festival in 2008. But before that, there were other things going on that were helping the festival grow.

Matraka got involved with the EXIT festival, Diddier explained. That really started to open doors. EXIT was a famous electronic music festival in Serbia, often credited with helping to oust Milosevic. “The main manager for the EXIT festival was in Cuba, as a tourist, a regular tourist,” Diddier told me, “and at a certain point, he saw what

Matraka was doing...[and] they presented themselves to us, got interested in what we were doing. They saw their beginning in us, and they invited us to go to Serbia.”

In 2007, Diddier went to Serbia. And it was there that Matraka really learned how to expand Rotilla. “They taught us how they made their festival. Security, medical spots, how to distribute the stages, how to manage a big public with less staff. How to make a festival on a grand scale. If you want to make a festival and you want to see it grow, you have to have a good mirror. We were very lucky that they became interested in us. It’s not easy for the ‘Best Festival in Europe,’ the same year that they are called that, to invite you to their festival...They helped us a lot,” said Diddier.

What Diddier was referring to was that EXIT had won the “Best European Festival Award” in 2007 at the UK Festival Awards.

When they came back from Serbia, Rotilla took what it learned abroad and implemented it, and the festival grew. The members of Matraka went all in, they didn’t sleep, and they saw what they were capable of creating. They were gaining momentum and popularity. By 2010, the popular hip-hop group, *Los Aldeanos*, played at Rotilla to a crowd of 15,000. That was the height. Because after that, the very next year, 2011, the Cuban government took over the festival. No more independent youth movement. No more real Rotilla. It was getting too big.

When I asked Diddier where the money was coming from to do all of this, to expand like this, he told me they managed to get help from all over the place. “We’ve worked with Holland, Spain, Switzerland, and Norway mostly. European countries. Up until now we haven’t worked with the U.S., but the Cuban government still accuses us of working for the CIA...They think we’re being manipulated,” said Diddier. “You know

[like] where are the funds filtered from, they [ask] us. As if the CIA manipulates the government in Holland, the Spanish government, everything, it's stupid."

Later, the AP would report, around the same time that the ZunZuneo stories were released, that USAID had tried and failed to use Cuban hip-hop as a tool for revolution. The article was posted all over the place, including Billboard.com on Dec. 11, 2014, under the title "How the U.S. Government Infiltrated Cuba's Hip-Hop Scene to Spark Change." The story went that USAID had centered their efforts on a group called *Los Aldeanos*, the same group that had played at Rotilla in 2010. The duo was comprised of two rappers, "El B" (Brian Oscar Rodriguez Gala) and Aldo, also called "A12 El Aldeano" (Aldo Roberto Rodriguez Baquero). *Los Aldeanos* were also one of the groups ZunZuneo was sending messages about during the Juanes concert – the Juanes concert that Janelle had filmed the documentary on. According to the AP, the company behind those copy-cat tweets was Creative Associates, a company whose mission it was to "provide outstanding, on-the-ground development services and forge partnerships to deliver sustainable solutions to global challenges..." Creative, the AP said, was contracted by USAID.

In 2013, when I first interviewed Diddier, nobody knew any of this, but when the article came out I called Diddier up and asked him: what's the deal?

"That article is so sad," Diddier told me. His opinion was that the AP had been fed the news by the Castro regime. That, as the only American news outlet allowed in Cuba, the AP was eating up "directed news" all the time. "They are trying to divide the rap movement, which was one of the most underground, authentic movements in Cuba. You can't be recruited to write a song," said Diddier, "It's stupid."

The AP article hit even closer to home than touching on Los Aldeanos though. It attacked Matraka Productions because it said that Matraka had been contracted by USAID indirectly. Specifically, it said that Adrian Monzon, who had been associated with Matraka Productions, had been aware that the Serbian promoter, Rajko Bozik, who had approached Matraka to offer help with their festival, was paid by Creative Associates International, which, as mentioned above, was contracted by USAID.

Wait, so were the Serbians bought by the United States then? And did Diddier know? In the 2013 interview I did with him about his documentary, he claimed they'd never received money from the U.S. Was that true, was he unaware of it? He did, in fact, seem not to know about the money trail the AP later unveiled in their reporting.

And yet, the news, a year after the interview, was quickly stacking cards against Matraka and the hip-hop movement. The idea was to “radicalize the Cuban people to challenge their own government,” said Trish Wilson of the AP to PBS on Dec. 13, 2014. The problem was that USAID was illegal in Cuba, so they had to move in a roundabout way (that should sound familiar by now). They ended up working through the Serbians because of the enormous youth movement in Serbia that had helped oust Milosevic back in 2000.

What annoys me about Trish Wilson's comment is that it makes it sound as though the Cubans were not tired and fed up and radicalized already. It makes the AP sound more arrogant in their thought processes and language, than the American government itself.

Diddier denied the USAID connection completely. “It's simply not true,” he told me. “The guy they mention in the piece, Monzon, he signed a contract with the



Americans, but he left Matraka,” said Diddier. “We’ve distanced ourselves from him,” he told me, “because we know the stigma associated with being linked to the U.S... You don’t understand, people in Cuba don’t even know the difference between USAID and the CIA.”

So, what about Adrian Monzon? Did he know what he was doing?

Adrian Monzon, sometimes known as “VJ Cuba,” lives in Miami now, and when the article came out, he denied it completely. “I have never participated in a project to overthrow the Cuban government. If anyone I worked with or that was doing the same work that I was had those intentions, it wasn’t my purpose,” Monzon told the Miami Herald. “I think that working to overthrow the government is a way of distributing propaganda for them and those people should be multiplied by zero because all they are is one more obstacle in the process that is life.”

“Saying that Matraka was funded by the U.S. or contracted to the U.S. or that USAID was helping us,” said Diddier, “is like saying I’m going to go ride from here to the moon on a bicycle.”

Diddier was indignant about the piece. He repeated that he considered all of these kinds of pieces attacks by the Castro regime on dissidents. Believing that the regime infiltrated the AP and led them to print the stories they printed, Diddier was, in essence, accusing the reporters of being mouth pieces; puppets. What’s fascinating here is that Diddier was saying that the American media was used by Cuba in the same way the American media says the Cuban rap movement and Matraka were used by USAID. In other words, everybody was being played and the truth itself was nothing but a poisonous potion swimming in a vat of good intentions mangled in orchestrated deceit. It was no

wonder then, that David found himself, so often, having to search inside himself for that clean source of water. Because when you're dealing with Cuba, you needed that clean supply to survive.

As all of this unfolded, my mind echoed back to Yoani. Her message about all of us wanting the same thing and I pictured it -- The Americans telling the Cubans: *We all want the same thing*. The Cubans telling the Cuban-Americans: *We all want the same thing*. The Cuban-Americans telling the young Cuban dissidents: *We all want the same thing*. A chorus of peace, covering up the trail of what it really took to break away from age-old chains.

"The people who write those articles, the people who talk without knowing, it's so obvious," said Diddier, "that they have never lived in a dictatorship."

So what to make of all of this? This hot, sopping soup.

On the one hand, the assistance of foreign money, specifically U.S. money, makes Rotilla's success less "real," less underground, less in the hands of the Cuban Youth. On the other hand, you could say that USAID was simply doing what it was meant to do: "enable resilient, democratic societies to realize their potential." The dissidents I met were definitely resilient -- they'd been fighting for a long time, before the Americans extended a hand. And they did, in fact, need aid. Couldn't you say then, that USAID was helping the Cubans do what they wanted to do, from within. The U.S. did not "create" Los Aldeanos or Michel Matos or Diddier Santos, they simply helped them get what they wanted, what they needed. When Henken responded to ZunZuneo, his piece voiced that foreign aid should not "undermine local voices." But was this aid actually undermining local voices? "I long for the day," said Diddier, "that we can actually apply for a grant

from the U.S., like every other country in the world, and that this isn't seen as something bad." And why shouldn't they be able to?

*Los Aldeanos* were rapping about what was going desperately wrong inside the island before the U.S. ever found them. They were rapping about what they needed, needed desperately for everyone to hear – both inside and outside Cuba. They were angry and hungry, desperate to speak out against the government that oppressed them, that lied to them, that was censoring them. In 2003, they showed up for the first time, and played for a tiny group of listeners in La Lisa, a marginal neighborhood in La Habana. They were already singing: “*Ya me canse, ya nos cansamos de que nunca se tomen en cuenta las cosas que hablamos, de que traten de callarnos siempre que nos expresamos, de estas y muchas cosas mas son de las que nos cansamos. Ya me canse ya nos cansamos.*” These lyrics were from their first album called *Censurado*, or Censored. In English the words went something like: “I’m tired, we’re tired, of no one taking into account the things we have to say, that they try to silence our expression, of this and so much more, we’re tired. I’m tired, we’re tired.” The song rose up and spit out in rage: They were tired of their country claiming everyone was the same, when government officials were the ones getting hospital attention, while their own grandmothers died, and not of old age but lack of treatment. They were tired of hunger and pain, and of a country that pretended to be just, when it was just as classist as any. They were tired of strangers to their country, tourists, being treated better than they were. Locked in their hearts, they carried “a deep sadness.” And there it was, “We’ve thought it and we’ve said it” because “*la verdad no se dice con permiso.*” Because “you don’t ask permission to tell the truth.”

In the title track of that first album, Aldo cried: “*No intenten cambiarme, ni consejos darme, yo fui malcriado, morire como empece y yo commence, Underground.*” “Don’t try to change me or give me advice, I was spoiled and I’ll die how I started, Underground.” The “underground” was in English and obviously a double-entendre, pointing to the ground that would bury him, and the underground movement that gave him breath and, therefore, life. Another “*doble filo.*”

As for Rotilla, the festival existed as an underground movement as well, gaining power inside Cuba before the U.S. reached out. And so couldn’t it also be that the U.S. was helping “local voices” step up to a greater mic, “connect people who have been cut off from the outside world by repressive or authoritarian governments,” as the Matt Herrick, spokesperson for USAID, said in defense of ZunZuneo.

I know this is a controversial statement. And the line is thin and tricky, one that treads the middle ground between assistance and the spread of imperialism. But I have to ask myself, if I were a Cuban musician or writer, working inside Cuba, and I was going to risk my life to point out the ills of my country, with the intent to improve my life and the life of everyone around me, would I decline – could I decline -- a helping hand? When the U.S. extended that hand and said, keep doing what you’re doing, here’s how to make it bigger, and we’ll help you spread the word... Would I deny that aid, even if it was probably laced in another kind of nation-building/keeping? I’m not so sure; easier said than done. If I was so tired of what was wrong, of what was tying me down, trapping my city, my country, my friends, my family, my lovers, my heart, if I was tired of my confines, then I would probably do everything I could to break free. Right? Or would I just be trapping myself and my country again, by accepting this helping hand, putting

Cuba in the hands of another power, “softly” as Henken wrote? Thinking this, my mind might start to turn, might deny the hand of the U.S. ... What might the U.S. do then, if I turned away? Perhaps cover their hand, in the guise of Switzerland, or another nation, reaching out. One that seemed more benign in its intention, one with an embassy on the island. So if the help came from Switzerland, or the Netherlands, or Serbia, would I take it then?

These are not easy questions to answer – not even hypothetically. The minute one answer takes root inside me, another one surfaces. I say to myself: yes, I would do take the aid. And then, just as quickly, I ask whether Jose Martí died on his white horse stupidly and in vain, and whether the Cubans inside the island were trading the yoke of tyranny for that of capital-colonialism, as China had done before it. Would this be worse? A Cuba caught between two systems – still gripping onto censorship while selling its soul to Starbucks? Worse than that, though, would being cordoned off forever, like a child in a crib, without the agency to make mistakes and learn from them, to be free to choose, to live as the rest of the world does -- in conversation, in dialogue and diplomacy, in commerce and war – wouldn't that be worse?

Listening to the dissidents and the AP stories that trickled out, these two voices were at constant battle inside me. I couldn't even imagine what they might do inside the mind of a dissident. Change was messy. My admiration for the young men I met at Christian's house, and for Yoani, widened and grew. When I looked at the tired face of every dissident who hated the word dissident, I could almost hear these questions, these burdens, shifting on their shoulders. There's an intro to *Censurado*, in which a Jekyll and Hyde scenario plays out. One voice is steady, begging for peace, one raging, asking

whether there is ever peace without war. “This is my struggle,” *Los Aldeanos* rap, “this is the moment.”

“This is the moment.” This phrase was something I thought over and over again in 2013, after I left Christian’s house. At the time, I didn’t have any of this information about USAID that I’m sharing now, I didn’t know about the U.S.’s role in hiring the Serbian producers that would help expand Rotilla, I didn’t know about the bumpy road to the *Aldeanos* rise to fame, I only felt that something was happening, that this was an important time for Cuba, and that these dissidents were young people who were taking great risks for change in their country. It was something inside, guttural, instinctual, and stirring. I felt it in my heart, like Aldo felt the pain in his, that the opening of Cuba was closer than we all thought, and this made my chest flutter, with the shudder of a hummingbird’s wings. I told friends and Cuban-Americans about this after the retreat, but they brushed it off. They told me: “we’ve been hearing that for years, and look where it’s gotten us.” And, “Change? I’d have to see it to believe it.” It was really happening this time, I responded. But it was hard to get through to a tired people. Because the people in exile, on the other side of the sea, were just as tired as *Los Aldeanos*, just as tired as the people within the island.

Sometimes, however, there was a note, somewhere, that clicked and connected. And this created further change – one click at a time. A few days after Gueits’ Spiritual Retreat, my mother had car trouble, and she asked me to take her to work. When she got in the car, I played David’s CD, and we listened to it in silence.

“Play it again,” she told me, “that’s really good.”

I couldn’t contain a smile as I pressed repeat. Dissident dissemination.

There's this one song in David's CD that ends by saying how rich it is to be comfortable, and how comfortable it is to applaud "those who dare" while, all the while, sitting back and doing nothing. Was that us, I asked my mother? Was that me? Was I sitting back, applauding, doing nothing? Or was that not my role? Was my role simply to take all of this in and report it later? Like a sponge that collected and spread the details of a particular moment in time? "Please, Vanessa," she said. "Don't start."

It was too late for that, of course, my engine got revving long ago.

This question about what I was doing to make a difference for Cuba pushed me back in time, to 1995.

I'm 16 and in my first car, a yellow VW van Papan has nicknamed The Banana Boat. My best friend, Yanik, is in the passenger seat, and we're at a gas station near my house. It's the happy-go-lucky 90s, Bill Clinton is president, grunge bands are breaking up and Coolio is topping the charts with *Gangsta's Paradise*. Yitzhak Rabin has just been murdered, war is raging in Bosnia, and we are finally responding. EBay is born, along with *Toy Story*. The digital age is entering our lives, full force, even though we're not pod people yet, and we don't quite know what it all means.

All of this is bubbling in the background. But, somewhere in my foreground is Cuba, as always, Cuba. Amnesty tells us there are about 600 prisoners of conscience on the island, political prisoners. We are reading Charlotte Bronte in school, and when I read: "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will," I think: Jane Eyre is obviously not Cuban. Or maybe that's what Cubans have to feel inside themselves in order to be free at all. Maybe Cuba is a 19<sup>th</sup> century woman. Everything relates back to this place I have never been to. I am

distraught by the things I hear about the island my parents are from, am constantly thinking about it.

As I pump gas, I start to wonder out loud what we can do for Cuba because we can't just sit here and do nothing, right? I mean, can we? I ask my friend. Yanik seems to agree. We ponder this as I finish pumping gas.

"You know, we'd have to be willing to die if we really wanted to do something," I say as I get back into the car, realizing this even as I speak the words.

"I don't want to die," Yanik responds. She looks at me with such an earnest face that we both start to laugh. "Me either," I say. I turn on the engine, and she turns up the radio, burying Cuba for now, continuing the path of our regular teenage American lives. As I drive off, I wonder to myself whether I would be so complacent if I were living in Cuba, and something inside me feels uneasy.

Years later, Diddier would ask me this same question. "What if you had been born in Cuba?" Diddier asked me on camera. My answer was fraught.

With Diddier, I was always the one on the questioning and listening end. Until, one day, he asked me if I would be in his documentary; if he could turn the questions on me. The documentary would be about the exile community. About what he'd learned in Miami. "Miami is nothing like what people think it is in Cuba," he told me. "People have the wrong idea, I want to show them."

I agreed, feeling it would be unfair not to. We met at my house, which in a strange turn of events had once been his house. After separating from my husband in 2013, I went in search of a place to live. I wanted something small, a cottage. So I searched for a "cottage for rent" online. I found one in my price range and in a central neighborhood, so



I went to go look at it. When I got to the place, I had a flashback of having picked Diddier up there once. But when I picked up Diddier, I had assumed he was bunking with family in the big house. I didn't even know there was a cottage behind. As it turned out, I was about to rent the cottage that Diddier's ex-girlfriend used to live in, and who he used to stay with. The coincidence was so strange it made my head explode. For a minute I became paranoid, but I let it go and signed the lease.

Months after I signed the lease, I had a dream in which Diddier was dressed in long, white robes -- a mixture between a Jihadist's robes and David's garb on the cover of his CD. I was on a subway platform in New York, and I saw Diddier across the platform. He was surrounded by light. I ran to him and asked him what he was doing, why he was in New York, what he was going to do? He told me he couldn't tell me. "I just have to do it," he said instead. "You don't have to," I said in return, "You don't have to do anything." I felt an almost unbearable strain and need to protect him as I tried to grab him, but he slipped from my grip. He ran out of sight. Minutes later I saw a flash of light; a bomb went off, and I woke up. Thinking about the dream later that day, I remembered that Diddier had told me how making Rotilla happen in Cuba was like derailing a train...

I never told Diddier about this dream.

The day we conducted the interview for his documentary, we walked to the park near my cottage and we searched for a place with the proper light. The conversation was casual, we talked about work. He'd gotten a job flyer and, well, it paid the bills, he shrugged. He was also having trouble understanding the American system of ticketing -- he'd gotten a few on his moped.

When we finally settled and the camera was set up, it's single-eye staring straight at me, Didier asked me about my family. I ended up telling him a portion of Maman's story, and as he filmed me, his eyes welled. "That really gets to me," he told me, off camera, "sorry...the way so many families have been broken, it's so---"

"Yeah, I know," I said.

Then he turned the camera back on and asked me the question: "What if you'd been born in Cuba? What do you think you would have done? You think you'd do the same thing we're doing?" I laughed and agreed. I told him that if I felt so passionate from over here, that I couldn't imagine what I might feel if I'd been born in Cuba, and/or what I would feel it necessary to do. I didn't know, but I was sure I'd be doing something.

On the way back home, after the interview, I was suddenly not sure of what I had said. Or, more accurately, I was sorry I'd said it. It tormented me. And so I wrote him an email to follow up. "I've been thinking about one of the questions you asked me," I wrote, "and I'd like to re-do, or erase that question because I don't really think I said what I feel. You asked me what I would do if I were born in Cuba, and the truth is I don't know. I can't know that. It could be that I would feel the opposite of what I feel from here, who knows. It's a very philosophical question, and I'd like to respond to it like that, philosophically, not politically. Because I believe that it's a more human question than a political one, for me, in the end. What I know is that my goal, for now at least, is not political, because I don't know enough, it is, rather, a humanistic and cultural goal. I'd like to talk about the painful rifts that have been created as a result of not having access to our maternal island, Cuba... For me it's very important [before answering any of this properly] to see the place that I have been told so much about...*Un abrazo.*"

There I was, doing the same exact thing that infuriated me, claiming to be a-political, when I knew very well that I wasn't. What a sissy. I knew why I wrote that email. It was fear. Because I suddenly felt a wave of mistrust. I didn't want my mug on film, claiming I'd be a counter-revolutionary if I'd been born in Cuba, before I even visited Cuba. I mean, in the end, who was this kid and why was I telling him all of this, and why was he talking to me? Paranoia, like a disease, started to spread inside me. Not writing the email was impossible, and yet after writing it I felt stupid. Worse. Maybe I was delusional. It's funny because Diddier himself had told me once about how you get paranoid in Cuba. "When you cross a certain line in Cuba, you start to be investigated, and they start accusing you that you work for the CIA... They enter your private life, your emails, your phone... you see a guy in the park and you think he's following you, and maybe he's not, maybe it's a delusion, but you feel it." Did he feel this way about me?

