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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

LEAVING LITTLE HAVANA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Cecilia Fernandez

2010

To: Dean Kenneth Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Cecilia Fernandez, and entitled Leaving Little Havana, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Lynne Barrett

Bruce Harvey

Les Standiford, Major Professor

Date of Defense: November 9, 2010

The thesis of Cecilia Fernandez is approved.

Dean Kenneth Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

Interim Dean Kevin O'Shea
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2010

DEDICATION

For my mother, Cecilia Emilia, who survived, and for my children, Alexandra, Andrew and Christopher, who need to know. I love you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Professor Dan Wakefield, mentor and friend, for his untiring support in the seven years that this thesis has been taking shape. His incredible ideas and faith in the project enabled me to finish. I also want to thank Professor Les Standiford, who took over from Dan at the last minute to give invaluable advice, Professor Lynne Barrett, whose lessons on plot will never leave me, and Professor Bruce Harvey for his comments on my work. Thanks also to the Creative Writing Department staff, Marta Lee and Therese Campbell, for all the answers to my questions.

I have found my coursework and interaction with the professors of the Creative Writing Department to be a turning point in my life. Without this program, the talented faculty, and my insightful fellow MFA students, my writing never could have flourished.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

LEAVING LITTLE HAVANA

by

Cecilia Fernandez

Florida International University, 2010

Miami, Florida

Professor Les Standiford, Major Professor

Leaving Little Havana is the story of a young girl who leaves her comfortable middle-class home in La Habana just after the Cuban Revolution and, fighting to overcome cultural and language barriers, forges a new life in Miami. Dealing with a torn identity and discovering her voice are at the center of the narrative. After an endless string of escapades, she finally pulls herself together, learns the value of her inner strength by rising above bleak circumstances and gets accepted to journalism school in California. The book examines the devastating effects of immigration on a family and the struggle of a child of Cuban exiles, coming of age in a foreign society, to beat the obstacles that stand in her way to a stable and satisfying life. The narrator shows that Cuban immigrants share similar challenges with all who have aspired to make America their home.

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CHAPTER ONE

CENTRO MEDICO

My mother walked, pale as the underside of an oyster shell, into the Vedado neighborhood clinic. She breathed in the antiseptic smell of the freshly waxed floors in the Centro Medico and braced herself for the inevitable wave of nausea that left her dizzy. Here she was at 29, praying her baby would be born alive. After ten years of marriage, her yearning for motherhood was so strong that she had spent eight months in bed to avoid a miscarriage in what the doctor had called a high-risk pregnancy.

"I hope this one makes it," she whispered, holding my father's hand. She thought of the first child, the one my father scraped from her uterus, saying he had to finish medical school before he could become a parent. She thought of the second child, the stillborn, who died when she fell climbing the steps on the bus to go to work at the school where she was a teacher. She had not known he was dead. After she labored for hours, the baby slipped out of her, a gray dried-up bundle. Through the curtain of sedatives and painkillers, she saw it was a boy and named him Rafael. He became my phantom brother, passionately desired not only by my mother but by me.

A strong contraction interrupted the guilt and regret that had not eased in the last decade. The contractions came regularly. Now they were stronger, pressing into her so tightly she felt paralyzed. My father, who had been working at another neighborhood clinic when she called him, guided her to the birthing chair, keeping up a lively banter with the doctors and nurses attending to other patients.

Just six months before, members of the left-wing *Ortodoxo* party, some aligned with the Communist Youth, attacked two military barracks on the east end of the island. Some had been murdered, others tortured, still others imprisoned, including the newly

recognized hero, Fidel Castro. Several months later, Castro had appeared at a highly publicized trial after, the rumor went, an attempt was made to poison him.

"And that's the end of Fidel," said a doctor scrubbing at a sink. "He was sentenced to 15 years. His revolution is many years away."

"That doesn't mean anything," my father declared. "This is the beginning of civil war in Cuba and the end of our government."

"Don't be silly, brother," the doctor answered.