"This is what they do," Diddier told me once, "they divide people." It's easier to conquer that way.

I was so depressed after I'd pressed send. I had no way to answer his question. I'd answered it and unanswered it. It was sad. I felt like I'd ended up right where I started.

Diddier responded by saying: "OK, don't worry, we can always do a second interview. It's also possible that your vision might change once you see where you come from."

Yes. I needed to see where I came from.

## **ROUTE 7: Cuba**

Even though it was 2011 when I made the “decision” to go to Cuba no matter what, it was difficult to actually get to the island, despite my decision. One reason was the lingering familial embargo, of course, but there were others. Some concrete, and some that I hadn’t expected to come across. I spoke to my family all the time about going to Cuba, and I could feel them loosening a bit, but it wasn’t the kind of loosening that allowed for the “blessing” I was looking for.

Meanwhile, I researched my family, and the dissidents arriving in Miami kept me busy. Cuba was coming to me before I got to her.

There were also several physically failed attempts to get to Havana. One was in 2013, when I was invited to speak about the ABC at a conference in Cuba called *Cuba Transatlantica*. The plan was that I would go with my then-husband. I would give the talk and do some research while I was there, and he would help me with the photographic aspect. He would take pictures so that I could use these later, for reference, and as supplements to my writing. His web design company provided photography for all of his clients, so we had plenty of proof that he could do this professionally. We needed the proof because, in this case, both of us had to go through OFAC, or the United States’ Office of Foreign Assets Control, before we made it to Cuba. In other words, the United States needed to give us permission to travel. Given that my Cuban counterparts were now allowed to leave the island without a visa, this seemed like a travesty. I could hear David’s words ring in my mind as I filled out the OFAC forms for my husband, “It’s funny how Americans think they’re so free.”

I was applying for an academic visa, while my husband was applying for one as a photographer, both artist visas and academic visas were allowed under the law. My paperwork, through the University of California Irvine, where I was a PhD candidate at the time, was going swiftly. It was my husband's that held us back. His OK from OFAC was not arriving in the mail, as we hoped it would. I called every day to nudge the office, or see where the paperwork was, but nothing. The conference came and went without us. Weeks after the conference took place, we received a rejection letter in the mail. My husband would not be allowed to travel to Cuba for the conference that had already taken place. I felt like I was in one of Yoani's sarcastic blogs about Cuban bureaucracy, except this one bore another red, white, and blue.

To this day, I don't know why he was denied. It could have been that he had a Green Card and wasn't a citizen yet, it could have been that he was born in Uruguay, where one of the world's remaining left-wing presidents, Jose Mujica, was in power. It could have been that the company he owned was a web design company, and the U.S. didn't want any more confusion about who was trying to instigate technological change from within the island. It could have simply been that we were not important enough, and that our paperwork was lost in a pile somewhere until the conference had come and gone. After all, JayZ and Beyoncé seemed to have had enough pull to go when they wanted to back in April, 2013 (more on that later) -- I'm pretty sure their paperwork wasn't late to arrive.

I didn't know it then, but what I should have done was not mention the conference. I should have gone to one of Miami's many charter agencies, told them I was going to visit family, and gotten a family visa. If I had a family visa, then I could bring

my husband with me by the mere fact that we lived at the same address. In fact, I could even have brought him with me if he was my boyfriend and not my husband, as long as we lived in the same apartment, house, or duplex. But I was to learn all of this later, the ins and outs of traveling to Cuba, as an American Born Cuban. And it was just as well because within a year's time, my husband and I would be divorced, and it was probably best that my first trip to Cuba was not with him, but with someone who had stronger ties to me and to the island itself.

The other problem I was grappling with was that once I decided to “disobey” my family in my mind, I had to begin to grapple with myself. My family had been my blockade for so long that I hadn't realized what I, myself, was actually feeling. There was a small part of me that wanted to keep Cuba at a distance. I was beginning to understand this. It was what I had known all my life. Close culturally, close physically, but impossible to reach. Part of me was also holding on to a small but powerful root of fear that had taken hold inside me, which had turned out to be stronger than it looked. This was often the case with roots. It was an irrational side of me, to a certain degree, but it was also based on well-researched facts. It was built on story, the stories my family had told me for so many years, but it was also built, brick by brick, on the facts I gathered while looking more closely at those stories.

From the time I was born, I had been told about a monster that lived a little over 90 miles away, an ancient, undying green gargoyle that ate adults and used children as propaganda, tying red bows around their necks and giving them names like Elian, The Great.

The gargoyle's name was Fidel. I was told that the minute you crossed over into his land, you had to be wary of his grip, because once in it, his claws – if they reached for you -- could puncture your skin, through to your organs, and you would die by bleeding out in a dungeon, alongside hungry prisoners of conscience.

His was a land to be feared.

The problem was that it didn't seem like that, from afar. When you looked at his land, an island, from afar, and you didn't know about Fidel and his army, you thought it was a paradise. The land itself glistened in beauty, was sunbathed and baptized by the water that surrounded it. The gods Yemaya and Oshún looked after it, despite Fidel's curse. Fidel, himself, often fooled the outsider -- covering his stone skin in the guise of benevolence, taking the tourist's dollar in exchange for a sense of false freedom. Even his name was a lie. Fidel – *fiel* -- covering him in the pretext of faithfulness and loyalty.

These were the stories I was told from the time I was born. Later, I found out that, fantastical as they seemed, most of them were true. It was clear that when the gargoyle and his army wanted certain people to disappear, they did. From the beginning this was true. The Cuba Archive documented the deaths of 3,615 people by firing squad from the time Fidel took power in 1959. His good friend, “Che” – despite his popularity on American T-shirts -- was yet another stone villain in disguise. About the firing squads, Che said, “To send men to the firing squad, judicial proof is unnecessary. These procedures are an archaic bourgeois detail. This is a revolution! And a revolutionary must become a cold killing machine motivated by pure hate. We must create a pedagogy of the *paredón* [the execution wall].”

As late as 2012, Oswaldo Payá, founder of the Varela Project, found himself mangled in a car crash many suspected was not an accident, but a carefully orchestrated murder. The United States Department of State, in its 2013 Human Rights Report, recounted that prisons in Cuba “lacked adequate water, sanitation, space, light, ventilation, and temperature control...prisoners often slept on concrete bunks without mattresses...” All you had to do to be sure that torture and mistreatment took place in Cuba, was to look at a Cuban political prisoner. They were usually toothless and starved, weakened, beat-down.

To enter this land without respect, to enter it like a blind tourist, ready to sit on Varadero Beach and order a mojito, was to know nothing of its past, its present, and the stone interior beneath its green fatigues; it was the errand of an uneducated fool.

And so, plainly said, I was afraid of Cuba and I respected her. Respected her dangers. Sometimes, I thought it was better to turn the volume up on my American radio and trod on, just as I had done with my friend, Yanik, at 16. But I couldn't, not anymore. I felt, like Yoani, a responsibility to bring the island from narrative into truth; fiction into fact.

Just as I was afraid of Cuba, Cubans were afraid of Miami. It was Diddier who explained this to me. In Cuba, they too had been raised on the stories of a monster dressed in green. This time, the green of capital and greed: America. We Cubans, on both sides of the Florida Straits, had to break through these fears, in order to move out of stagnation and allow for change.

One day, about a year after I had first met Diddier, I sat down with him for a chat and some coffee. He'd decided to stay for a while, and was trying to get a Green Card so



that he could move freely between Cuba and the U.S. This was the dream of all Cubans, Cuban-Americans, and American Born Cubans – and if you could break through the fear, it was something you *might* be able to attain.

He told me what it was like – the breaking of his fear, of his expectations of Miami, and of the stagnation that resulted after that break – the waiting for everybody else to catch up, for the paperwork to go through. “I feel like I have sand all over me,” he told me.

“I don’t get it, what do you mean sand?” I asked him as I sipped a Cuban coffee in an Argentine bakery.

“I don’t know, I don’t know why I used that expression, but it’s like--”

“Like you feel heavy?”

“No, like, I don’t know, like you’ve been sitting on the beach and you haven’t gotten up for a while, and now you’re full of sand and you can’t go inside, or anywhere, because you’re full of sand and not respectable.”

“Oh, ok--”

“It’s just, you know, I haven’t done anything. In Cuba, I was doing things and I felt like I was making a difference, and I haven’t been able to do that here, haven’t found my footing.”

Still, while in Miami, he’d managed to find the funding to finish a documentary he’d started in Cuba called *Articulo 53* about journalism in Cuba, specifically independent journalism like that of Yoani Sanchez. He was also starting to interview people for his documentary on Cuban Miami, the one he had interviewed me for. But I understood, everything changed here, he was literally looking at everything from a

different angle, and he had to get used to the perspective, which was something he understood too, and started to tell me about in that same conversation.

A good friend was visiting him from Havana, and Diddier could see “*todo el trabajo que le habian hecho,*” all the “work” that had been done on him. From the outside, after being in Miami for a year, he could see all of this “work” done on his friend as a kind of brainwashing, in essence. He didn’t notice it before, in Cuba, but now he could see it. He didn’t tell me this, but I’m pretty sure that friend was Michel Matos, who I knew was in town at the time.

“It’s like we’re talking about TV, and I was telling him how nice it would be to have a 40” TV in my house and he said, a 40” TV, that’s consumerism, brother, and I told him that’s not consumerism, that’s comfort.” Diddier told me this laughing. And then a little more seriously, he said, “It’s like a virus that we have on top of us that has been inculcated for so many years. You know, we used to be totally disconnected from the world, so when Fidel would tell us the world was running out of water in a year, we believed him. It was like he was a prophet. But the world wasn’t running out of water.”

He just kept nodding his head -- no, no, no -- at the thought of his friend.

I kept thinking about this every time I found myself questioning my trip to Cuba, wondering why I hadn’t just gotten on a plane from Mexico, like some of my other friends. Why I hadn’t saved enough money to get onto one of those touristy “people-to-people” Obama-sanctioned trips. Or, why I hadn’t tried for another academic visa, or gone ahead and gotten a family visa. Now it was me who felt full of sand. Full of a heavy residue I couldn’t get rid of no matter how far I walked. Because, in Miami, there’s sand everywhere. You walked around to try and get the breeze to brush it off, but the sand re-

accumulated. You left and went to New York, Minneapolis, LA, Florence, Ghana, Lagos, Kyoto, but then you came back and the sand found a way to stick to your skin. I just had to jump in the ocean, get rid of the sand.

Enough!

In February of 2014, I drove to my mother's house and repeated what I had come to: "Enough is enough, enough of all of this!" I was upset. I was upset at myself for waiting so long. I was upset at her for getting in the way. "I'm going to Cuba. I'm getting a ticket and no matter what anybody says, I'm getting on that plane."

I didn't even say hello. I used my key, walked in, and ranted.

"This again?" my mother said. She'd heard my key in the lock and had made it close to the door by the time I opened it.

"This time for real. I'm not asking permission."

*La verdad no se dice con permiso.*

My mother looked at me, straight in the eye, as if we were in an old Western, about to duel. Then she quietly closed the door behind me and walked to the kitchen, poured herself a glass of water. I could almost see the little wheels churning in her head, but I had no idea what the mechanisms at work were telling her to think. She drank. I wasn't sure what to do, standing there, at the entrance of her apartment, watching her drink water. So, I just repeated myself.

"I have to go." I was quieter now.

"I know."

She knew? What did she know?

“I know you have to go.”

“Yes. I do.”

She walked to the living room table and sat down. I sat down across from her.

There was silence. She placed her glass of water before her.

“I’m going with you,” she said.

“What?!?!” I got up from my chair for a flash of a second. I got up, and sat right back down. My mother remained calm, almost stoic.

“What?!?!” I repeated.

“If you’re going to torture me like this, then I’m going with you.”

“What?!?!” I yelled again, my hands to my head, dramatic without wanting to be. I was obviously at a loss for words. Why was I the one losing my cool now?

“You think I haven’t been thinking about it too? You think I haven’t been tormented by this? You think I don’t ask around and collect stories, just like you? I’ve been listening to you,” my mother said.

Looking at my mother’s glass of water, I thought about all those times I made French bread with my grandfather. About how making the bread was about waiting, mostly. It was about adding water, kneading, and waiting. Over and over again, until it was finally done. But when it was done, when it was baked, you had to run to the oven to take it out. You had to get your timing right, you had to take advantage of the moment.

Behind the scenes, my mother explained, she’d been asking her employees – employees that had just arrived from Cuba in recent years – about the realities of Cuba today, about whether things were really changing.

“I don’t have to read everything you read,” she told me, “I went straight to the horse’s mouth.”

“What did they tell you, how did they--”

“They told me: Jackie, you need to go, go for yourself. Nothing is going to happen.”

“So we’re going to Cuba?”

“I can’t believe it,” she said with a pregnant pause, “I can’t believe I have to go to Cuba.” She shook her head, as she bit both her lips at the same time. “I can’t believe I have to go.” She took another drink of water.

I knew that a big part of the reason for her deciding to come to Cuba was a fierce Cuban-mother protectiveness spreading its wings around me. She knew I was serious, that I was going this time, with or without her, alone or in the company of friends. No matter what, I was going to Cuba. But it was also something else too, that had caused the change. It was also her own disobedience, to a certain degree, a rebellion against her parents. On top of that, it was my chipping away at her, finally sculpting something. It was the voice of dissent that had reached her. It was her employees, more recent arrivals, sharing today’s Cuba through new stories, reinvigorating the well of oral history, making her wonder. Was she full of sand?

“We need to inform ourselves more,” my mother told me, at our table, “before we go, I need to know more. I need maps and facts and—”

The weeks that followed had us visiting the homes of family and friends that had gone to Cuba before us. We spoke with a friend of a friend who lead “people-to-people” travel tours, and gathered mountains of information from her. “You don’t know how

much this affects me,” my mother told me every couple of days. She was still distraught by the idea that she would be returning to the place her own parents were so adamantly against visiting.

When we told Maman we were going, she was less hysterical than she was in the past, worn down, “Just don’t tell me when you leave, ok? Don’t tell me. You know how I hate goodbyes.” I tried to explain that this was not a long-goodbye. But she continued to say: “No, just don’t tell me, don’t tell me when you leave. When you come back, show me that you’re safe and sound, and tell me that you went. Tell me then.”

We decided to use a travel agency in Miami called ABC Charter because it was where I had purchased my tickets back in 2009, the ones I never used, and because several people I knew had used the agency and had a good experience. The place was on 87<sup>th</sup> avenue in Miami, in Westchester. All around there were strip malls, middle class homes, concrete, and not enough trees.

Inside, everybody was speaking Spanish, and we were immediately asked to sit down, and wait for Magdalena, who would be back in a second. As soon as Magdalena arrived, she told us we could call her Magda, and we explained that we wanted to take a really short trip to Cuba. Nothing big. “It’s our first time,” my mother said nervously now.

“Are either of you Cuban?”

“My mom is,” I told her, “I was born here.”

“It’s impossible, you can’t go.”

My mother and I looked at each other. We’d done our homework and knew that it was legal for Cuban-Americans to go under Obama.

“I don’t understand,” said my mother.

“Me either,” I added.

“*You* can go,” Magda said to me, pointing her many-ringed finger. “But your mother can’t.” Now she was shaking the finger she pointed at me, her bangles chiming up against each other.

“What! What do you mean?” My mother was upset now, looking back and forth at Magda and then at me, Magda, me, Magda, me.

“Impossible,” repeated Magda. Then she typed something into her computer and confirmed, “Yep, impossible.”

I could see that this was making my mother want to go more than ever. Or maybe even want to truly go for the first time in her life. As if suddenly, she were placed into my predicament, as if suddenly she was getting an intravenous dose of what the familial embargo felt like. Before the possibility was there, always, a high hanging fruit she could simply climb a ladder to get to, but now this woman, Magda, was removing the ladder and my mother wanted that damn fruit. All of a sudden, she was thirsty and the fruit was so ripe, and she could see it and it was beautiful. She was ready for it, and now it was...Impossible?

“What do you mean I can’t go?” my mother repeated slowly, wanting a more in-depth answer this time.

“It’s the banks.”

“What banks?” I asked, perplexed.

“The banks, they’re not allowing it.”

It turned out, the problem was that the Cuban Interests Section in Washington had lost M&T bank, the bank they had used to do business with Cuba. Somehow this meant that my mother could not get her visa because she was born in Cuba. I could get my visa though, that wasn't a problem, ABC could provide that.

“But this has to be fixed, they have to find another bank, or--”

“Oh, sure. They'll fix it,” Magda told us.

“So I can go.”

“Yeah, you can go, you just have to wait.”

“How long?”

“Ooof! A long time, I'm sure,” sighed Magda.

“What's a long time?” my mother asked.

“Listen, I suggest that you use your Cuban passport,” replied Magda to my mother.

My mother explained that her passport was expired.

“We can renew it, we just need your birth certificate.”

“I don't have that.” My mother was wide-eyed, nearly breathless.

“Do you have your old passport?”

“Yes, somewhere, I think...”

“I'm sure Maman has it,” I assured my mother.

“And do you have family in Cuba?”

“Yes,” my mother and I responded in unison.

“Ok, well tell a family member over there to go to the office where you get the



birth certificates, and to have them give it to someone to bring back here, and then we can renew your passport and you can go to Cuba, as a Cuban. You'll have to renew it every two years once you get it. *Prorroga*," she said, a word we would hear over and over again during the passport ordeal, which meant an "extension" of the passport.

We learned quickly that when Magda said impossible, she really just meant difficult. When she said no, she really meant maybe. She'd arrived in the early 2000s, through a much more recent migration wave from Cuba than my mother, and she had, therefore, lived most of her life in Castro's Cuba, where she had become so accustomed to things being impossible that her entire demeanor had adapted to it. Nothing seemed reachable when you talked to her, until you got to know her a little better, and then you found out that she was pretty positive and hopeful, deep down...really deep down. You had to do some digging to locate that well of positivity, but she wouldn't have gotten out of Cuba without it.

"Why don't you two convene and tell me what you want to do, talk about it," Magda told us, as she turned back to her computer and the phone, which was ringing in fits and starts.

I asked my mother whether she wanted me to go alone this time, and she could come next time. No, she told me, she wanted to go now. She wanted to get her passport. She could ask my step-dad's aunt, Carmen's sister, Lutgarda, who was still in Cuba, to get my mother's birth certificate, and Blanca, Carmen's other sister, who now lives in the States and who she knew was going to Cuba soon -- Blanca could pick it up from Lutgarda and bring it back to Miami. Blanca had purchased her tickets before this banking mess happened, and besides she had her passport up to date and could travel

anyway. So, Blanca would bring us my mom's birth certificate. We communicated all of this to Magda after she got off the phone.

"Ok, once we have that, and your old passport, it should take about six months," said Magda.

"Well," I told my mother, "We've waited this long, what's another six months?"

And so we took our first steps on the paper chase toward my mother's passport. My mother went home to call Blanca, who said yes immediately, and I continued to hang out with my dissidents.

In late October, we got a call from the travel agency that my mother's passport had arrived. Technically, *she* got the call. She texted to tell me: "It's here!" I called her immediately.

"When are we going?" I asked her. "Let's get on this now, right now. I'll call the agency tomorrow."

My mother told me to please calm down and not pressure her, she had to talk to Carlos.

But I knew the timer had just rung, and we had to get the bread out of the oven, or it would go bad.

My parents, however, had just finished paying for my younger sister's wedding – a big wedding, so they were financially tight. A trip to Cuba could be expensive. The tickets, as I mentioned before, were in the vicinity of \$500 US dollars. Plus, my mother wanted to stay in a hotel because she didn't want to impose on the family we had over there, since we hadn't even met them.