A liquid lighter and clearer than water ran down my mother's legs as she walked with short, careful strides. Pain twisted her features.

"You'll see I'm right," my father called out, hoisting my mother's legs up onto the metal stirrups.

When my mother shifted her body into place, she thought about her dead mother. If only she were here to comfort, to encourage; it hurt so much. To the nurse holding her hand, she screamed, "I can't stand it!" Then, her moans stretched into shrieks for twenty-four hours.

At last, with the obstetrician ordering, "Push! Push now!" and with one final convulsion, she expelled my body into the glaring lights of the surgical suite. It was eight in the morning. The obstetrician examined me while my father watched from a corner, dressed in green scrubs. I weighed nearly ten pounds, my mother's third and last conception and only surviving child.

"She looks like a daisy, *una margarita*," my father said. "Let's name her Cecilia Margarita."

I was born on an island, a fertile, mountainous, tropical island encircled by loops and curves of sandy beaches the color and texture of fine sawdust, and locked in the embrace of the sea. When I didn't live there anymore, it was difficult to stop longing for the breezes that relieved the heat's monotony and for that fine sand to caress my toes. It was even more difficult to lie awake in a California rainstorm and not hear ripping thunder and not see lightning spears sparring in the sky.

I was born during a time historians refer to as "pre-revolutionary Cuba," the heyday of the island, which brings up images of Mafia gangster Meyer Lansky, the Las Vegas-style Tropicana Nightclub, foreign conglomerates like the United Fruit Company, and just before the U.S. embargo, the food shortages and the involvement of the Soviet Union. When I traveled throughout the United States in the seventies and eighties, this accident, the place and time of my birth, was the cause of constant comment from students I met: most knew little about Cuba and wondered about its geographical location.

Because I shared a birthday—the 28th of January-- with the writer and hero, Jose Marti, who died on a horse fighting for Cuban independence from Spain in 1897, my birthday was celebrated and remarked upon throughout the island each year. Later, I told friends and colleagues that I had inherited not only Marti's literary talents and uncompromising love of *patria,* nation, but his inclination toward engaging in numerous, tempestuous love affairs.

But on the day of my birth, on that hot January in 1954, my parents were not concerned with the political or literary implications of my life. When my mother came

home from the clinic, embracing a wriggling pink blanket, our housekeeper and my future nanny, Ana Maria, greeted her with cries of reproach.

"Why didn't you sign up for the *canastilla*?" Ana Maria shook her head and took me in her arms to stare disbelieving into my red-rimmed eyes. "You could have won a free *canastilla*, imagine that!" she exclaimed.

That year, WQBA radio had sponsored a contest for mothers whose children were born on Marti's birthday. The lucky families received a free bassinette, a matching set of crib sheets, towels, and baby clothes that usually cost hundreds of dollars.

"That's right, we could have won," my mother agreed, with mock dismay. Everyone knew my *canastilla* had been ready for weeks. When my parents and Ana Maria, who still held me tightly, entered my bedroom, my bassinette was prominently displayed in the center. It was covered with lace and trussed with pink and white satin bows on every corner. A finely textured mosquito net formed a protective cloud over its length. My parents' numerous female relatives had embroidered stacks of linen sheets and cotton coverlets with my initials and piled them on a bureau. An armoire with opened doors showcased mostly pink and white linen and cotton outfits. Drawers were filled with silk cuffed socks and white booties. But the focal point was the étagère where a porcelain china doll, whose hand is meant to be hidden until she grants a wish, stood elegantly next to a smirking Pierrot. A set of glass animals propped up books of European fairy tales.

"I guess we didn't need the *canastilla*," my father said, already suspecting that six years later, the remnants of my sheets and pillowcases, along with the china doll--her hand taped securely to her side-- would be stuffed in crates and suitcases and shipped to a warehouse in Miami.