“I know it’s expensive, but it doesn’t matter,” I told her, “just pretend like this is my wedding.” I had eloped with my ex-husband, I reminded her. And I would be paying for my ticket. She sighed. I persisted. She sighed again. I told her we had to go before Christmas, which meant we had to go the following month, November. Silence. A couple of days passed, and then: She agreed.

We were going to Cuba.

Like my mother, I couldn’t believe it. I was finally going to Cuba, and I was going with my mom, who hadn’t seen the island since she was five years old. This was maybe the single most important trip of my life.

The day before we left, Carmen called my mother ten, maybe fifteen times. “I have something for you to take, call me.” “Please Jackie, call me! Please! I need to give you a package for Lutgarda.”

Lutgarda was Carmen’s sister, who had done my mother the favor of attaining her birth certificate in Cuba. My mother, busy with packing, ignored Carmen’s calls. I got angry at her for doing this. “That’s selfish,” I told her, “you need to call her back.”

“Selfish? You’re calling me selfish, after all I’ll I’ve been through to go on this trip with you? Do you how hard this has been for me? *Carmen’s* selfish making me take bags over there--”

“They don’t have anything!” I cut in, angrily. “It’s our responsibility.”

Before we could finish our argument, though, Carlos walked in with a bag from Carmen.

“From my mother,” he said, holding it up like a dead fish.

“Great!” my mother responded sarcastically.

“It’s not even that big, calm down, we’ll fit it in our bags.”

It was a plastic bag filled with Advil, shirts, underwear, bras, medicine, a chocolate bar, Cuban coffee. Everything was labeled – some of it was for Lutgarda, some of it was for her niece, Blanca’s daughter, Betty.

I slept over at my mother’s house, and the next morning we woke up excited. Carlos made us Cuban coffee as we smiled and jittered around the apartment. “You’re not going to find this over there,” said Carlos, as he handed us our *cafecito* – Bustelo – *con espumita*. “They drink it all day, but it’s not café, it’s *chicharo*.” *Chicharo* was a green bean. “At least you’re not going during the special period,” he laughed, “then you’d be eating fried grapefruit peel, if you were lucky.”

During the 90s, those happy-Clinton-90s, while the U.S. enjoyed an economic boom, the Cubans were suffering the end of the Cold War and the death of the Soviet Union. Cut off from Russian aid, they were left to starve. Quite literally. Cats disappeared from the streets, and the shelves that used to stock Soviet foodstuffs began to stock a whole lot of *nada* – empty stomachs and empty Ladas. The agriculture system they’d built on Soviet imports collapsed as well, leaving Cubans unable to grow their own food. Without fertilizer, produce suffered, no matter how much Cubans scraped the ground. But they got creative, as always. They ate cloth and pieces of mattress. In Miami, we’d heard rumors that people were eating “steaks” made out of rubber. When family arrived on American shore, managing to escape, they looked us straight in the face and said, “That ain’t no rumor. If I told you what I had to eat to survive...well...”

Fidel called this epoch the “*Periodo Especial*,” or “Special Period,” a period the Cuban people would have to “endure,” for the “greater good of their system.” *Patria o muerte*, “motherland or death,” a statement Fidel adopted in the 60s, and which Che Guevara later delivered in a speech to the United Nations in 1964.

There’s a joke that *The Economist* reported in an article called “Parrot Diplomacy” in 2008, that before Castro the signs at the national zoo read, generically: “Please don’t feed the animals.” But the signs started to change over time. When Fidel went commie, the signs started to read: “Please don’t take the animals’ food.” And when the Special Period came into full force, the signs changed yet again: “Please don’t eat the animals.” Here’s another *Periodo Especial* joke Regina Anavy recounted in her book *Out of Cuba: Memoir of a Journey*: “Do you know about the three main achievements of the Revolution? Healthcare, education, and sports.” Pause for effect. Now... “Do you know about the three failures of the Revolution? Breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”

Araceli Alonso, in her book *Out of Havana: Memoirs of Ordinary Life in Cuba*,” gave us a list of what the Cubans ate during this period: “ ‘Cheese pizza’ [made] with melted condoms from China, ‘beef burgers,’ made of green banana peel, ‘fruit juice,’ made with urine and mashed orange peel.” The system was killing them. “One could pass close to neighbors or friends or relatives without recognizing them,” wrote Alonso, “Fat people turn into skinny, and skinny into skeletons. Young people got older in months, and old people died before it was their time to go.”

I’d read some places that the average Cuban lost 11 pounds (*Time*) during the Special Period, and in other places that they’d lost an average of 20 pounds each (*TeleSur*). Every time you saw a Cuban refugee in the 90s, I remember clearly, you could

count their ribs. Their faces were gaunt, cheeks sunken like Concentration Camp victims. Talk to any Cuban who survived the period and they would tell you they rather not remember it.

“*Aya ustedes*,” Carlos told us calmly. He didn’t like that we were going. We told him he was coming next time.

“No way, no way in hell,” he replied.

“That’s what mom used to say,” I told him, winking.

“Yeah, but I’m not budging.”

“He will,” I told my mother, as soon as Carlos left the kitchen to get his car keys in the other room.

When we arrived in the airport, it was full, which was no surprise for Miami International Airport, as ever the gateway to Latin America. Carlos drove us to the Cuban Charters section of American Airlines and we all jumped out of the car with our luggage. There was Spanish all around us, Cuban Spanish. “Let me help you,” said one attendant. We gave him our two bags, and he looked around. “That’s it!” he asked.

“That’s it,” my mom said, smiling.

“Your first time?” he questioned us, as he took our luggage and wrapped it in blue plastic wrap, which he insisted was necessary. They required it inside, he said.

“My first time ever,” I told him, with a grin I couldn’t control. “She was born there,” I pointed at my mother, “but she hasn’t been there since she was five.”

“Next time you go, you’ll see, you’ll bring bags and bags and bags. They’ve got nothing. You’ll want to bring them everything. But also you’ll miss everything from here,

and you'll need it all of a sudden, you know what I mean? First time I went..." He went on and on as he swung the luggage around, catching the plastic wrapping.

I looked at my mother and whispered to her as our bag-wrapper talked about his trips, "You should be feeling really guilty right about now, for not wanting to take Carmen's measly little bag."

"*Bueno, Suerte!*" Our bag-packer patted us on the shoulder, when he was done, wishing us luck as we said goodbye to Carlos and headed on inside.

Inside, there was a huge line at the Cuba counter. It was like a plastic blue mountain range -- wrapped-up suitcases and duffle bags delineating the contour of the landscape. The bags were labeled: *MEDICINA. ROPA. ZAPATOS.* And more *MEDICINA.* It's funny, I thought to myself, how the exiles left Cuba with *gusanos* and now they came back with them, full to the brim. Once a *gusano* always a *gusano*.

"I'm *not* nervous, it's incredible," my mother turned to me to say, "so strange! I'm *not* nervous at all." Meanwhile, the pink rash erupting on her neck told a different story. "I'm evolving," she continued. And then again: "I'm evolving!" She kept saying this, proud of herself, smiling. Some of her closest friends couldn't understand why she was taking this trip. "They're not evolved yet," she whispered. "It's ok."

The atmosphere inside the plane was full of an almost uncontainable energy, like the plane was a balloon that was about to reach the tipping point of too-much helium. Sitting all around us were people like us that were going to meet family for the first time, people who hadn't seen their family in decades. People who returned all the time to get their necessary infusion of the island, people who came to the U.S. more recently from Cuba and returned more frequently to the island than the older exile generation. There

were very few people on this plane without Cuban ties. I spotted two or three, and they were almost stereotypically dressed as “reporters” – khaki cargo jackets and camera bags.

The most impressive thing about the flight was how quick it was. The plane lifted off, the flight attendants gave everybody a coke, and then the plane descended. “*Que locura*,” said the woman behind us, “All the time and energy it took to get here for such a short flight.” Her voice was heavy and serious as she said this, right as we were beginning our descent.

My mother nodded her head in agreement, when she heard the woman’s comment, even though there was no way the woman could see my mother, hidden by our seats as we are. We were both looking out the window, and my mother’s jitters had dissipated into a slow and dazed calm. It might even be called shock. Next to me, to my right, there was a picture-book *guajiro*. A Cuban obviously not from Havana, but from the countryside, and when the lush green of the island began to come into view, he turned his cowboy-hatted head to me and said in his country-flavored Spanish: “She’s a beauty, isn’t she?”

“She is,” I replied. And it was true. All of that untouched green, spread out before us. Cuba. My chest swelled with a pride that was almost inexplicable, as if this place were mine, as if I had made it, when really it had made me. It had reached across the gulf and formed me out of mud.

We were about to land, about to touch ground when people started applauding. “Hang on now, hang on,” a man behind us somewhere called out, “we haven’t touched ground yet, when we touch ground, then clap, only when we touch ground!” The



clapping abated a bit, heeding the man's instruction, until the wheels hit the tarmac and then everybody erupted in a joyful round of applause.

We had landed in Havana.

"I can't believe it," my mother turned to me, her eyes beginning to well. And like a stinging but benign infection, I caught her rush of emotion.

From the window, I could see a sign on the walls of the Jose Martí Airport that read: "*Patria es humanidad*," "Homeland is Humanity" – a quote by Martí himself, speaking through the airport that bore his name. "Homeland is humanity, that portion of humanity which we see closest, that portion which we're born into..." I was about to see the part of myself that had remained invisible, though not impalpable, all of these years. My mother and I were about to enter the place we were closest to, in our hearts.

When I was young, I had trouble differentiating the Puerto Rican flag from the Cuban. They were almost identical. The only difference was that the triangle, left-center, of the Cuban flag was red, while the one on the Puerto Rican flag was blue. I had to create a mnemonic device to remember, and what I decided on was that – I must have been about five or six – the Cuban one was the one with the "red, beating heart" like "my heart," the blue was somebody else's heart, that's why it was blue, cooler than my hot one. This made sense to me, and stuck with me. And here we were, about to step into the center of that red, vibrating triangle.

My mother and I walked out of the plane, following everyone in front of us. To get to the airport you had to walk down a set of portable stairs and then across the tarmac. We began to do this, but by the time we reached the middle of the space between the plane and the airport, my mother stopped, put her bag down and took her hands to her

eyes and started to shake. The tears were rolling slowly from my eyes too as I watched her and embraced her. “Oh my God,” she kept saying, weeping into her hands, “Oh my God.”

The airport was tiny. I looked around and thought to myself: *They’re really going to have to expand this or get another airport when things open up.*

My mother took out a hand-drawn map.

“What is that?”

“One of my employees drew it for me. It’s of the airport,” she told me, proudly.

“But we’re here mom, and it’s tiny, I don’t think we’ll need it.”

“This is very useful,” she said, ignoring me, looking down at her map and then around her.

I let her hold her security blanket as I, too, looked around.

Everything was new and clean, but utilitarian and desperately undecorated, as were the uniforms of the airport attendants. No commissioned artist murals or mosaic floors here. We stood in line to be processed. The booths we were waiting to walk up to were beige and brown, the walls above painted a bright red, and the numbers for the booths were set in a bright square of yellow. It was like a basic crayon box had met with a Soviet-era architect and come up with this bleak design. The terminal we were in, which was the one designated specifically for U.S. Charters, was actually recently renovated and re-opened in 2010. You wouldn’t know it from the motifs at play in the structure and decor.

In front of us was one of the journalists with camera equipment. We watched carefully as they questioned him. They let him in without too much trouble, which made

it seem like it would be even easier for us. My mother went first. She was pretending to be calm again, but there was that rash starting to lurk on her neck. They let her through, which meant she had to go through a windowless door. She didn't know what was on the other side, and so she looked back in semi-panic because she would lose sight of me for a while, during the time the customs agent processed me. I smiled, trying to assuage the flash of fear that appeared on her face.

The woman checking my passport was made of stone, her face plastered in a permanent lack of expression. She asked me what I was in Cuba for, and I told her I was visiting family. She took a while, looking at my passport and my paperwork, my visa, her screen – so long that I found my own heart beating a bit faster than usual. “The mouth of the lion,” I heard my mother’s voice in my head, running in slow motion until the snap of a stamp brought me back into the present. “That’s it?” I asked her. She nodded as if to say, “What more do you want?” And I walked through the door, my mother waiting on the other side.

Outside there were swarms of people gathered, waiting for family. There must have been ten people waiting for every person that arrived. Entire families and groups of friends, waiting for stories of the outside world, waiting for news of those who had gone, waiting to see a mother, sister, brother they hadn't seen in years, or one they saw the other day, but that was coming back with goods. I thought back to a time when Miami was like this. As a kid, we'd wait for my father when he came back from a business trip, the whole family there at the airport. Or when our aunts would come visit from Spain, and we'd all be there too, our heads rubber-necking like geese, watching the customs' door for the aunts, as they waddled out in their old-school knit sweaters and pantyhose.

We'd lost this. This warmth. I looked around and felt a short spout of envy for this hot, messy welcome. We didn't have anyone waiting for us because we didn't want to inconvenience any of Carlos' family. We'd become so American.

Magda, from the travel agency, had given us the phone number for her nephew. "You'll need a guide since it's your first time," she'd told us, "he's a good boy, you'll like him." We considered calling him now instead of taking a taxi. We also had another contact, a friend of a friend, a woman, who said she'd show us around Havana. She worked for a government agency and was highly educated, our friend told us, "I use her all the time." We decided we would call her when we got to the hotel. "I'm a little cautious of the taxis," my mother made sure to tell me. I thought they looked fine. We walked up and down the outside perimeter of the airport a couple of times, until one guy saw us wandering and came up to us, told us to stop going in circles and just get in his cab. He was funny about it, and I felt comfortable with his joke, my mother did not. So we went in another circle before we got back to him. "I already have a client now, but come, don't worry, I'll take you to my buddy," he said and then shouted out: "Domingo!"

"Here you are," he said handing us over to Domingo, who looked like he was in his late thirties, sprightly, and ready to go.

Domingo was chatty, which was the best kind of cab driver when you got to a new place, the perfect introduction to a city. He started talking immediately about Raul and Fidel, and my mother and I looked at each other surprised. We thought our cab driver, of all people, would want to remain in that ever "a-political" territory. But no, he didn't. Although he still talked in a kind of code. It was my mother who was asking the

questions now, while I sat and listened. How did he feel about the changes in Cuba, she asked.

“When the *muchacho* came to power,” he said, “we were all hoping for change, you know, and it looked like there has been some, but we’ll have to see, you know how these things are. One thing I can tell you is that people aren’t just sitting around with their arms crossed anymore, if you know what I mean?”

*El muchacho*, or “the kid,” seemed to be Raul. He might have been 83 years old, but he was still Fidel’s little bro.

“You know what’s tough, it’s the old people,” he said, “they’re set in their ways. The young people and the mindset is changing, but it’s hard for the young people to change *los viejos*, you know what I mean?”

We knew exactly what he meant.

“It will come,” my mother said, all of a sudden comfortable. Lounging, chatting up the cab driver like she never left the country, like everything here belonged as much to her as it did to Domingo. “It’s like that everywhere, you know,” my mother assured him.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Domingo nodded his head.

“People are people...”

I thought of Yrak Saenz and something he said to the *The Havana Note* reporter, about how hard it was for one person to create change -- “many people are stuck in their respective trenches and do not realize that as Cubans we have to resolve the problems we face together...” This was the problem so many of the dissidents were complaining about, what David sometimes sang about -- trying to get the older generations to look outside the boxes they’d created for themselves. And my mother was right, it wasn’t so

different in Miami, where my generation's middle line had been very slowly chipping away at the older generation's hardline for years.

As we got out of the cab, Domingo looked me up and down and told me he thought he knew me. "Not likely," I told him. "Are you sure? I'm pretty sure I talked to you when you were at the University of Havana." Nope, not me. I was flattered that he thought I had been to Cuba before, long enough to have attended University, but I was not so flattered that I seemed to be a type, and I was also aware that he might just have been fishing for information, or a bigger tip, which we gave him anyway.

"Aren't you glad I asked Domingo all those questions?!" My mom said, proud of herself.

"Yes," I told her, cracking up. Although what I was really glad about was that I was here, at the steps of this hotel, across from *El Malecón*, with her.

"I want to go to *El Malecón*, I want it to splash all over me," she said.

"Let's go!"

"No, wait, we have to call *nene* first, we have to let them know we're ok, can you imagine what it's like to be over there, waiting for our call?"

Before we left, we'd decided to tell Maman we were going, against her will. We went to her apartment, towing our bags, and we said goodbye. She cried and hugged us tight. "Be careful," she said, "very, very careful." And then hugged us again. "Maybe next time I'll go with you," she whispered. The amount of hope and joy that sentence gave me was like nothing else. The fact that my grandmother was now considering the possibility of return was ... well, it was something else.

"What about you Papan?"

“What about me? I just came back from there the other day with Pedrito,” he said.

“Oh yeah, that’ right!” I responded, following the fiction that was his truth.

In his dementia, Papan had come and gone to Cuba hundreds of times in his mind. In fact, before my mother had agreed to this trip, I’d packed bags with Papan for these alternate-universe trips. I’d be at his house and he’d say, “Hey, we’re leaving tomorrow, we better pack up, we’re running behind!” And I’d tell him he was right, we’d better hurry. And I’d fold shirts and shorts on his bed, that would eventually find their way to a drawer again, and he’d tell me everything we needed to do when we got there. We’d have to get some work in while we were there, he’d explain, at the baker’s union. I would agree, but then I’d tell him we had to have fun too. “Oh yes, of course!” he’d laugh.

As we stepped inside the hotel, the Melía Cohiba, in El Vedado, my mom’s old hood, I felt a flood of guilt. Outside, the building was horrendous. An imposing stone structure that felt more like a fort or a sea wall than it did a hotel. But inside, it was pure luxury. Marble floors, square skylights filtering sun through stained glass, Vegas-style flower arrangements towering over crystal-clear tables anchored by gilded swans. A bar area to our left with a lounge and piano, gray and black as if set for executives on business.

“This isn’t right,” I told my mother. “This isn’t the responsible way to travel here.”

“Vanessa, please, don’t start!” she scolded, “This is what I can handle. You wanted to come and this is what I can handle the first time.”

The first time, she said. As if this were the first of many trips to come. I collected her words and tucked them away with tremendous satisfaction. But still, I realized the irony of this conversation. My mother, who had refused to go to Cuba because she did not want to give Fidel, that tyrant, money, was now defending her right to stay at this hotel, a hotel which, through the Spanish company that owned it, had been doing business with the Castro regime for years. And, there we were, supporting it. We could have stayed at a smaller hotel or a *Casa Particular*, a bed and breakfast run out of a Cuban's home. At least then we could have helped a Cuban family out. The discomfort of this, the idea that we were supporting a regime we did not believe in sat heavy on my shoulders throughout the trip. Me, I was the hardliner on this issue, an irony indeed. The hotel did not seem to bother my mother as much. What my mother felt was that if she needed to make a call, she could. If she needed to use the internet, she could. If she needed to buy a bottle of water, she could. As many bottles of water as she wanted. Plus, there was air-conditioning. This was important to her, given the fact that her entire face was as red as the triangled-center of the Cuban flag.

After we left a message for Carlos and Maman, to tell them we were safe, that we had not been Alan-grossed, we had not been captured or detained, I told my mother we needed to explore. "I don't know," she said, "why don't we just wait until tomorrow, when we have a guide." I couldn't believe how scared she was.

"Mom, you seriously felt scared out there?" I'd been in African hotels where I had to dodge bats to get to my room, in cities like Guayaquil, where you could feel the tension of crime in the air, you could cut it with the pocket-knife you had better have on you for protection. Havana was not scary, not scary at all. It was welcoming and warm,



friendly, open. That was her surface. What my mother was afraid of was what lay beneath – the undercurrent of dictatorship. The stone gargoyle beneath the green fatigue.

“It’s going to be fine, they love tourists,” I told her, “they need tourists, they’re not going to do anything to us...”

“Just give me a second.”

“We don’t have that much time here, this is a short trip, let’s go!”

“*Ay, Vanessa, por dios,*” she sighed. “*Siempre agitando.*”

Eventually, we made it outside the hotel.

“Only a little bit, it’s getting late, it’s going to get dark soon,” she said.

“Fine. Let’s walk to the end of that block.”

“Ok.”

And like that I took my mother, block by block, until we walked at least ten blocks, and she started to gain confidence. Walking in the streets, we both felt as though we knew this city in our bones. Somewhere in our DNA, she was there, clinging and echoing.

The city’s turquoise and eggshell yellow cracked walls, peeling like they were about to give birth to the past. Her cobbled streets, patched together. The passersby that walked through her, used to her tricky turns. The women in their short shorts, their curly hair, their tight, pink, American t-shirts, now outdated. Colonial history sitting on sand. Old men with cotton-white hair selling peanuts on the corner of the boulevard. Sagging telephone wires swinging across wide skies, while new, handcrafted connections got caught in ancient trees. Red against yellow, newspaper against brick, and balconies that leaned toward promise, the future, daydreams.

The absolute sense of familiarity surprised me. I recognized this place, and understood it in a very different way than I'd understood any other city I'd been. As we walked, the Cuban Spanish, all vowels, spoke to us, and soft breezes hit us. They were graceful and cooling, and full of salt. The first time this happened, we both laughed out loud. We laughed because it was what Maman always said, "In Cuba it's not like in Miami, there's always a breeze, a wonderful breeze." Now we were feeling that breeze on our skin, in Vedado, the same neighborhood Maman had lived in with Papan, so many years ago.

"Look!" my mom said as we continued to walk. "It's Centro Vasco!"

The very first one, the restaurant the Saizarbitorias had modeled their Miami replica out of.

"Take a picture," my mom shouted, "we have to show them."

I took a slew of pictures, although I was sure they had received hundreds of these over the years from friends and family that visited the island. It was yet another irony of our first day in Havana. That this first restaurant had somehow survived the revolution, but the replica had not been able to live past *el exilio*, despite its nostalgia, or, paradoxically, because of it.

At some point I looked down at the street name we were on and it said "Linea."

"Mom! This is Linea, this is the street where the church is, where you were baptized, let's go find it."

My mother's response was to quell my treasure hunt mode. But I persisted because I could hear that it was a false quelling now. By now, my mother was sprightly and smiling. Her face was still red with heat, but she savored the breezes when they

came, and these gave her the energy to plow on. She complained about the exhaust, and coughed. “This is toxic,” she said, more than once, “all this gas and exhaust and smoke, the cars...toxic. No codes or smog tests...” The language of America. But on we went, sometimes hand in hand, like two schoolgirls on a field trip.

Until we ran into it, *La Parroquia del Sagrado Corazón de Jesus del Carmelo del Vedado. Calle Linea entre C y D*. Just as I’d written on the slip of paper I had in my pocket. We had asked Maman before we left, about everything she remembered. She’d recalled the location of the church exactly. It was closed, and it would remain closed throughout our trip, but still ... “I was baptized here,” my mom said more than once, staring at the large stone church before us.

On the way back to our hotel, my mother had one request.

“I want to get splashed by the Malecón,” she said, as if she were five again.

“Let’s go!” I told her, excited.

*El Malecón*, Cuba’s five-mile long sea wall, strode right across from our hotel. From the moment we arrived in *La Habana*, we could hear it. The water crashed against the wall with all the power of the strident sea, rising up in an explosion of foam and water and salt, until it collapsed onto the street by the wall’s side. Nothing could hold it, not stone or the city itself. And the streets of Havana understood. She took it in, and welcomed it. Let the water wash over her defiantly. The people of Cuba understood her defiance, they were born and bred of her, and they respected her, because sometimes it was one of them that ran up against the sea wall in the other direction, rising up in an explosion of frustration, and crashing onto the ocean itself, a raft beneath their bodies,

praying to her and to *La Virgen de la Caridad*, that she carry them out to the other side, to Miami, the Keys, anywhere but here.

As my mother walked over to the wall, I walked behind, and watched her. Her paces were slow, taking in the night. When she made it to the wall, she just stood there, looking out. She didn't move as a giant wave crashed and rose high above her, splashing her completely, bathing her, re-baptizing her.

Back in our room, we stared at the bags the Miami airport attendant had so carefully wrapped in blue plastic. He had secured them so tightly that it was almost impossible for us to remove the shield. Once we got the blue off, we realized that Carlos had tightened white plastic tag fasteners around the zippers, so as to also protect our luggage, as if we were carrying the crown jewels of the Batista era. There was no way to get these off without a knife or scissor, so I ran downstairs for something sharp to cut away at the layers of paranoia and protection.

“No problem, no problem, *claro*, but I warn you,” said the front desk attendant laughing, “what we have here are Cuban scissors.” When she handed me the scissors I laughed with her. They were blue, old and discolored, held together by bits of tape, and the very same plastic zip fasteners we had been trying to break upstairs. It seemed that our first world problems – the need to remove those layers of protection – were the very things that both broke the Cuban scissors, and repaired them. The desk clerk shrugged her shoulders and said, “See! Cuban scissors!”

After a shower, we walked down to the hotel lobby for dinner. We decided on the bar/lounge instead of one of the restaurants. The atmosphere was livelier in the lobby. We

ordered “pizza,” a Cuban favorite, and scarfed it down, starving. Then we ordered cubes of cheese, slices of ham, and more wine. In the background, a lounge singer crooned American favorites – Jazz standards and Sinatra. Her English was so bad, however, that the words seemed new. My mother and I tried to decipher them, but it was often impossible. It was like she was playing an improv game of singing gibberish. Occasionally, she added a Brazilian tune, or an old Spanish bolero. She was better at the Portuguese, we thought, but perhaps that was because we didn’t speak Portuguese.

At one point, my mom and I were both looking around, when we realized there were a number of prostitutes scattered all around the room. *Jineteras*.

“Right?” my mother whispered in Spanish. We didn’t speak a single word of English throughout the trip. “They are, aren’t they, I mean...right?” Her eyes were wide as she lifted herself up from her conspiratorial lean toward me.

“Yeah, oh yeah,” I said.

There were two women we spotted immediately, each with a foreigner of her own at her side. One woman, dressed in a short, black dress, was sitting by the stage with an old, big-bellied Spaniard leaning into her.

“He’s disgusting,” my mother commentated.

I nodded in agreement.

He was talking her ear off. She listened, smiled, listened, and took a sip of her drink. She pointed to the menu, asked whether they were going to order anything. She was hungry. He said of course, and called the server over in a flash. After they ordered, he stood up, said he would be right back and returned fifteen minutes later with an envelope, which he slipped into her hand. She smiled and put it swiftly away.

“Did you see that?” I asked my mother.

“No, what happened?!”

“He just gave her money.”

“Urgh.” My mother slumps into her chair, deflated.

To the left of the Spaniard, about three lounge-tables away, there was another couple. A German-looking tourist this time. These two were facing each other across their table, dining. They spoke very little. The Cuban woman was also dressed in black – a tight long-sleeved dress. Her hair was immaculately pulled-back into a bun, like a ballet dancer. Her make-up was discreet. She was elegant, and as desperately beautiful as she was bored.

My mother and I stared, as we watched one of Cuba’s clichés play out before us. This made me feel even guiltier for staying here, in this hotel, where such transactions were commonplace. I thought about my mother, of what might have happened to her if she’d stayed on the island. If Papan hadn’t made his way into that cracked window in the Venezuelan Embassy, if Maman hadn’t pulled my mom and aunt up the wobbly rope steps of *El Marques de Comillas*.

The money exchanged between foreigners and women were not the only transactions taking place. Right beside us -- two tables to our immediate left, at the closest table to the bar, also the furthest table from the stage -- there were four Latin Americans, discussing business. They were talking about buying, selling, and renting property. Raul had allowed Cubans to buy and sell property in 2011.

On our walk, we had seen the signs: for sale. *Se Vende*, everywhere. These hand-written signs advertised the sale of apartments and houses -- most of the advertised

property was crumbling. The blue and aqua paint chipping, the metal of their gates rusting. We'd stepped into a few buildings and looked around, wooden floors squeaking and moving with our steps, architecture that had been weathered by time and hurricanes, isolation and years of Cuban-repair and ingenuity, bred of both intelligence and need. Immediately, I began to harbor a fantasy, that I would buy one of these. It was easy to imagine... Better me than one of those shady Latin Americans sitting next to us, I thought, as I listened to them discuss how they would buy and sell, buy and sell, buy and sell. *Los Aldeanos* took a back beat hold in my brain, as I listened. "*Europa entera abusan de mi pueblito que esto es la tierra de los mangos bajitos, agua de coco, añejo, mojito, que esto es la tierra de los mangos bajitos. Todo barato y un clima super rico que esto es la tierra de los mangos bajitos. Muñecas sabrosas, mujeres de to'o tipo.*" "This is the land of low hanging mangoes, coconut water, aged rum, and mojitos, the land of low-hanging mangos. Everything cheap and a climate, so delicious. Beautiful, savory dolls for the taking, all kinds." So many low-hanging mangos to pluck.

Already, the island was being pilfered. The management of property, flesh and mortar, all around us in this hotel lobby was proof. I half expected the crooner in the corner to break out into her warped rendition of *Love for Sale*, a lyric caught somewhere in translation, in the foreign words that didn't take natural form in her mouth, but that she was forced to sing because she herself was just another mango hanging from the great Cuban canopy.

Every night it was the same. The only difference between when we visited, and years prior, was that now Cubans were allowed into the hotel. Up until 2008, Cubans were not allowed to set foot within the hotels that were raised on their own soil. One of

the nights, we watched as a group of Cubans entered. They were celebrating a big occasion, all decked out. It was an anniversary, we soon overheard. “*Oye, Caballero,*” said one of the Cubans, raising his glass, “*metele mano que esto no pasa todo los dia.*” “Dig in, my friends, because this doesn’t happen every day.”

I didn’t know how they managed it, or what they had to do to spend the night, eating and drinking in the lobby of the Melía Cohiba. Perhaps they were visiting a family member who was staying in the hotel, who was also picking up their tab. I couldn’t tell from where I was standing, but what I knew was that the average Cuban salary was about \$20 a month. The hotel cost \$150 a night. Our dinners often cost about \$40 for the both of us together, that was double an entire month’s work for a Cuban.

We woke up in the morning exuberant, ready to face the day ahead. We were going to meet Lianne, an architect, the woman who worked for the government agency, and a friend of a friend back in Miami -- she had promised to take us around. She was in her forties, sandwiched between my generation and my mother’s, which promised to be an interesting perspective from which to see the island. She arrived at exactly the time we’d set the night before. No “Cuban time.” My mother was the one that was running late. Her hair had taken on a whole new look in Cuba – it was curling in distinct ringlets - - the Malecón and Cuba’s humidity gave her an insta-perm. She attempted to arrange it in the mirror, but to no avail.

“Oh my god!” my mother said. The curls were impossible to tame. She pressed one down and it sprung back up like a coil. *You’re not in Miami anymore*, the curls were telling her, brashly. *Welcome to La Habana. This is what you really look like.*



“I like it mom, you should always wear it like that,” I told her seriously, playing with her ringlets.

Lianne was waiting for us in the lobby. The first thing I noticed was that she looked like us. Her eyebrows were thick and shapely. Her eyes were dark, just like her short black, cute-shag of a haircut. Standing together, the three of us could be sisters. She had a look of sophisticated casualness about her. Wearing an emerald sleeveless shirt, white jean capris, sandals and a messenger bag, she looked like she did her shopping at *Anthropologie* and the *Gap*. Her demeanor and American clothes, perfectly coiffed and matched, made her blend right into to the hotel’s clientele, easily mistaken for a Miami-Cuban visiting the city.

“The Lada is outside,” she told us. The valet guy let her park it out front for a little while, but we would have to hurry. “You ready?” she asked.

Looking at Lianne’s tamed, stylish hair, my mother couldn’t help excuse herself. “Sorry we’re late, it’s just that my hair has taken on a life of it’s own here.”

“Oh, I know,” said Lianne, smiling, looking at my mom’s hair, which was gaining girth as we spoke, “believe me, I know how it goes.”

The first place we wanted to visit was Lutgarda’s house -- Carlos’s aunt, Carmen’s sister. The idea was a short visit the first day, so that we could spend the entire day with her the next, hanging out with Betty, Carlos’s cousin, and going to La Lisa – the same marginal Havana neighborhood in which *Los Aldeanos* played their first gig, and where Carlos grew up.

The Lada, an old Russian import, was square, red, and perfectly painted, the smell of diesel filling the interior. The windows were down and that cool Havana breeze made its way in. Lianne avoided the potholes and meandered her way around the streets like a pro. This was her father's car, she told us. They'd fixed it up over the years; it would run on almost anything. "We have another car," she told us, "but my husband took it today." She preferred the other car to the rough ride of the Lada, but it would do. My mother and I were both impressed and wondered how they could afford so much. Later, when we felt more comfortable, we would ask her and she would say, "little by little, everything in Cuba is very little by little."

Lutgarda's house was in Miramar, in the municipality of Playa. Miramar translates literally into "view of the sea." With its ocean panoramic views, this was the area of Havana that used to be reserved for the rich. You could still see the residue of that everywhere. Resembling Miami's Spanish-infused, wealthy neighborhood of Coral Gables, there were trees all around, shading our walk through the streets. On our way to the house, we drove by international embassies, all housed inside old mansions. The architecture blended Spanish colonial, with 1950s American design – marking the sources of wealth throughout Cuba's history, from the Spanish rule to the reign of American sugar and casino gangsterism.

My aunt's house – even though she was Carlos's aunt, we all called her *mi tia*, our aunt – was a mid-century two-level American-inspired home. There was a gate around it, made up of whatever pieces of metal meshing they could find. There were red pieces joining with green pieces joining with silver pieces. It was all brought together and secured with a chain and padlock. So much for there being "no crime in Cuba," I thought

to myself. Americans loved to say that when they visited Havana, and I always wondered about the verity of that statement. There was no way to really gather facts because it was well known that the government skewed statistics in its favor: no crime, no illness, no death; healthcare and education for all. Everything was perfect. Which left one to wonder, standing in front of Lutgarda's house, why she needed this massive padlock, or why so many were still throwing themselves to the brutal sea, or making their way out of Cuba through Mexico.

The three of us stood in front of the house, my mother and I wondering how we were going to get inside to knock on the door. There was no doorbell. We knew that Lutgarda lived on one of the floors, and someone else lived on the other, but which was which, we had no idea.

“Lutgarda!” called out Lianne. “Lutgarda!!”

Oh, so that's how you did it. My mother and I felt strange yelling, we couldn't get ourselves to do it, so we let Lianne do the hollering. Because we didn't know whether Lutgarda would come from upstairs or down, we didn't know where to look exactly. And, where was the entrance for the upstairs part of the house anyway?

The story behind the house was a complicated one, as it so often was with property in Cuba. Initially the house, all two floors of it, belonged to Lutgarda's brother in law, who worked for American sugar. Lutgarda and her husband lived there with him, until Lutgarda's husband died. Then it was just Lutgarda and the brother-in-law. When the brother-in-law fell ill, they hired a caretaker to help him; they needed the extra hands. When Lutgarda's brother-in-law died, the woman who helped the brother-in-law took over the bottom floor. And here's where the story got complicated. Different family

members had different versions of this part. We didn't know if the brother-in-law actually left a floor of the house to the caretaker, or if she was just squatting. Whatever the case, Lutgarda decided she would live in the other floor of the house – she didn't need that much space, anyway. And who was going to throw the caretaker out? Not Lutgarda. Another version of the story had the old man leaving the whole house to the caretaker – old men have been known to do such things. In which case, the caretaker had probably asked herself: Whose gonna throw Lutgarda out, poor woman? Not me. And so there they all were, nicely co-habiting.

“You want Lutgarda?” an old man came out to ask from the door downstairs.

We nodded.

“She's there, I saw her earlier, just keep calling for her. Lutgardaaa!”

“Lutgarda!!” Lianne shouted out again.

We joined in this time: “Lutgardaaa!”

“Here I am!” called a voice from upstairs, followed by Lutgarda, approaching the terrace-balcony of the house, beaming and waving. “Here I am, hang on, hang on, I'll come down!”

In a flash Lutgarda was downstairs. She wore a snug, striped red shirt holding her enormous breasts in place. Elastic-waisted jeans, and purple crock-imitations on her feet, lilac. A thin gold chain around her neck. She looked exactly like Carmen, but without make-up and slightly less coiffed. My mother and Lutgarda embraced tight, right away, as soon as Lutgarda got the lock open. “*Mi sobrina! Mi sobrina,*” Lutgarda kept saying, squeezing my mother as if she might slip away. “My niece, my niece, my niece, I can't believe it!” My mother squeezed right back and they locked onto each other for at least a

couple of minutes. Everybody was crying. Then she turned to me and gave me a tight press to her cushiony chest.

“C’mon, c’mon, let’s go upstairs,” she said, bringing her hand to her eye, wiping away the wet, her small gold bracelet dangling around her wrist as she did so. “Sorry about the lock, it’s just it has gotten bad on this street, so...well, you know how it is.”

We followed Lutgarda along the side of the house until we got to a hidden entrance – a set of stairs that led to a door, which led to more stairs. “Watch out for the first set of stairs,” she said. They don’t have a railing. Magritte-like stairs, surrealist without trying to be, like so many things in Cuba. “The neighbor’s been saying he’s gonna to help me out, put a railing in or something, but he says he’s not motivated lately. *Desmotivado*. What can you do?”

“Motivated? Whose motivated?” Lianne laughed.

Once we got inside the door, we walked straight onto the second set of stairs, so narrow that the walls themselves were the railings. We climbed until we got to the top. Lutgarda’s apartment was spacious and immaculately clean. Everything was white. There were a couple of standing fans here and there. She showed us around.

“Next time, you have to stay with me, it’s just me and look how much room I have,” she insisted, holding my mother’s hand, as she led us around the house. “See,” she said, “two rooms, and nobody sleeps here unless somebody’s visiting.”

“It was just this first time, we didn’t want to bother you,” my mother told her.

“What do you mean bother me?” Lutgarda looked insulted. “That’s the craziest thing I’ve ever heard.” She slapped her thigh and then placed her hand on her cheek and nodded her head, *no, no, no*. She just couldn’t understand.

“Oh look!” Lianne said to me, “that’s the libretta.”

“Yeah, the libretta,” Lutgarda sighed. As if to say: So what?

Lianne explained that it was interesting to outsiders.

“Oh,” Lutgarda sighed again, as we all stood staring at the booklet for a minute.

“Well, there it is,” said Lutgarda.

It was a grid that listed how much vegetable oil and coffee, sugar and grain Lutgarda could take for herself, how much she was given by the State, and allowed to consume. Next to the rations there were scribbles, with the handwritten date that Lutgarda received her portions.

“Leave that, let’s come in here, it’s cooler, come! I’ll turn on the fan.”

“We’re just here for a little bit today,” my mother reminded her, “we’re coming back tomorrow because today Lianne is going to show us around, and --”

“Yes, ok, but you can sit for a while and chat, can’t you?!”

We sat in the living room, which was large and bare. The walls were white, not newly painted, but clean. The floor was a spotless white Terrazzo, which seemed to have been there since the house was built, but looked brand new due to how well-kept it was. People would pay a fortune for this kind of floor back in Miami. A tiny wicker wood table sat at the center of the space, surrounded by rocking chairs. Old rocking chairs, dark wood and sturdy, that had probably been with Lutgarda since she got married.

We’d forgotten her package from Carmen in the hotel. We told her this immediately. *We left it, so stupid!* It was because of my mother’s hair, I explained, because she was...

“Yeah, look at that hair!” Lutgarda said laughing and pointing. “My god!”