VILLA AMERICA

My uncle Cesar Perez, born and raised in Galicia, Spain, built his wife a house on a chicken farm surrounded by the sea and named it after her. Villa America stood with its open porch and wooden rocking chairs next to the sandy shores of Playa Baracoa, thirty minutes east of La Habana by car. When I visited on the weekends, I listened for two sounds: the lonely lowing of the cows in the field and the sorrowful wails of the guitar in the *canciones guajiras*, country ballads, Tio Cesar's housekeepers kept tuned on the radio. The air was clean and sharp and smelled of salt.

Cesar, a tall, trim, muscular man with a high forehead, tanned but creased face and thick strands of gray hair falling into his eyes, greeted us at the door. America Castellanos, my maternal grandmother's sister who was also my godmother, stood apart, holding her son's hand. Cesarito, their twenty-year-old son, was afflicted with Down's Syndrome. He forced out joyful grunts, sounding like a walrus, each time he saw me.

"Cesarito, let's go to the water," my mother said almost immediately that day. She loved the ocean. Cesarito pointed to his father and uttered scrambled sounds in a voice distorted and rough. Cesar, wearing a stiffly ironed white *guayabera*, a boxy shirt with pleats in the front, nodded approval.

My mother and I stood ready to go on a wide veranda that encircled the house. The breezes whipped up to a full wind, different from that of a summer's day. My father, with Tio Cesar, America and the housekeeper, Mercedes, who by now was a member of the family, rocked in chairs next to the railing. Two cooks were in the kitchen preparing *lechon asado*, roast pork, and *tostones*, fried green plaintains.

"The best way to cook *flan* is through a method called *bano Maria,"* America said. This was done by steaming the dish in the middle of a pot of boiling water. Mercedes agreed. Then Tio Cesar told a story about leaving Spain for Cuba in 1937, during the Civil War under Generalisimo Francisco Franco. Every word that had the "s" sound turned into a "z" sound in the Spanish way of enunciating. My father listed Franco's attributes, proclaiming him the best leader Spain had ever had.

"That's what we should have here in Cuba, someone like Franco," he said. "Fidel and his brother would have been shot by now."

In May of 1955, Fidel and Raul Castro, along with 18 followers who were involved in an attack on military barracks in July two years before, left the Isle of Pines prison under an amnesty law. They had been sentenced to 15 years. It was Batista's greatest error of judgment: within weeks Castro went to Mexico to form a trained group that would provide the backbone of a guerrilla troop to overthrow Batista. Fidel, the leader of what was now known as the 26 of July Movement, had issued a speech entitled *History Will Absolve Me*, which, the summer before, had appeared in a pamphlet and circulated throughout the island. In the pamphlet, Fidel called for a 15-point program of reforms, including the distribution of land among peasant families, and nationalization of public services, education and industrialization.

"There is no doubt Fidel is a communist," my father said.

"Negotiations with Batista are still possible," Cesar countered. "It's the only way out of this mess. Look, there's a tourism and building boom going on right now. Communism can't come in here."

"Fidel will never forget the defeat of the Moncada barracks. Don't you know he's going to come back from Mexico and try to overthrow Batista?"

"*Vamos*," my mother urged, taking Cesarito's hand and holding me up in the crook of her arm. Cesarito was tall and trim like his father, but with tar black hair that slid into his eyes. He sported a neat but sparse mustache as if each hair were implanted and stood on its own. His walk was lumbering, heavy, uncoordinated. But his arms bulged with muscles. He placed his hand on my mother's waist as she walked toward the shore.

The ocean surrounding Villa America was as transparent as the water in a glass. We sat in a small gazebo with built-in benches suspended above the sea. From there, I looked down and saw seaweed and other plants attached to coral rocks flutter in the ripple of the waves. I focused on small round black marine animals called *erizos* or sea urchins. These were covered with quills as long and sharp as a porcupine's. I wanted to touch them, but Cesarito grunted loudly and shook his head, forcing distorted noises from his throat. Dozens of these creatures clung to rocks along the water's edge. I had no idea that the central portion of the animal was a tender delicacy served as an appetizer. I leaned under the railing of the gazebo, flat on my stomach, and reached toward the water.