My mother cracked up. *We'll bring it tomorrow. We promise, we won't forget.*  
She nodded, *Yes, yes, don't worry, I know you won't forget.*

“How is Carlito? He was the fattest baby in the world. Huge, the biggest most beautiful child, a looker, so cute. So big. A turkey. Really, just huge. I don't know how Carmen gave birth to him. I don't tell this to the others, but he was the most beautiful, the most beautiful child. My favorite. Why didn't he come? I don't understand why he didn't come!”

“We'll get him to come next time,” I told her.

“You haven't visited Miami?” Lianne asked.

“I haven't been invited,” said Lutgarda, lowering her lids coquettishly.

“Well, consider yourself invited!” I said.

My mother shot me a crooked smile. Later, she would explain to me that to “invite her” meant to pay for all her paperwork, her ticket, her stay, etc. They couldn't afford that at the moment.

“Is this the library?” my mother changed the subject. “Where are the--”

“The books? I threw them out the window.”

“What?!”

“Good riddance.”

“But why?” My mother's face went dry and white.

“One day I got so tired of them, I threw them all out the window, one by one. They went flying.” Lutgarda nodded her head, yes, emphatically -- a look of tremendous satisfaction flashing across her face.

“Why?!” My mother asked again. She simply couldn’t understand it. “You have no idea how much Carlos talks about this library, or the library that *was*, all the books, how he loved the books in here.”

“He talks about this house?”

“About this house, the library, his books...”

When Carlos left Cuba, after Armando was released, Carlos, Armando, and Carmen hid out at Lutgarda’s house. That time, it wasn’t the government they were hiding from, but Carlos’s grandfather. They didn’t tell him they were leaving the island, kept it secret. This was significant because Carlos’ grandfather had taken Armando’s place as a father figure, while Armando was in jail. Carlos always talked about his grandfather.

“He always shaved at night,” Carlos told me before we left, “I can remember it very clearly, standing in the doorway of the bathroom in our house in La Lisa. I would tell my grandfather all about my day, like a report, and he would tell me to stay away from the girls, girls were a distraction. He told me what to do when I got into fights at school, he gave me advice...” Then his grandfather would leave for the night, Carlos never knew where to, but probably to chase those very girls he was asking Carlos to keep his distance from. Meanwhile, Carlos, a top-student, would stay behind, continuing to study by candlelight.

When Armando was released from prison, they couldn’t tell the grandfather that they were taking Carlos. He would be heartbroken, and he might not allow it to happen. The other thing about Carlos’ grandfather was that, while Armando was in prison for anti-Castro activity, Carlos’ grandfather was 100% Fidelista. “Look at everything the



revolution has given us,” he would tell Carlos, “Education is free, medicine is free. Fidel won over the Yankees!” At first, Carlos believed him. He feared the United States. The United States was a monster. And then from one day to the next, at 16, his father was released from prison and he and his mother were supposed to leave with this stranger, his father. Carlos’ feelings were mixed. But he understood that they couldn’t tell his grandfather, that there was too much at stake.

The lie they would tell was that Carmen and Armando were going to stay at Lutgarda’s for a while, while Carlos went to the country to cut cane (which was common for teenagers his age), all the time knowing that from Lutgarda’s they would leave for the United States. While they waited at Lutgarda’s for their paperwork to clear, Carlos found an escape in the books on Lutgarda’s shelves. They wrapped around the room; he could pick up anywhere, learn anything, leave Cuba without leaving Cuba. Leave his situation, without falling into the mouth of the Lion. Not my mother’s green Cuban lion, but just the opposite – an America lion with perfect teeth, sharp and bright and white. Eventually, Carlos would come to love the Lion, but at first he tread carefully, for fear it might bite his head off. He would never forget his grandfather – “He made me who I am...” -- though he was never to see him, or even speak to him, again.

Lutgarda’s apartment had been Carlos’ purgatory, the space between two worlds, where he’d found paradise in the books Lutgarda had thrown out the window. It was only at the end of our trip that my mother and I could understand why someone would do that. Cuba, its un-air-conditioned heat, its bugs, and bites. The amount of mites that must have lived all over those books, collecting in their pages. Dust everywhere. Termites nibbling. *Enough! Out! Get out of here! Out the window!* What was the point, the promises inside

were empty, because Lutgarda was trapped. Others had made their way out, but she hadn't, she couldn't, she was stuck there, sandwiched like the pages of those books. Those books weren't windows. The only window was the window right there, the one she threw the books out of. The one through which, if for only seconds, the books grew wings, flapping their pages like a new-born bird, a Pirouline.

“How I miss my sister...” Lutgarda said, looking at my mother, before we left for the day. “How I miss her.” My mother held Lutgarda in her arms and cried with her again, more softly this time, gentle. “Let's see what we can do, let's see if we can get her to come,” my mother said. “It's not her, you know, she wants to come, it's Armando that's stopping her. You know how Armando is...”

“Boy do I know,” Lutgarda laughed. “You know when I was a kid I would see him out and about and bribe him?”

“What do you mean?” I asked her, not understanding.

“I would see him with a girl and I'd tell him, I won't tell my sister if you give me some money.”

My mother and I shared a glance. Poor Carmen. What a betrayal, by sister and husband, both. Carmen, who would remain loyal to Armando throughout his entire time in prison...

“I bet you see that a lot,” said my mother to Lianne as we walked back out onto the street.

“Yes,” she said, “but it never becomes less moving.” Lianne's eyes had watered right along with ours. A stranger, witnessing another family's reunion. But she knew the

reasons and root causes for our separation all too well. Was there ever a Cuban that didn't long for someone? Her father had been sent to Angola when she was small, she told us. He was a doctor. He'd died young, she explained, because of all the diseases he caught in Africa, they took their toll. He was skinny when he came back from all of those forced trips -- missions. He was always gone for a long time, and when he returned he was never the same, and then, one day, he was gone for the long run, gone for good.

We decided to lighten the load and do a couple of "touristy" things before we went to find my mother's old home, the very last place she lived before she left Cuba, fifty-three years ago.

First, we hit up the University of Havana, where dogs lined the steps of the school, semi-groomed and tagged by the government. "University dogs," one student told us. As I looked through the windows of the classrooms, still equipped with old chalkboards, I imagined teaching Contemporary American Literature to Cuban students. Just for one semester. The thought thrilled me. I wondered if the taxi driver, when he asked me about the University, whether he wasn't looking into the future instead of the past.

We ran into the old American 50s Fords and Chevy's on the streets, of course, newly painted, American tourists inside. We rolled our eyes. Caravans of the cars met us several times during our day's venture, like an Easter parade, outfitted in pastels as they were, taking up the road. The Cubans called them *Almendrones* – big almonds – perhaps because of their giant shells, or perhaps because these almonds were often painted pink, purple, and yellow for special occasions. "Yeah the Americans love them," smiled Lianne, "they really do..." She didn't count us as "Americans," we were something else.

After the University, we headed toward the *Hotel Nacional*.

“It looks just like the Biltmore,” my mother said, referring to the hotel in Coral Gables.

“No, it’s not the Biltmore, it’s the Palm Beach Breakers that it looks like, it’s a copy of the Breakers,” Lianne corrected my mother.

“But it still looks like the Biltmore.”

“The Biltmore and the Breakers were made by the same architects. Schultze & Weaver,” she said in her Cuban accent, giving us an education in our own Floridian architecture. “*El Nacional* was McKim, Mead & White, also an American firm, but not the same as the Breakers and Biltmore, they were just copying Schultze & Weaver.”

And of course, Lianne was right. As it turned out, Schultz and Weaver were also the same architects that built Miami’s Freedom Tower.

The Nacional was a stunner of a hotel, but everybody knew that.

“What’s really amazing and so fascinating are the walls. After all the hubbub about throwing the mobsters out of Cuba, we have them all over the walls here, it’s funny,” Lianne commented.

The hotel was a kind of strange tribute to the Batista era and the American mobsters in cahoots with the Batista regime. Their pictures lined the walls, and there were even a couple of their old gaming machines around. There were also prints of the American stars that stayed there – people like Sinatra and Hemingway, Ava Gardner and Nat King Cole. This was all a part of the hotel’s mythology, and also why it was so popular with tourists.

As we strolled the grounds outside, we watched as Cuban quinceañeras took their pictures. “They’re allowed to do that now, a lot of them save up to get it done, now that they can come inside the hotels,” said Lianne. My mother and I smirked, as we’d seen the same image in Miami, a Cuban-American quinceañera taking her picture at the Biltmore, or under the Spanish-inspired stone arches of Coral Gables.

The view of El Malecón was a marvel from the hotel grounds -- you could see the island curve out onto the horizon of the ocean, as the cars curved toward you in the other direction. Peppered all along your sightline were mint and yellow and pink buildings, and those high rising splashes of the ocean against the wall.

“Oh no, look at the sky” Lianne said abruptly, “it looks like it’s going to rain.” She seemed preoccupied by this fact, and repeated it several times. We didn’t quite understand why she seemed so worried. It was just rain, we were from Miami, we were used to it. There was, of course, a reason -- we just didn’t know it yet.

As Lianne continued to look up, I looked down and spotted a flower that drew me back, in a fast flick, like the whip of the curving landscape -- to my grandmother. There it was, on the floor, the flower Maman had told me about so many times, the flower she had played with as a kid. Ever since I was little, my grandmother looked at the trees around us, searching for this flower. I remember her sitting on the ground with me when I was about four, we were rolling fast toy cars back and forth to each other on the tile of her kitchen, where later Pirouline and Saltarín would fly above us, and she started to tell me about these flowers.

“When they fall on the ground, they are like Hawaiian girls. You pick them up,” she said, miming the actions she was describing, “and turn them around, and twirl them,

and it's exactly like a skirt, it's just like a Hawaiian hula skirt. We'd do that until the flower fell apart, until the dancer got old and stopped dancing."

Every time she told me that story, and it was often, and for many years, she smiled this pure-contentment smile. The smile yogis try and get you to smile when you're in their meditation classes. I loved to see her go there. I loved to watch her Hawaiian girls dance in my mind.

"Do you know that flower?" She would ask me. "I don't know what it's called, but it's just like that, you'll know when you see it."

I never knew what she was talking about. But there it was now, staring me in the face, pink tip and straw skirt. There was my grandmother's spot of happiness, her trigger to contentment. It was the flower of a Mimosa tree, and it was the absolute best thing I'd seen all day. Forget about the mojitos everybody told you to try, for me, it was all about this Mimosa and her skirt, waiting to be turned. I bent down to touch it, but I only got to twirl her once because she fell apart at my fingertips right away.

"C'mon," my mother called out to me, pulling me away, making me feel even closer to my grandmother, a child being called by her mother, away from play, and onto the business of the day.

There was one more stop on our light-hearted "break," before the storm of searching for my mother's childhood home, and this was ISA, Cuba's National Art School.

"This was one of those early idealistic moves, at the beginning of the revolution," said Lianne, as she pointed to the school. The campus was on the grounds of the Old Havana Country Club and when you walked through its gates you could see the earlier

blueprint. It was said that in 1961, Che and Fidel played the last game of golf in Cuba on this golf course, and Fidel decided to turn it into an art school. Turn the elite course into an artistic course – the playing field for the rich into an educational playground for visual artists, musicians, and performers.

The architects of the school, Richard Porro, Vitorio Garatti, and Roberto Gottardi, were not without vision. The buildings were like no other structures in Cuba -- round domes with skylights that looked as if they were both primitive and futuristic, dressed both in adobe-colored brick, and forward-looking pod-like layouts at the same time. There was also a serpentine structure that meandered around the design, which the students called the *gusano* (there was that word again). The problem was that the money ran out in 1965, and because the Cubans were charting closer ties with the Soviet Union at the time, functional Soviet design eventually infiltrated the early idealism of the architects.

“See over there,” said Lianne, “those horrendous dorms, that’s Soviet utilitarianism.” My mother and I nodded, grimaced. The dorms were an eye sore, as was the Russian embassy in Miramar.

The embassy was a massive, constructivist, stone monolith that towered over the other buildings in the city, watching all and, unfortunately, seen from one-too-many corners of Havana. Set against the old trim mansions the other embassies were based in, the Russians definitely stood out. It was hard not to use Lianne’s word: horrendous. It looked like a concrete transformer that had picked up too much sand on its path to world domination, the particles embedded onto its skin like a miner’s silicosis, forcing it to stop in its tracks, its own strength freezing it, curtailing its power.

When we had enough of a break, Lianne said, “Well, are you ready?” My mother and I nodded our heads, eager. It was time to go back to Vedado and find mom’s apartment.

This was what we knew: The apartment building was on L and 15<sup>th</sup>, it was an address we had heard our entire life. *L y 15*. My grandmother constantly referred to that apartment in conversation. We also knew that the building number was 202. And we were almost sure that the actual apartment was #10. We weren’t positive about the apartment number because my grandmother couldn’t remember exactly. When we asked her she said 10 first. It just came out of her mouth, as if on automatic, but then she started to doubt herself. “Well, I don’t know, maybe it was 7, or 5, or 9. It wasn’t 1. We weren’t on the first floor that’s for sure, not on the first floor, not after the first set of stairs, not that.” My grandfather, totally out of it, laughed out loud at my grandmother’s numbers. Was she playing a game? “No, Severo, we’re trying to remember the apartment on *L y 15*. What was it?”

“Where?” my grandfather asked.

“*L y 15!*”

“*El sindicato?*”

“No! Not the union, for god’s sake, not the union, the--”

“Yes, the union, the union!”

“That’s not what we’re talking about!”

“She seduced me when I was leaving the union one day, you know that, don’t you?”

“That’s not what we’re talking about.”



“It was more than seduce... She harassed me, she liked to harass me, she’s still harassing me,” my grandfather laughed. “She was something!”

“Yes, I was. But the apartment, do you remember the apartment?”

“Which one?”

“On *L y 15*.”

“*L y 15*? Are we going to Cuba?”

“You’ll just have to ask around when you get there,” my grandmother concluded, shaking her head at my grandfather. “Tell them you’re looking for Dulce and Severo’s old place. They’ll remember.”

As we drove around El Vedado, looking for *L y 15*, which was easy to find, my mother said, as she looked around: “Of course they never wanted to leave this place.” The sentence was charged for everybody in the car, and it made our minds jump in a million directions. My grandparents were forced to leave; Lianne couldn’t leave; and here we were, my mother and I -- my mother who hadn’t wanted to come back for so long, but who was now here -- both of us able to come and go as we pleased, the children of those forced to leave, now free. You could go on and on forever like this, delineating the complications of exile and immigration, the beauty and imprisonment of the island itself. Cuba liked to wrap itself around you, warm you up, only to tie you up -- it was what Cuba did best.

“There it is,” said Lianne, parking right in front of the building.

The building was stone, the accents pink and green. An archway that looked at least 15 feet high, with an open pink, wooden door, welcomed us to the stairwell. Inside,

the stairs looked almost art deco, with their marble steps and zigzag design, stone railing in blue and yellow. My mother's face looked like a tiny, stunned bird's. She took one step up the marble stairs, Lianne followed, and I followed Lianne. "I remember these stairs," said my mother, stopping midway up the first flight. Her eyes watered, but she was not going to cry again. Forget that. She kept walking. "Can you imagine how many times Maman and Papan went up and down these stairs with us?" my mom asked me. "Just up and down these stairs, with me and Ingrid, by themselves, going places, up and down, up and down." It was something to hold on to. She was standing on the ground they stood, older now than they were when they left.

We had already explained the predicament regarding the confusion with the actual apartment number. But, Lianne had assured us that we didn't have to worry about that. At the top of the first flight, Lianne knocked on a door. "*Hey, how are you, listen...*" And then she proceeded to tell our story.

"Oh, you wanna come in, maybe this is your apartment?!" an old woman said, "Maybe you'll come inside and remember everything! Come on, come on in, come, come!" We knew it wasn't this apartment because Maman had told us specifically that it wasn't on that first landing, but we went inside nonetheless. The woman's hair was held up in a bandana, and she was wearing flip-flops, a tank-top, shorts.

"Come in!" she said again. We were all inside her apartment, when she said, "Ok, come on I'll give you the tour and you tell me if you remember anything."

"Who are these people," an old man said as we entered the living room. He was sitting down in a chair, ancient as the wood that held him up.

“They’re from Miami, this might be where they used to live.”

“Oh! Come on in, come in,” he said, smiling, toothless.

The house was spotless. I really couldn’t understand how they did it. How they kept their homes so clean in the pounding heat, and without AC to condition everything, clean the dust out.

“No, no, this isn’t it,” said my mother. “I mean it’s a very nice home, you have a *very* nice home, but this isn’t it, it’s just--”

“You want some coffee?”

“No, that’s ok, don’t worry about us,” Lianne answered for us.

“It’s no worry, I’ll make coffee.”

“Really, no, it’s ok, we’re ok.”

“Ok then,” said the woman, upset that she couldn’t give us anything. “You know what,” she said, “I know who can help you.”

“Oh yeah?” asked Lianne.

“*La Vieja del edificio*,” she said. The oldest lady in the building.

“Where is she?” my mom asked.

“She knows everything.”

We were making our way out of the woman’s apartment as she told us this. A neighbor, hearing the commotion, came out and asked: “What’s going on?”

“They’re from Miami, they’re looking for their apartment. I told them about the Old Lady, that’s their best bet, I think. What do you think?”

“She’s your best bet, yeah. The only apartment you’re not going to be able to see,” said the neighbor, “is the one that they started to rent, that one there.” She pointed to the apartment right across the way.

“Oh you have one of those?” asked Lianne, her eyes following the neighbor’s pointed finger.

“Yeah, there’s always someone different, they don’t open the door.”

This was one of those apartments the four Latin American men were talking about. A condo owned by a foreigner, through a Cuban, that was consistently rented out to tourists.

“There’s a couple there now, but they’re not going to open the door, trust me.”

Now a woman was coming up the stairs, another tenant, an old Cuban woman walking slowly, as if the weight of her old bones was equal to Atlas’. We wondered: Could this be the Old Lady of the Building?

“Hey, Maria, do you know where the Old Lady is?” asked the neighbor to the woman coming up the stairs.

Guess she wasn’t the old lady.

“Yeah, she’s downstairs where she always is, in the basement.”

“So then that’s what you should do,” said the neighbor. “Let me take you up to some of the other apartments and if not, we’ll go see the Old Lady.”

We meandered with our two guides, Lianne and now this new one we’d collected, the neighbor, who took us around the apartment building knocking on doors. We entered people’s homes, chatted with the residents, and were told that no one was home at #10, which was probably my mother’s old apartment. It was gated and had a little garden between the gate and the door. We peeked through the bars.

“Let’s go, I’m going to take you to the Old Lady, she might know where the woman who lives in #10 is. The Old Lady knows everything.”

We agreed and followed the neighbor downstairs, all the way outside the building and into a basement apartment. It was evident that this basement apartment used to be a car garage. The door was open and there was a woman sweeping the dirt out of the doorway.

“That’s not the Old Lady,” the neighbor told us, “but they live together.”

The neighbor made introductions and we were, of course, welcomed inside. The Old Lady of the building was sitting in a rocking chair. It became evident that she and the woman that greeted us at the door had known each other for a long time, were partners. The Old Lady was wearing a faded white t-shirt with disappearing zebra print, brown pants, and imitation sneakers. She had tiny gold hoops hugging her ear lobes and her hair was pure silver, shaggy, and short. She smiled at us and told us to sit down, let’s chat, she said. Her house was as simple as she was. The floor was an imitation marble tile, and her only pieces of furniture were rocking chairs and a tiny table. On the walls there was a painting of a swan, its beak about to touch a Lotus rising out of a dark green pond. There was also an image of *La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*, Cuba’s patron saint, Our Lady of Charity, who when conflated with Santeria appeared as Oshún. The Spanish brought the story of *La Caridad del Cobre* to Cuba, and the Cubans ran with it. There were different versions of the story, but they all revolved around the same ideas – there was always a slave and always the sea.

The story I had always heard was about two brothers that went out one day on the bay with their slave, whose name was Juan. They were in search of salt, which they

needed on land. Out on the bay, a storm arose out of the blue – they rocked on the waves until they feared the water would eat them up. Juan Moreno, the slave, had a small medallion of the Virgin Mary around his neck, and all three of the Juans began to pray to her. Suddenly, the storm stilled, and from the sky, instead of lightning, appeared a vision. At first it seemed like a bright bird, but then they realized that it wasn't a bird, but a statue of the Virgin Mary, holding the baby Jesus. In most stories she was a mixed Mary, a caramel-colored *mulata*. Sometimes she was dressed in blue, but often she was dressed in bright yellow, the color of Oshún.

My mother had taken the rocking chair right under *La Virgen de La Caridad del Cobre* and the old woman, whose name we soon learned was Berta Maria Candelaria, was sitting beneath the swan in her own rocking chair. I was sitting across from them, and Lianne was sitting to my right, also watching them. Berta Maria told us right away that she wasn't sure where the tenant of #10 was, and she didn't think she knew Dulce or Severo because she arrived in the building in 1962, one year after my grandparents left, even though she'd been there ever since. Somehow, she'd become the manager for the building, over the years.

“Thank G-- No, you know what, yeah, I'm going to say it, *God*. There. *God*. Thank God, I've always been able to survive here.”

“But it hasn't always been easy,” said her partner, Ramona, standing behind Berta Maria with her broom in hand.

This fascinated me, how Berta Maria had been, momentarily, afraid to say the word “God,” and then went ahead and said it. This was a woman raised by the revolution,

which for so long did not allow for the worship of the God she thanked now. How hard it must have been, to tuck this belief away in the pockets of her uniform.

“She was the kind that lived in her green fatigues,” said Ramona, shaking her head. “And look what she got for it, a car garage to live in. I mean look around you.”

Ramona was tough and Berta Maria’s protector, you could tell. I envisioned a million nights when Ramona scolded Berta Maria for her stubborn beliefs in the system.

“Oh yes, I was very staunch,” said Berta Maria. “Stupid, very stupid.”

“So stupid,” agreed Ramona.

“If you want to hear it, I’ll tell you my story?”

Berta Maria did not wait for us to say yes, she simply delved in.

She had been a revolutionary to the T, a model. She believed in education for all, that everyone should be equal. But life had a way of twisting things around for you, you see. It was such a strange way life had. She used to clean for a living, clean offices, this was right at the start of the revolution. She was actually already fairly high up in the revolutionary ladder, meaning she was a respected *compañera*, and she knew a lot of higher ups, but she still cleaned offices, that was how the revolution was. Everybody the same, everybody doing their part. But, anyway, there was this one woman whose office she cleaned that really had it in for her. She was Spanish, of course, and haughty. A terrible person. The woman used to spit on Berta Maria when she came in to clean, on her knees in her green fatigues. At first, Berta Maria didn’t say anything, she just thought, this is how the Spaniards are, what can you do, this is why they were booted, but still, it bothered her to be treated like this. So, one day, she stood up and asked her, to her face:

“Why? Why do you treat me like this?” And the woman started yelling. “I’m trapped here, we’re trapped here because of you, because of you and your putrid revolution!”

As it turned out, she and her husband were stuck in Cuba because they wouldn’t leave without their son, who had been born in Cuba. Just like the Revolution had tried to claim Carlos, the Revolution had claimed the Spanish couple’s son. The government had told her that the couple could leave to their imperialist Spain if they wanted, but their son could not, their son belonged to Cuba, to Fidel, not to them. Then the woman started crying. Crying and crying. Poor woman, thought Berta Maria. Revolution or no Revolution, we’re people no? We were all people, wasn’t that the point of the Revolution anyway? So Berta Maria said: “I’ll help you, I’m going to help you.”

“I’m telling you,” said Ramona, exasperated, intruding on the story. “She’s always been like that.”

Anyway, the Spanish woman, she told Berta Maria that it was no use. At that point the Spanish woman was sobbing. They’d tried everything, she told her. There was nothing anyone could do. “I can help you,” said Berta Maria, a woman on a mission. So she went to all those higher ups she knew and she told them she needed a favor. “Listen,” she said, “I need help getting somebody some papers, how can I do that?”

“Who?” they asked.

“A family member. They don’t want to be here and why should they stay if they don’t want to. Good riddance, anyway, right?” Berta Maria was playing all sides of the coin.

And like that, by winding her way around the bureaucracy, she did it. She faked papers for the son, and got the family out of Cuba. They begged Berta Maria to leave



with them, but she refused. Berta Maria loved Cuba, there was no reason for her to leave. Several months later, Berta Maria received a very large check from the Spanish couple as a gift. But Berta Maria felt she couldn't keep it, so she donated it, in its entirety, to the Revolution.

“Urgh... I'm telling you,” sighed Ramona.

When the Spanish woman found out that Berta Maria had given away the money, she tried again. She never stopped trying to thank Berta Maria. She sent plane tickets to Spain that Berta Maria never used. And over and over again, she sent money. Every time, Berta Maria gave it to the government. But as the years passed, she realized she was getting older, and she had nothing to live on. As the country's foodstuffs started to disappear and she felt a growl in her stomach and the burden of disillusion on her chest, she decided that she'd start saving some of that money. And so she put it away. She made herself a little savings account, so that she could live her last days in peace. “I'll keep this piece,” she said.

One day, she decided that she wanted to pull the money out of the account she was holding it in, and she went to claim it. But it wasn't there. “What do you mean it's not there,” she asked. Three days later a caravan arrived at Berta Maria's house, right out there where we had been standing just a few minutes ago. And a militant woman, like the kind Berta Maria used to be, got out of a black car, followed by other men and women in fatigues, and they sat down in Berta Maria's apartment and they told her: “But Berta Maria, how can you ask for your money, when it has already been used for education and healthcare, for the good of your country?”

“And like that those bastards stole her money!” said Ramona, growling. “Just like that they took it all and left her with nothing.”

“That’s what I get for being a fool,” said Berta Maria. “Well, somehow or another, at least I’ve always been taken care of.”

“We still have some of those tickets to Spain she never used,” said Ramona, going to the other room and coming back with them. Old, yellowing plane tickets from the seventies. Paper tickets to nowhere.

“As I said, at least God has taken care of me, because here I am, you know what I mean?”

Lianne said she knew what she meant. She smiled at Berta Maria and nodded her head lightly. Berta Maria stared at Lianne for a moment, just looked at her the way a shaman looks into the future or a psychic into the soul of person. “You,” Berta Maria told Lianne, “You have suffered a great deal. Yes, you have.” Lianne’s eyes watered, but she held back, restrained the tears from tipping over. Now it was my mother, Ramona, and myself that were staring at Berta Maria and Lianne, until Lianne looked down and changed the subject.

“So, you’re in charge of this whole building?” asked Lianne.

“Yes, the whole thing,” Berta Maria said, allowing the shift. “The big problem we are having now is with all the amendments we are having to add to the building documents, the owner manual, you know what I mean?”

“Wait, what?” asked my mother. “What do you mean? You mean this is an official condo?”

“A what?”

“Individuals own these apartments?”

“Yes, there aren’t that many of them, but little by little they’ve been bought up and we have a manual, that’s--”

“Condo docs?! You have condo docs?! I’m a property manager in Miami, you know, I can help you!”

My mother was so excited. She couldn’t have imagined that this building would have condo docs. This building here, in communist Cuba.

“Can I see them, the condo docs?”

“Of course!” said Berta Maria, asking Ramona to go grab them.

Ramona came out with a tiny pamphlet, type-written, with little pieces of white paper stapled in, new amendments covering old amendments.

“Take a picture,” my mom asked me. “Do you mind if we take a picture?”

“Sure, why not?” said Berta Maria, laughing at us now.

“This is amazing.”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” said Ramona. “Our new troubles are because of the foreigners.”

“That’s right, the costs are going up because of them, they think they’re in France and --”

“And they use a ton of water and electricity, and--”

“They’re driving all our maintenance prices up!”

“No!” yelled my mother, “no, no, no, you have to nip that in the bud right now or the Cubans are gonna get screwed.”

“That’s what I’ve been telling her,” said Ramona, “that’s exactly what I’ve been telling her.”

The problem was that the “condo docs,” as my mother called the tiny, crumbling pamphlet of rules and regulations she was holding in her hand, declared that every owner share the expenses of the building’s utilities evenly. And for a long while, that seemed to work, when it was just Cubans living in the building. But now that the Spanish, French, Italians, and Germans were renting from the foreign-owner, they were using up much more electricity. Used to first-world utilities, they left the water running too long, they didn’t take off the lights. The prices skyrocketed, and the Cubans couldn’t make their payments.

My mother jumped in, explained that Berta Maria had to get the association to vote on the changes. That every apartment needed to pay according to what they spent, otherwise, she repeated again, the Cubans would be fucked. And you didn’t want the foreigners to fuck the Cubans, that was the last thing you wanted. And on and on they went. My mother, speaking slowly, gave instructions, while Berta Maria nodded and Lianne smirked.

We had gone in searching for my mother’s past, and we ended up in this discussion, about how to save the future of the building my mother left all those years ago.

“We should really get going,” said Lianne. “If we want to see a little of *La Habana Vieja* today.”

My mother and I agreed.

“Every once in a while it happens,” said Berta Maria, breaking into a language that was almost like verse, just as we were about to go. “And I always feel so bad. There was this one time when I heard a mad woman wailing. It was a long, hard wail, and I thought what’s happening, what’s happening out there. When I got outside there was a woman, like you, and she was crying on the sidewalk with her head in her hands, and she just couldn’t stop crying.”

“Crying and crying,” added Ramona.

“She remembered everything,” continued Berta Maria, “she was older than you.”

“She remembered everything, it’s true,” echoed Ramona.

Now it was my mother’s eyes that were watering, but she too showed Lianne’s restraint, she forbid the water to tip over the wall of her eyes. She would not be that woman on the sidewalk. She was not that woman. She was the woman, in here, hugging Berta Maria, telling her to watch out for herself, for the people she protected in her building, leaving behind instructions on how to be fair. How to be just. How to keep the foreigners from grabbing too-hungrily at the low-hanging fruit.

As we got inside the Lada, Lianne sighed and said, “there are so many like her, so many people disillusioned and used.”

For a while we were silent in the car, the old engine vibrating, and the bumpy road of La Habana rolling beneath us. The hum of Havana zinging by, as the afternoon set its shadow over the sun. We were heading toward La Habana Vieja to take a first-hand look at Eusebio Leal’s masterpiece.

“Look to your right, quickly or you’ll miss it,” said Lianne, breaking our quiet.  
“See that?”

We did see it, a flashing cluster of three or four restaurants and bars. They faced the Malecón and they jumped with music, bright lights, and people looking for a good time.

“It’s the Ocean Drive of La Habana!”

We all laughed.

“It’s all new,” she bragged, “we didn’t have that kind of thing before.”

It was hard to tell when “before” was, and where “now” started.

We took the Malecón all the way to Old Havana, and as we approached, the sky turned darker still.

“Oh no!” Lianne cried again. “Please tell me it’s not going to rain.”

Almost at the same time, my mother called out, “Look, Vane, look, just like Papan’s painting. It’s exactly the same!”

By now, Lianne knew who Maman and Papan were and she smiled, forgetting her complaint about the darkening sky above us.

In my grandparent’s house there had always hung a watercolor my grandfather made – a cloudy landscape of a curving street with old, magical-looking street lamps that shone light on a purpling evening. We realized now that it was this very street we were on, this very part of the Malecón that led into La Habana Vieja, and in the same exact light. We had arrived at the precise moment of day, walking straight into my grandfather’s memory, straight into his depiction of the past, now renovated, reinvigorated. Back to the future of La Habana Vieja.

“Isn’t it amazing,” my mother said.

After we parked the car and started to walk, we felt a drizzle of rain spray over us. Lianne looked up at the sky and scowled again. My mother leaned into me and whispered: “I hope it rains and rains. I hope it pours and we get washed by Cuban rain.”

My mother, it seemed, wanted to be baptized and re-baptized, cleaned and renewed by this city, over and over again. She wanted to be one with her, run on the streets like the rain did. I could see that, in her heart, she wanted to do cartwheels; her five-year old self re-surfacing.

“I want you to see all the plazas,” said Lianne, referring to the five plazas at the center of Old Havana, the center of the preservation movement led by Eusebio Leal, who was lauded here as the man who saved the center of the city from becoming a pile of rubble. Some of the plazas were already restored and others were mid-restoration.

“Two buildings fall in Havana every day,” Lianne told us. “If it weren’t for Leal, I really don’t know where we’d be in terms of Old Havana.”

In 2012, the BBC reported that it was even more dire – according to them, three houses collapsed in part, or full, every single day in Havana.

As Lianne explained it to us, what Leal did was make a deal with Fidel. Back in the 80s, Castro had agreed to some renovations of the city center. Once the Special Period hit, however, all of that funding came to a standstill. But Leal, who was known for his resilience and drive in the matter of historical preservation, plowed on. In the early 90s, Leal spoke with Fidel personally and described the idea he’d come up with.

He told Fidel that the historic center of the city, with its colonial buildings, and Spanish-era architecture was crumbling, and that he wanted to save it. Fidel knew this

much, why was Leal repeating himself, but what could be done, there wasn't even enough money to feed the people, how could he possibly fund historic architecture and preservation when the people were starving. That's when Leal asked Fidel for control of a sector of Old Havana, where the plazas were located. He also asked for the capacity to generate income off the area, and for permission to re-invest the profits back into Old Havana and its preservation. In essence, Leal was asking to create a company that would allow for a system of restoration. This company would restore buildings that would become hotels for tourists, and create restaurants for tourists that would turn a profit. This profit would then fund a further leg of restoration. Fidel agreed. He said: Fine, I'll give you a million dollars to start, and then it's up to you. If you fail, you fail. But Leal did not fail.

What Fidel had agreed to, in essence, was a capitalist model. And it worked. Little by little, Leal brought in foreign investors to buy in to storefronts. Benetton bought in early. I remember when that happened and everybody in Miami stopped buying Benetton. There was a huge campaign to ban the brand. The all-girls Catholic school I went to used to have a modeling show every year as a fundraiser, and Benetton was one of the show's sponsors. In 1993, when Benetton bought in to Cuba, the Cuban parents at the school, which made up the majority, insisted the fashion show find a new partner, and it did. Otherwise, the school could count on not raising a penny from the Cuban-American community, who criticized the company for supporting Castro's regime by doing business with it. My mother was adamantly against Benetton at the time. She stopped buying my sister and me their bright-colored clothes and very clearly told us why.



Now, walking through Old Havana, we passed by the Benetton store. I reminded my mother of all of this. She shrugged her shoulders as if to say: *Maybe I was wrong, maybe I wasn't, maybe it's complicated, what're you gonna do about it?* My mother had grown an attitude in Havana, a little bit of my grandmother rubbing off on her.

As we hit the cobblestone steps of the *Plaza de la Catedral*, a painted version of Spain stood before us. The stone Cathedral, the stained glass, and the bright blue and yellow accents all around the square looked like a trompe l'oeil mural rather than reality. Even the barefoot kids and torn-up side streets in juxtaposition to the clean edges of restored stone added to the façade. It was strange to me that this was the Cuba tourists saw first. Don't get me wrong, there was a beauty to it, but there was also the artificial edge of tourist attraction written all over it. And still, it was a feat no less, this restoration project. The irony, of course, was that La Habana Vieja was like those Cuban scissors at our hotel. The very thing that fed it, threatened to erase its authenticity, and it was again the foreign dollar that was in control to a certain degree – and, in this case, it was not only plucking the mango, it was painting another one on the tree and signing the painting.

Lianne was proud of the plazas, as I would be if I had been born here. It was impossible to say that they were not appealing, but, more than that, they were a sign of Cuban resilience. I could not imagine what it was like to get those construction Cranes into Havana, or how they had managed the building supplies needed; how they had managed to match the Spanish baroque and neo-colonial mortar to mold this place together in a city where the only thing that was clearly abundant was scarcity and lack. For anyone who has ever led anything, the challenges of a project like Leal's seemed

clear, the meeting of those challenges admirable. It was no wonder he was a hero in these parts.

As we filtered through the complications of this restoration, staring at the cathedral, and ignoring the tourist traps -- “Can we take your picture,” and “Do you want a rickshaw ride” -- the sky grumbled and opened up. Bucketfuls of rain fell suddenly, not without warning because the sky had been foreboding since we got in Lianne’s Lada this morning, but as if a button had been switched. The ocean had turned upside down and was pouring itself onto us. My mother was ecstatic.

We ran from the center, like scattered pigeons to the arched pathways that lined the square, and we stood for a minute, looking at the rain. Daunted.

“Those rickshaws are gonna make a bundle,” said Lianne. They had covered roofs, and they were peddling around the plazas, picking people up. “They’re illegal, but nobody stops them, especially not on days like today.”

It was tropical and torrential, just like Miami’s rain. I thought for a minute about taking off my shoes, like the boys that were running all around us, fighting like cocks, jumping on scaffolding, but then I remembered the nails and debris from the restoration that was being river-run into the streets.

“I guess it’s time to eat then,” my mother said. Which was exactly what we did. We found ourselves inside a cute little joint called *Esto No Es Un Café*, or This is Not a Café, spinning off the surrealist Magritte painting of a pipe entitled, “This is Not a Pipe.” In the painting, a well-crafted pipe takes center-canvas, and below it the words of the title in French, *Ceci n’est pas une pipe*. This was the perfect name for a Café in the restored Old Havana. Because this was not La Habana Vieja, this was a painted version of it, and

yet, it was art nonetheless. Next to the restaurant there was a print workshop, which also added to the Café's clever nombre. "It's Cuban-owned," Lianne told us about the place. My mother loved this idea. She loved to hear this, loved it when the Cubans could take a piece of their own pie. I wondered how truly Cuban-owned it was though, how they could afford this, and whether there wasn't a foreign investor in the soup somewhere, taking a bigger-than-they-should portion. Still, it was progress, that a Cuban could call this place their own.

Inside the café, it felt like a New York City hole-in-the-wall on the Upper West Side on Amsterdam Avenue, it had exactly that kind of vibe, mixed with a little Euro because of the Spanish tile below us and the brick-laid counter. We ordered "bruschetta," which was comprised of soft, Cuban bread, cheese and tomatoes. We also ordered vegetable skewers – this was the kind of fare the place offered up. The fare sounded fancy, but it tasted like a sandwich shop, which was great. We were starving and devoured it, washing it down with a *Bucanero*, Cuban beer. Well, my mom and I had *Bucaneros*, Lianne stuck to bottled water. The beer, I had to say was delicious. The food fueled us and I felt less guilty eating there than at the hotel.

When we were finished eating, it was still raining so we decided to go inside the print shop next door. My mom was looking for gifts to bring back home, while I spoke to the artists. A print caught my eye. It was an old souped-up Ford drifting in the air above the ocean, suspended by a hot air balloon that was attached to it, allowing it to drift over the sea. This called to me on so many levels. At the end of my novel, *White Light*, the main character who was a visual artist, made a hot-air-balloon out of her deceased Cuban father's shirts, and the installation in the book clicked somewhere with this print. As I

was looking at it intently, someone approached me. A youngish man, about my age. Timid, short, just a little bit taller than me.

“I made that,” he said.

“I love it,” I responded.

He smiled broadly and asked me if I was an artist, and I told him that I was.

“You know, it’s like these cars, things like these cars, sometimes they are our way out, just not the way you think they are,” he told me. I smiled at him to tell him that I got it, and he smiled back again.

“I’ll take it,” I said, knowing that this painted version of a hot-air balloon was helping him plot his real escape.

He wrapped the piece for me carefully between two pieces of cardboard and then wrapped the cardboard in paper.

“I’ll take good care of it,” I told him, “don’t worry.”

It was still raining when we left *el taller*, but we had succumbed to getting wet by now. We jumped through the puddles, in and out of covered archways; we snuck inside hotels to dry ourselves, and then we continued on our grand adventure. Lianne yelled over the rain, talking to us about each of the plazas, as we roamed in and out of them, until it was time to go.

When we got to the old Lada, we finally realized why Lianne had been so worried all day about the rain. “The windshield wipers don’t work,” she said. My mother and I looked at each other and laughed. Lianne laughed too. We got in the car and we drove blindly on the Malecón, my mother gripping the seat, Lianne wiping the window every once in a while with her hand, water coming into the car. For some reason, I felt no fear, I

felt, instead, an enormous sense of peace and contentment. I felt like the god damn Buddha in Cuba, sitting in the backseat of an old, red-lacquered Lada, watching the rain from my window.

“I think we should go to my house and switch cars, Guillermo will be home by now and maybe he wants to come out with us tonight. I want to show you *La Fabrica*.”

*La Fabrica*, Lianne explained, was like nothing else in Cuba. “I bet you guys won’t think it’s such a big deal because you have these things in New York and Miami and Los Angeles, and all those cities, but when it first opened here everybody was so excited, you’ll see, I won’t tell you anymore about it, but it’s a big deal for us.” She was telling us this as she drove, ducking her head, looking through the rain that was crashing against the windshield. Soon, however, the sunset hour became visible through the clouds, streaking in bright orange and pink, and the skies began to clear. Lianne’s shoulders and my mother’s started to unclench. Now, people were crossing the street, almost throwing themselves to get to the Malecón’s wall. “It’s that time of day, people start coming out,” said Lianne. By the time we reached the point where we veered off the Malecón, it had stopped raining completely, and what we left behind were a swarm of people on its wall, socializing, laughing, talking. There were twenty-somethings and thirty-somethings, and teenagers, and none of them were hooked to a cell phone. Some of them had cell phones, but none were attached to them. Their legs dangled off the wall as they looked each other in the eye and told each other about their days. I watched them in the rear view mirror, as we drove away from the wall and toward Lianne’s house.

When we arrived, my mother and I were shocked. The house was much nicer than we’d expected it to be. It was bigger than our tiny apartments back home, that was for

sure. Like Lutgarda's house, it had mid-century American design, except this house was a little more spruced up. Located in the neighborhood of Kohly, which was upper echelon, it was also in the municipality of Playa, just like Miramar. On the surface it was a house you could easily find in the United States. It was also exceptionally green, located near a strip of forest near the Almendares River. *Los Carpinteros*, Lianne told us, lived nearby. They're a group of famous visual artists who had shown their large installations all over the world from Toronto to Zurich. "They just bought a house for 500/600 thousand dollars." My mother and I looked at each other, immediately suspicious of how someone could afford this kind of place in Cuba.

Lianne told us it wasn't easy to get this house. It was part of a *Permuta* that involved three families. A *Permuta* was what they called house exchanges before Cubans were allowed to buy and sell property. Trading houses, basically. Sometimes, these trades involved any number of people and the extended family of those people, so that each person could get closest to what they needed.

So, let's say you had an apartment in La Habana Vieja, but you wanted a house in Kohly – you needed this house because you had nine people living in your tiny apartment and it had gotten out of control. Ever since your daughter and her two kids moved in, things had gotten crazy. One of the kids was 18 and she was a little wild. You wanted to live in Kohly because that's where you worked, cleaning somebody else's house, and there was this person that had a house in Kohly, you'd heard, who wanted an apartment in Kohly instead of a house, because her family was shrinking instead of expanding. In fact, her husband had just died in that very house she wanted to leave, a husband who she had been with since she was 15. Her son jumped out into the sea weeks before and she

hadn't heard from him since. She was afraid he was dead. This woman was going mad in that house. But you didn't believe in ghosts and you had seen the house and you thought your family would thrive in it. So now there was this possibly open house in Kohly. And you wanted to do everything you could to get it, so you found someone with an apartment that the widow of that house in Kohly could move into, under the condition that an old aunt of that man who owned the apartment in Kohly could stay in the apartment. There was an old aunt, you see, and she couldn't be moved, she was a little demented and had lived in that apartment forever, and so... "I just have to leave her there but I need to be able to visit her all the time, would that be ok with the widow?" said a nephew of the aunt. Well, you didn't know, you said, you would ask though. The widow agreed to take on the aunt -- she would be less lonely that way anyway, have someone to take care of -- and no problem about the nephew, he could visit come as often as he wanted. And, by the way had you heard anything about her son? she asked. No, you responded, you had not. Though lately you had been asking for him, you had been asking your relatives in Miami. You asked them to watch for new fish that coasted onto the shore. People that were picked up at sea, wet foot. God you hoped that didn't happen, if he was picked up "wet foot," at sea, he would be sent back to Cuba. You prayed that the widow's son was ok, even though it had now been a little over three weeks and you weren't so sure. But, in any case, now you had your house in Kohly, and you got an apartment for the widow, that part was solved. But who was going to take your apartment in La Habana Vieja? You heard through the grapevine that there was a student who wanted to leave her mother's house and needed a place to move in to with her husband-to-be, as long as the student's mother could find a caretaker to move into her house in Vedado. So you asked your wild

18 year old granddaughter if she wanted to earn a little extra cash. She'd have to move, if she wanted to do it, to a house in Vedado, with an old lady. Your granddaughter jumped at the opportunity, she was saving to get the fuck out of Cuba, she told you. "Don't get on a raft," you scolded her. No, she said, she was saving to go another route, she knew a guy who arranged it, through Mexico... And there you had it. Your *permuta*.

That was not Lianne's story exactly, but it was always something similar -- a complex arrangement of trades. It was this that landed Lianne in this house in Kohly, with her husband, her two kids, and her mother. Her mother had a whole section of the house to herself, but at least she was with the family -- Lianne couldn't very well imagine her mother alone somewhere. It was hard to get the house, but it was worth it, better this way, explained Lianne.

Once we were inside the house, Lianne's husband, Guillermo, greeted us, embraced us, and welcomed us in, asked us what we wanted to drink. Maybe we wanted a little whiskey? We didn't want to bother them, and were about to have some drinks at La Fabrica, so we told him not to worry. He nearly insisted, but we told him again not to worry, really, we were quite full from our late lunch and beers.

He and Lianne had an exchange about the kids. One of them was lost, he was supposed to be home a couple of hours ago, but they couldn't find him anywhere. They used their landline to call around the neighborhood, but still, they couldn't locate him. He was around ten years old if I remember correctly. "He does this all the time," said Guillermo. Their teenage daughter was home, but she wanted to go to a party.

"It's one of those sleep over parties," Lianne told us.



“They do that now,” said Guillermo, “they sleep over so they can do what they want and nobody knows.”

“But we know the parents of this one, so...”

“Oh believe me, I understand. I have two daughters,” my mother laughed.

We had to wait until Lianne and Guillermo placed their son before we headed out anywhere. So we sat and waited for the call, or for the kid to walk in the door.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” said Lianne, “I wanted to give you something. For you and your mother.”

“Oh no, Lianne, you don’t have to, please, we’re the ones that should be--”

“Don’t be silly, hang on!” Lianne ran into a back room.

When she came back she was holding two stones.

“From *El Cobre*,” she told us.

*El Cobre* was the church that housed *La Virgen de la Caridad*, and the most well-known pilgrimage spot in Cuba. It was in Santiago de Cuba, at the feet of the Sierra Maestra, the famous mountain range that Fidel and his men had called home before they took the island from Batista’s hold.

My mother was deeply moved by this gift, and she told Lianne so. They hugged and my mother put the stones safely away. A couple of minutes later, the phone rang. Guillermo went to get it. They’d found their son, he was at a neighbor’s house. Guillermo scolded the kid on the phone for not letting them know where he was. My mother lifted her eyebrows, shrugged and sighed: kids, her shoulders said.

“He’ll be home soon, and he has the key,” said Guillermo, joining my mother in her sigh, after hanging up the phone. “Now we can leave!”

So off we went go into the cool night, on our way to La Fabrica. It was actually called La Fabrica de Arte Cubano, or FAC, and it was housed inside what was once Havana's electric company headquarters, which was later turned into an olive oil factory. As we arrived, Lianne's excitement shone through. The sky was clear now and we didn't have to fear more rain anyway because we were in Guillermo's car, a newer import. We were getting there early, but that was ok, she told us, at least we would be able to park easily. "This was so cool," she said, "when it first opened here, I can't tell you, we just didn't have anything like it."

From the outside, what you saw was an old factory. You could easily be in the meatpacking district in Manhattan; Wynwood in Miami, about to watch a show, listen to some underground band that had been making subcultural waves, and that you were cool enough to know about. There was a banner across the concrete hedge around the building that read Fabrica de Arte Cubano, and on the wall an illuminated sign that beamed FAC. Standing tall over everything, a distillation tower, from when the place used to convert olives into oil --- a very different kind of bastion than that of the Russian embassy, this one a kind of cultural obelisk.

The cover at FAC was two CUCs, or two Cuban Convertibles. These weren't cars, but a second form of currency in Cuba. The CUC, which was almost equal to the U.S. dollar, was the money tourists used. The Cubans used the peso, still stamped with Che's mug. Or, at least the Cubans were *supposed* to use the peso. They got paid in pesos, but they often used the CUC and the dollar to get what they needed, when they could. There were the regular currency exchanges at the airport and the hotels, but there was a better exchange rate on the street. If you could get 85 CUCs for 100 U.S. dollars at

the exchange window, you could get 90 CUC on the street. It was illegal, of course, but that never stopped anybody in Cuba. Cubans would have disappeared a long time ago without the black market and the ways in which they manipulated and managed to live outside the system.

Aside from the cover charge at FAC, you got a ticket that resembled the *libretta*. It was a brilliant visual pun, irony; smart marketing. “Isn’t that great,” Lianne smiled as she handed us our *libretta* tickets. The idea was that you could go around the many bars in the FAC, all of which had different kinds of drinks and food, and they would stamp what you bought, as if it were a ration book. You paid what you consumed at the end, when you handed in your *libretta*, in exchange for CUCs. Here, you could drink anything you could afford -- the liquor shelves were stocked with rye and rum, wine, water, and whiskey. There were tapas you could bite into too. There was visual art on every wall, and a space on the bottom floor for music and movies. If you went upstairs there was more space, and more bars.

Upstairs, they were playing a documentary on quantum physics. We sat there a while, captivated, sipping our drinks and watching. *Reality doesn’t exist*, the documentary told us, *unless you’re looking at it. You create reality*. It was an interesting message to deliver inside Cuba: You create your reality, not others. Right before the quantum physics documentary, there was a documentary on early American hip-hop...

Behind us, there was a terrace, which was gathering a group of twenty-somethings, smoking their cigarettes, inhaling and releasing smoke into the bright night, distilling their lives, exhaling pieces of themselves into the city. Downstairs, we could hear a band starting to prep, the sound of symbols, the beating of a drum.

Here at the FAC, you could decide your groove; you set the pace. I thought back to David D Omni and his open-armed dream – a place where anyone could play, not just the bands sanctioned by the state.

Walking around the downstairs level, greeting people, was X Alfonso, the musician who ran the place. He had shoulder-length dreadlock-braids and looked like a mixture between Basquiat and Lenny Kravitz with an Afro-Cuban edge. He was laid back and his voice was steady, a calm leader.

X Alfonso was pretty well-known in Cuba. Apart from the fact that he had a solo career as a musician, he also came from a famous family -- his parents were the founders of *Sintesis*, a prominent Cuban band that played rock when rock was banned in Cuba. They mixed Afro-Cuban beats with rock n' roll and toured all over the world, becoming really popular in the 80s and 90s. X's sound was influenced by his parents, but also by older Cuban music like that of Beny Moré. His albums were mixtures of many things, just like the FAC, and just like the name of his parent's band – they were a synthesis. He was well-traveled, and a “citizen of the world,” he liked to say, like Yoani.

In an interview with Erwin Perez, the host of a Miami TV show called *No Es Lo Mismo*, Perez asked X whether he was not afraid to become influenced by the United States, as he traveled. X answered calmly, though you could see the annoyance inside, just as you could measure his control. He was annoyed that Perez thought he could be so easily influenced. “I've visited 42 countries and have been to the United States six times before this,” he kindly explained to Perez. No, he did not fear that. “Fear?” he repeated. He had lived in Barcelona for five years, but he never left Cuba, not really, he said. He loved living in Cuba, where he still lived and worked today, running FAC.

It was easy to see how X might have met foreign investors throughout his travels. Easy to see how he might have expressed a dream, like David's, and someone had answered his call to partnership. This place was huge and it looked like it took some serious upkeep. There was one managerial-looking white guy walking around the joint too, he was German perhaps? Or maybe from Brussels? Definitely European. When I asked X about the investors, he didn't reply. He and his family had traveled the world as musicians, perhaps this was all his money, after all. His language was that of peace, like Yoani's was in Miami, like David's had been too. "I don't like to criticize, I like to reflect," he told Perez in the interview mentioned above. He reflected upon contemporary Cuba and the world. "The world," he said in a different interview with Martí Noticias, "the world and Cuba look a lot alike."

When we finally got back to our hotel, my mom and I hugged Lianne. We felt like we'd known her forever, even though it had only been a day. My mom asked her how much would be a good amount to give her, and Lianne said: "Oh, nothing, no, of course not, nothing!" It was illegal to take money, so we understood that she didn't actually mean she wouldn't take the cash, it was just we had to be more discreet. Lianne sat back inside her car and my mother leaned in and asked her: "If we were to give you a gift, then would you prefer that gift to be in CUC or American Dollars?" The answer was quick and easy: Dollars. My mom handed her a \$100 bill, hidden from view, and Lianne thanked us. My mother, unsure, asked whether that was a good amount. "More than enough, really, more than enough," said Lianne. We hugged again, and turned to go inside.

But we couldn't go to sleep now, we were totally over stimulated, rained upon, and filled with Havana. We had quantum physics swimming in our brain, doing laps with Eusebio Leal.

"We still have those drink coupons," I told my mom.

"*Ay, si*, let's get a drink," my mother said. "Definitely."

We hit the closest bar, the circle bar just to the right of the entrance. There was a young kid tending the bar by himself, he was maybe twenty-one at the most. He smiled at us, and when he heard our Spanish, asked: "Cuban?"

"*Claro que si*," my mother said, beaming.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

"Miami," we chimed in unison.

"I'm dying to get over there," he told us. Then he leaned in and said, "dying to go somewhere, you know what I mean?"

"Then we'll see you in Miami soon," my mother told him, encouragingly, "I'm sure of it!"

"From your mouth to God's ears," said the kid.

"So, what can we get for these tickets?" I asked, flashing the drink tickets they'd given us at the front desk.

"*Bueno...*" he said, curling his lip. "Only two things. A Melía cocktail or a mojito."

"What's a Melía cocktail?" asked my mother.

"*Tremenda bombita*," he said, laughing and rattling his head. He couldn't understand how people drank it. Then he pointed to the array of liquor that made up this

little bomb. It was kitchen-sink cocktail, like a Long Island Ice Tea, catching the well. We shook our heads along with him: No way. We'll just go for some wine now and hold on to our tickets for later when we feel like a mojito. "Good idea," he said, grinning.

As we sipped our wine and reviewed the day, an American woman sat at the bar across from us, with her husband. She was exceptionally *gringa*. Her voice was high-pitched and demanding. "Listen," she said, "I want something light, you know, light. That's what I want. Alright?"

"Oh, of course ma'am," said our bartender, flashing us a quick wink. "I have just the thing for you. A Melía Cocktail, our specialty."

My mother and I burst out laughing. The American woman snarled: What was so funny?

We headed upstairs with the residue of laughter on our faces, the wine bringing us into a cool down from the high-speed run our minds were on as we'd left Lianne, *La Fabrica*, *La Habana Vieja*, *La Vieja del edificio*, and Lutgarda's flying books behind, for now. Tomorrow would be another collection of experiences, and we had to make room for them. Tomorrow we would see where Carlos lived as a kid, where he grew up. We'd heard so much about that place, that apartment in *La Lisa*. Now we would finally see it.

In the morning, we took a taxi to Lutgarda's, and then Lutgarda, my mom, and I hitched a ride to *La Lisa* with one of Lutgarda's neighbors, a cranky old Cuban Quasimodo with a hatchback car. Lutgarda had set up the ride after telling us Betty, Blanca's daughter, wouldn't be able to take us. Because Betty drove a government car, you see, and if they found out she was driving tourists around, she would get in trouble.

We were not even supposed to be in Lutgarda's house without permission from the State. But damn that to hell, Lutgarda wasn't going to report our visit -- what was she a child?

Martín, the cranky old man, arrived on time. He was crisp as an autumn leaf, misplaced in summer, starched and neat. Perfectly ironed, from his shirt down to his jeans. His attitude, however, had more wrinkles edged into it.

"These damn potholes," he complained from the second we hit the road. "Damn potholes everywhere, you'd think they could find a shovel and fill one." Martín maneuvered around the big dips, but suffered us all through the small ones. "*La Habana* is destruction," he said, hunching his back, round as his car, curling over the wheel. "Pure destruction, disaster, dead-weight, damn it!" Martín didn't give it up, he just went on complaining the whole ride, as Lutgarda braced herself for the small bumps, holding onto the roof of the car. From the looks of it, Lutgarda was used to this, she knew the drill.

"Are you going to pick us up?" asked Lutgarda as soon as we entered the perimeter of the municipality of La Lisa.

"I'll just wait for you," he said, sighing.

"Thank you," appeased Lutgarda. "I appreciate that."

"Thank you!" my mom and I echoed from the back seat as we got out of his hatchback.

Turned out Martín was a sweetheart deep down, he was just a little bit of a curmudgeon on the surface. "He used to be a pilot," said Lutgarda. He'd seen the world, and now here he was, in this pot-holed city, living out his old age, without a view.

La Lisa was in pieces, shattered. Broken sidewalks, tenements, dirt roads. You could see it on their faces, the people were hungry. Skinny and tired, leaning out of their



front doors and windows, sitting on their porches. Demotivated, as Lutgarda's next-door neighbor would say. "What for? What the hell for?" those were the words written plain across the expressions of the people we passed, people who did not smile, did not wince, but sat still, trying to catch the bit of breeze that found its lost way here.

"Has it always been like this?" I asked, as we walked up the sidewalk toward the apartment.

"It's gotten worse, but it was never great."

The apartment was dead, nobody lived there, explained Lutgarda.

"We're thinking about selling it, but I don't know. Someone tried to offer us 10,000 dollars for it, but that's too little, I've heard of people paying 50,000 and even 100,000 for an apartment! Why not us?"

The last person to live in the apartment was Kique, Lutgarda's twin brother – the drunk uncle, who would often end up jailed for voicing his opinions about the government in public. He had died of cancer several months before our visit, and ever since then, the apartment had been shut up. "Ana Maria, watches it for us," said Lutgarda.

Ana Maria was Juan Carlos' sister. Juan Carlos we'd heard a lot about because he was Carlos' best friend growing up. Now he was a musician, living in Italy – my mom had met him -- but Ana Maria was still in La Lisa. Stuck.

"And thank god for Ana Maria. Because the things that happen here," Lutgarda whispered to us, "you can't even imagine. One day I get a call from Ana Maria and she tells me to come over now, right now, right now, right now! They're about to knock down your wall! Who I ask her? Whose going to knock down my wall, what are you talking about. And she tells me, the neighbors, they know you're not here, and that Kique

is dead, and they're trying to make their apartment bigger. Come down here or they'll do it, they're prepping to do it now... Imagine, I had to run over here, get a ride and tell those people to stop. I had to literally get in the way of them and the hammer, stop them from breaking the wall to my own apartment!"

Soon, we found ourselves knocking on Ana Maria's door, so we could get the key to the apartment.

"*Ay dios mio!* Lutgarda!" Ana Maria exclaimed as she opened the door, poking her head out through the gate that was still locked. "Look how I look, I didn't know you were coming with guests, look at me!" Ana Maria was tall, black, and skinny. She was holding her hands to her face, embarrassed. She had pieces of cardboard in her hair that served as curlers, around which she's managed to twirl her hair. "Oh well, hang on, let me get the key. And a *pañuelo* for my head!"

When she finally came out from behind the gate of her apartment, she hugged us tight. "Oh my god, oh my god, you're Carlos' daughter, and you're Carlitos' wife! Carlos and Juan Carlos were like this." She joined her fingers. "They used to play in this hallway, right here," she said, pointing to the dirty Spanish-tile floor.

"That's when Carlos wasn't studying," said Lutgarda.

"Oh yes, that boy was so studious," said Ana Maria, "is he still smart?"

"Oh yes," my mother smiled. "Still smart."

"By candlelight he used to study," Lutgarda said, clapping her hands once. And then she turned her attention to Ana Maria. "Any trouble?"

"No, no. No trouble this time."

We all walked toward the apartment, anxious. All of us, wondering what we would find inside. It was right across from Ana Maria's. It took a little while to open the lock, which was rusted by rain and time. When Lutgarda couldn't do it, she handed the key to Ana Maria, who managed to wiggle and shimmy the key around until it clicked and unlocked.

My mother's mouth slackened like a sail when the door opened. We held our breaths. The moisture and humidity trapped inside made me imagine poisonous spores entering our lungs, spores that would lodge themselves in tissue and reproduce.

"Kique lived here?" my mother asked, awe-struck.

"Yes," says Lutgarda, sadly.

"See that," said Ana Maria, pointing to the crisp edges of a couch that looked as though it had been torched.

"Don't remind me," sighed Lutgarda.

Turned out Kique had fallen asleep smoking on that couch one day several years ago, and Ana Maria had seen smoke coming from the house, had almost been forced to knock down the door to wake him up. She saved him that time. But the cancer got him. Cancer that was no doubt caused by this apartment.

The place couldn't be more than 400 square feet. Right as you walked in there was the burnt couch to your left, a kitchen with no appliances a few steps from the couch. Kique sold the appliances because he needed to live. And drink. He drank himself to sleep every night, so that he could wake up the next day, until he didn't wake up anymore. There was a tiny room to the right of the couch, with a putrid mattress. To touch that mattress would be to die of a bacterial infection there was no antibiotic cure

for. The layers of mites and dust and dirt and death that were mostly likely lying between the cloth and the coils was almost unimaginable. I say almost because, as it was, I pictured a blooming of bugs so mighty it could carry the mattress out one day, as if in a cartoon. If only this were a cartoon.

“You have to throw that mattress out right now,” was the only thing my mother could muster.

“In Cuba you don’t throw mattresses out,” said Lutgarda, laughing sarcastically. “Where in the world would we get another?”

“But this one can kill you,” my mother said, dead serious.

Lutgarda laughed again. Her laugh said: *We’ve been through worse, my dear, than a dirty mattress.*

A few paces from the microbious mattress was the bathroom – so small you could hardly spread your arms out in it. This was the bathroom Carlos used to watch his grandfather shave in. At one point there were six people living in this house. Carlos’ grandfather and grandmother, who slept on the mattress, many moons ago, when it was still fairly clean. Lutgarda and Kique, Carlos and Carmen, who slept split, between the sofa bed and a chair.

They should have taken the 10,000 dollars.

“Can you imagine nene studying here?” my mom whispered to me, her jaw still dropping between words.

I could. I could picture everyone going to sleep and Carlos lighting a candle, crouching like Martín, our driver, over the table to read and write, find his escape, his portal.

No wonder he lied to his grandfather to get out of here, his grandfather who he loved, but this...anything was better than this. What were his options? To stay here, live in this place until it fell apart, bit by bit, and killed him?

It was evident that Kique had helped destroy this apartment, which had, in turn, destroyed him. The disaster of his life, trapped on this island, locked in this apartment, driving him to drink, his decline pushing this place into further disrepair...The disrepair driving him further into drink, until an accumulation built inside his body and multiplied, and slowly slayed him.

I breathed short breaths inside this place. The breaths choked and stifled me. My mother and I needed air.

“Does that gate open?” my mother asked, pointing to a small opening that led to a four by two foot cement block “terrace.”

“That one’s going to need a little help,” said Ana Maria, who soon after left to go in search of some kind of oil for the venture. When she returned, she jiggled the lock. Poured cooking oil, then jiggled again. A woman in the adjoining building saw her through the window and gave her instructions. Like this, they managed to open the lock, and we rushed out to the terrace. Air.

All of us, crowded, we breathed and stood, staring at the other cement terraces. Ana Maria and the neighbor talked. Lutgarda told my mom how her mother used to wash the clothes out there by hand. “The apartment has always been small, but it didn’t always look like this you know, when my parents had it, it was clean as a whistle. It was only later, when Kique had it, that... well...”

My mother silently said, yes. She understood.

Our ride back to Lutgarda's, and eventually back to our hotel, was quiet. Nobody talked much, and even Martín knew to respect the silence, turning his vociferous complaints into sighs instead. The car was full of deep breaths in and long sighs out. It was a vehicle run on Carbon Dioxide and fumes, shattered dreams, disillusion, sadness and startling dips in the road. This too was Cuba. Cuba was the beautiful Malecón, the rise and rush of water washing over us, blessing us. Cuba was connection. But Cuba was also this – this abandon – this failure. An island we had left to choke on itself, rattling like an engine running on the expired pulp of an old rusted can of Coca-Cola that had been smuggled in and sold on the black market.

Our hotel was full of Coca-Cola. Because, of course, Spain could buy from the Coca-Cola company, even if Cuba couldn't. Inside the Melía Cohiba in el Vedado, one could order a coke in a U.S. embargoed country. You could drink yourself a Cuba Libre, a rum and coke, though the irony would probably turn even Coke's saccharine syrup bitter.

The next morning, at breakfast, I didn't drink coke. Instead, I sat back and looked at the preposterousness of abundance all around me. The buffet, for one, gave me a pang in my chest at the thought of all that went to waste here. The sight of yet another foreigner who bought a woman last night, had brought her to breakfast, and who was now pouring her a mimosa. Pang. I wished the best for her while, at the same time, I felt a chord of humility and pain that vibrated from her out to me. I sat back and felt the weight of guilt settling into me. Jamón Serrano, Manchego, peaches and cream and bacon. Pang.

Guava juice and mango juice and papaya juice, and eggs any way you wanted them. Champagne and orange juice at the door to greet you. A group singing next to the piano – morning ditties – covers of *The Beatles*, who had once been banned in Cuba. It was not just the food in here that made me feel guilty, in contrast to the scant appropriations of *La Libretta*, it was the freedom of everyone in here. All of these guests, most of them oblivious to what really went on outside the hotel door, to what Lutgarda and Betty lived, what Kique lived – all of these guests, free to come and go as they pleased. Sure, the Cubans could leave now without a visa, but with what money? They were still trapped, or else that woman next to me wouldn't be selling herself to get the hell out of Dodge.

It was this obliviousness that had most annoyed me about Beyoncé and Jay Z's visit in 2014. When we were in *La Habana Vieja*, Lianne talked to us about the visit. About how the streets had brimmed with love for Beyoncé. How the people were so excited to see her. "And dressed like she was, in yellow," said Lianne, "it was brilliant marketing." We asked her what she meant. "It's the color of *La Caridad del Cobre*, so imagine, there she was, this star, black, dressed in yellow, *La Virgen* herself."

I wondered if this *was* a brilliant marketing move, or a coincidence, but whatever it was, it was perfect. If I had to guess, I'd err on the side PR versus serendipity. Because if intelligence came in the way of secret police and infiltrated spies in Cuba, then in America it meandered its sneaky path through marketing and PR. Beyoncé, a black woman, dressed in yellow, just like the Virgin at *El Cobre*; the goddess come to Havana, spreading honey that was so close, but so out of reach, right across that Florida Straits.

It was not that Beyoncé went to Cuba that bothered me, in fact, I was happy about that – thrilled. I felt like it was part of the process toward aperture. She should be able to go anywhere she wanted and Cubans should be able to listen to, touch, and see, whomever they liked.

The part that bothered me was her ignorance upon her return to the U.S. How “shocked” she was by the response, the outrage against her trip. Someone like me, of my generation, was excited that she went to Cuba, like Juanes had before her. Older generations opposed her trip, even questioned its legality, for the same reasons I’ve listed here a million times – she was giving money to Castro, and she was going without knowledge of the island’s conflicted history and present turmoil. I was not part of that older generation’s chorus. It was only when Beyoncé came back, that I became upset.

Her naïve voice, kitty-like, in an interview, purred out that she was “shocked” by the response. After her beautiful trip, after meeting “some incredible children,” it was quite simply “shocking.” If you are in a position of power, then you must educate yourself. If you don’t “understand,” and/or find something “shocking,” then read, talk to people, try to understand the reaction. Understand and then disagree if you’d like, go for it, I do it all the time. I disagree with my parent’s generation and grandparent’s, but I listen and learn first.

By going to Cuba, Beyoncé was making a political choice, whether she knew it or not. If she didn’t understand it before, then she should have understood it after. She could not simply, after her trip, try to stay out of the fray and stand pretty and shocked.

For a Cuban of a certain generation, who had seen his father’s blood spilled against the wall of the paredón, or his brother tortured, for him going to Cuba was like



saying you were going to visit a KKK meeting, out of curiosity, because they were holding it in a wonderful Southern Gone-with-the-Wind style plantation house – the architecture, it was so beautiful, and the little children in the yard, they were so cute – and you just couldn't understand what the big deal was. Well, it was history. The weight of history was the big deal.

Jay Z responded to the Cuba trip in a song called “Open Letter,” and in his lyrics he wrote: “Y'all gonna learn today... This communist shit is so confusing when it's from China, the very mic that I'm using. Idiot wind, the Bob Dylan of rap music. You're an idiot, baby, you should become a student.” Perhaps Jay-Z and Beyoncé should have turned those words upon themselves and become students as well.

As I sat in the hotel, thinking of Beyoncé and Jay Z, and this massive buffet, I thought to myself: *This is crucial if we really want to open Cuba – we must all become students of her past if we are going to venture here.*

Also in the lyrics of “Open Letter,” Jay Z wrote: “Politicians never did shit for me. Except lie to me, distort history. Wanna give me jail time and a fine. Fine, let me commit a real crime...”

Living in the America of Trayvon Martín, where 1 million of the 2.3 million people incarcerated are black, where the inner city is still an isolated island as choked off as Cuba, with food deserts, dry as the Arizona border, I understood those lyrics. I understood them because I thought about them. All I asked was that the same kind of thought be turned to that “communist shit” that's “so confusing.”

It was interesting, I thought to myself, how all this food gone to waste, at the morning buffet at the Melía Cohiba, made me think of Beyoncé and Jay Z. How they had

an opportunity, and they wasted it, out of sheer ignorance. I was thrilled to see them arrive in Cuba, I only wished they had learned something and shared it with the rest of America. Cuba was a place you had to fly and sail into responsibly. Maybe we should add a warning to the bottom of tickets sold to the island: Travel Responsibly.

No, such a move, such a command, would be too close to that “communist shit.” Let us leave it to the individual then and hope for the best. That is, after all, the price of our freedom: choice.

## **ROUTE 8: December 17, 2014**

The rest of our trip to Cuba, short as it was, four days in total, was a flood of family and new friends. We had a list of places to see, maps drawn by friends that we followed, searching for memories that turned out to be harder to unbury than treasure. We sought out my mother's friend's house and found that it was tiny in comparison to the giant palace he remembered leaving behind as a child. We went down streets we recognized by my grandmother's descriptions, through mere oral history. We roamed Havana. Sometimes we felt the most free we had ever felt. Sometimes we felt as though we were caught in a web of complexity so thick there was no way to break out of it. We wished we could stay longer. We were happy to go home.

On the way back, on the plane, my mother turned to me and said: "The ship has turned." Almost every night before we went to bed, she said this as she stared at the ceiling of the hotel, pensively. She would tell family and friends when we got back.

"This was hard for me," my mother told me again on the plane ride back home, leaning onto her headrest, looking ahead, "but I'm evolving. You have to listen to your children."

The last part she said as if to herself. I was proud of this. This change, this morphology, this next rung in the mythology. I was proud of the breaking of the familial embargo. Which, in the end was not a "break," but a union. Or perhaps it was a break, a rupture that led to aperture. An aperture that was soon to lead to more aperture, on a much larger scale. But we didn't know that yet, as we sat on the airplane, Cuba reeling in our heads.

"I can't believe it," my mother said. "I can't believe we did it."

“We went to Cuba.”

As we touched down in Miami, nobody clapped. We took America for granted.

On the car ride home from the airport, I felt sad.

“Where are the people?” I asked my mom. “This is so depressing. Everybody in their little boxes, in their cars, nobody out on the street talking to each other.”

My mother laughed at me. It had come out a little bit more teen-angsty than I wanted it to, but there it was. Suddenly Miami felt tame, quiet, reserved. Miami was so cold, so American. I missed the warmth, the hugs, the people chatting everywhere you went, the touching of skin in conversation. There was no Malecón here, there were no kids on its ledge. The kids were all inside, it was night and it was raining. Nobody went out in the rain. And our windshield wipers worked perfectly, wiping away the water, making a crisp, clear path toward home.

The feeling I was missing already about Cuba was the feeling I missed when I was in New York or LA usually, and missing Miami. Gradations of heat. Gradations of *Cubaneo* and mixture.

When we arrived at my mother’s apartment, we dropped our luggage on the black, wood floor, took off our shoes, and sat still in the air conditioning, exhausted. Tomorrow we would start to share the trip, show pictures, show my grandmother her old apartment, and she would say: *Maybe next time, I can go with you.*

Several weeks later, on December 17<sup>th</sup>, early in the morning, I got a text message from my friend Ivan, who was also an American Born Cuban, and who had once dressed

up as Jose Martí and rented a white horse to ride down 8<sup>th</sup> street, reciting the verses of the Cuban patriot as his horse kept the beat with his hooves. In his text message, Ivan wrote: “Obama is going to talk at noon. I think it’s about Cuba!” I jumped out of bed, ecstatic. Could it be the end of the embargo? There were many hours to go before the speech, but I turned on the TV. They were going to release Alan Gross. But there was more. Of course there was more. In exchange for what? They weren’t just going to release Alan Gross for nothing.

The hours passed with excited texts from fellow American Born Cubans. I texted my mother, and sister, and step-dad. My Facebook wall was blowing up. What would Obama say? Were Americans going to be able to go to Cuba now? News trickled out about the exchange of Alan Gross for three of the Cuban Five, Cuban spies who had infiltrated Cuban exile groups in South Florida in the late 90s, had been arrested in 1998. But there was more, the news outlets promised, still more.

I had a class to teach at 1pm, but I knew that if I played my cards right with time, then I would be able to catch the speech right before going to teach, from the Café at the corner of New World School of the Arts, where I was teaching playwriting that day. I avoided traffic, and listened to NPR in the car, rode to the top of the parking garage and arrived early at the café. I set up my laptop, connected, and waited for Obama’s face to show up on my screen.

“Today, the United States of America is changing its relationship with the people of Cuba.” My eyes welled. This was what so many of us had been waiting to hear for so long. It was what my parents had dreaded once, but what my mother now wanted as much as I did. It would be, Obama explained, the most significant change in policy in

over 50 years. He talked about the complicated history of the United States in Cuba, a history my mother and I had felt first hand in Havana – that thick entangling web. A history I had felt around me, all of my life. In the stories of my grandmother, in the birds she tried to save, in the prison torture tales of Armando, in Carlos’ candlelight studies, and Kique’s alcoholism. It was the history that made me cry now, in this café, as I heard my president speak about Cuba. My country. My roots, my complicated routes.

Obama spoke of the exile community – my family – who had “made enormous contributions to our country -- in politics and business, culture and sports. Like immigrants before, Cubans helped remake America, even as they felt a painful yearning for the land and families they left behind. All of this bound America and Cuba in a unique relationship, at once family and foe.” I thought of my father. The image of him lugging massive suitcases of shoes, a shoe salesman for America in the Caribbean, schlepping shoes across Barbados and Aruba, Curacao and Martinique, the weight pressing down into his heels, causing spurs of pain – hard, manual labor, the Achilles heel of immigration. My mother, who had started out as a receptionist and made her way to the head of her own company, had put her two little girls in private school, no matter how hard it was, or what it took. I thought of being raised in the 500 square feet my mother, my sister, my father and I shared, and I thought of where we were now, and the pride in my chest rose.

Obama talked about China. I thought of Vincent, Yoani’s Chinese translator. And I thought of Yoani’s role in all of this. How her writing had helped to make history, how she was a rung in the ladder of this long climb. Cuban-Americans had been part of that ladder too, along with the American Born Cubans who had changed their parents.

By allowing Cuban Americans and American Born Cubans to visit Cuba, “Cuban Americans have been reunited with their families,” said Obama, “and are the best possible ambassadors for our values.” I thought of Berta Maria Candelaria and my mother discussing condo docs. Discussing the best way to make room for a foreigner that could bring change, while maintaining Cuban residents rights and dignity. “And through these exchanges, a younger generation of Cuban Americans has increasingly questioned an approach that does more to keep Cuba closed off from an interconnected world,” continued Obama.

There was no way that Obama could have made this speech without American Born Cubans, without a breaking of the familial embargo first. I convinced my mother to vote for Obama in 2008, and I convinced her to go to Cuba just weeks before, and I am not the only one. According to the 2014 Florida International Cuba Poll on How Cuban-Americans in Miami View US Policies Towards Cuba, 90% of younger Cuban-Americans, such as myself, favored restoring diplomatic ties. 68% of all Cuban-Americans polled favored the lifting of travel restrictions. 52% of the respondents opposed the embargo completely.

It was easy to see how the younger generation had changed the face of the exile community and made way for the U.S. Cuba Aperture that Obama was talking about right now. What was more complicated was that our parents created us, infused us with the passion that made this happen, that made us turn against them, in order to have them move toward change.

We would reopen an embassy that has been closed since January of 1961, Obama promised. And we would work toward the end of the embargo. Americans would be

allowed to travel, and Cubans would have more access to the world, the world to Cuba. “Nobody represents America’s values better than the American people, and I believe this contact will ultimately do more to empower the Cuban people,” said Obama.

The speech was perfectly crafted. Pointed at all generations, at Americans, at the world, at Cubans inside the island and out. Obama even quoted Martí: “Liberty is the right of every man to be honest.” And then he said the line that made every Cuban, Cuban-American, and American Born Cuban, laugh as they watched and listened: “Cubans have a saying about daily life: “*No es facil*” -- it’s not easy. Today, the United States wants to be a partner in making the lives of ordinary Cubans a little bit easier, more free, more prosperous.”

Obama just said “*No es facil*,” that ever-present Cuban chant. And with that, he connected us. Facebook and twitter lit up with laughter emoji’s at Obama’s inclusion of the Cuban phrase. As a writer, about to teach a writing class, I could not help but be awed by the technique of this speech. I was moved by it, and I thought through it, structurally at the same time, saw the mechanisms behind it. I was being manipulated, and I didn’t care. This was the magic of America. It was brilliant, it was sneaky, it was beautiful, and it was dangerous and powerful all at once. *No es facil*.

“Change is hard -- in our own lives, and in the lives of nations. And change is even harder when we carry the heavy weight of history on our shoulders. But today we are making these changes because it is the right thing to do. Today, America chooses to cut loose the shackles of the past so as to reach for a better future -- for the Cuban people, for the American people, for our entire hemisphere, and for the world.”



I was about to be late for my class, so I turned off my computer, tears still visible in my eyes, and I ran to my young playwrights.

“Write something that will change the world,” I told them that day, “that’s your assignment.”

They complained, but I insisted. And they knew I wasn’t kidding.

“Even if it’s small, even if it’s just somebody’s mind, even if you only change a single mind, write it, write something that will create change. What do you want to change?”

I thought back to my sixteen-year-old self, pumping gas, longing to do something for Cuba. I thought back to all the years I spoke to my parents, told them that things were changing, something was happening, you could feel it, you could read it, you could see it. You could write it. Miami was changing. Cuba was changing. We were changing. And with great change, came great responsibility.

THE END

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