Cesarito's grunts heightened into screams and my mother, who had been gazing out to sea with that look of being deep into thoughts that can't be shared, leaned down and pulled me up. "*Ya esta todo*," the cook yelled from the kitchen window that dinner was ready. The singer on the radio screeched a raw protest to the twang of the guitar. With me safely in her arms, my mother walked with Cesarito through the chicken coops on the way to the house. I waved to a cluster of chicks huddled next to a hen. We entered

the gate and a dozen chickens clucked around my mother's heels. A rooster waved his floppy, fleshy comb.

"*Ay, que bonitos,*" my mother crooned as she knelt, and we both stroked whatever feathers we could touch. Mercedes, a short, stocky woman smelling of lard, waded into the tide of chickens and led us out to the dining room where the rest of the family already had sat down, still squabbling about Fidel.

RANCHO LUNA

We slid past wooden shanties and headed out on the main highway of La Habana in my father's stylish new Buick. The hilly Cuban countryside rose up in bright green around us. Nothing is as cool as the shadow of a mountain or as resplendent as a valley going off in all directions. Up and down, the undulating land reached out to the edges of the sea.

It was three in the afternoon, lunchtime on Sunday. A heavy meal at this time of day meant no dinner, only a *café con leche* with toast before bed. My father turned into a bumpy unpaved road with thick trees on both sides. At the end of the road, a clearing leaped out from the heavy brush. Rancho Luna, Moon Ranch, was my favorite restaurant with its open walls, and sandy earthen floors. Thick rough logs held up the ceiling. The owners bragged that 324,000 chickens had been eaten here in the last three years.

We sat at a table in an open wooden structure resembling rural houses called *bohios*, the simple homes of the farmers who lived throughout the countryside. These farmers were *guajiros*, countryfolk who lived underneath roofs thatched with palm fronds, sleeping on earthen floors with rough planks as walls, many of whom harvested the sugar crop that made the island rich. They lived with no bathrooms, no running

water. A ramshackle outhouse stood in the back. A well surrounded with wooden buckets was in the front. These *guajiros* became Cuba's folk heroes, the ones Fidel Castro promised to emancipate. And this restaurant, a replica of their homes, paid tribute to their lives.

It was two days before Christmas, 1956. Earlier this month, Fidel had come back from Mexico on a boat called the Granma and bunkered down in a wooded mountain range, the Sierra Maestra, in the eastern province of Oriente. He shared the space with *bohios* scattered over its length and width.

My father scowled when telling my mother about the communist infiltration of the island. Castro's 26 of July Movement planned to strike during the holidays. Already, bombs were exploding in several towns in Oriente. Batista was on alert, threatening reprisals, including hanging the rebels.

My mother, like Tio Cesar, was skeptical. "*EL Diario de La Marina* has just called us the Las Vegas of Latin America," she said. "How bad can things be? And thanks to the crisis in the Suez Canal, our sugar prices are high."

"It's only a $36 flight to Miami," he said.

"What does that mean?"

On the rough wooden lunch table, the waiter set down platters of *arroz con pollo,* chicken with yellow rice, and *platanos maduros*, ripe fried bananas. My father savored each bite, reached over and tore off a piece of flaky bread from a basket and used it to push the rice onto his fork. My mother tasted small morsels from her fork and left half of the food on her plate. I ate a little of everything, rather than a lot of one thing, just beginning to develop my taste for Cuban food.

"Taste my beer," my father said, tilting his glass toward me, sitting in a high chair between my parents.

I raised the glass to my lips, the foam coming up to my nose like a wave, and tasted the golden liquid. My face contorted. The bitterness repulsed me. My father laughed, and I felt happy because I had made him laugh. I drank water to dissolve the acrid taste and laughed too.

"Rafael," my mother began. "Don't give her that to taste." Her voice was tense.

"Ay, China, what's wrong with it?"

"*Tiene todo de malo*. Everything is wrong with it. Like you. How can I go on living with you after this?" Suddenly, as if the beer tasting had been the last straw, she ripped a letter from her wicker purse gaping open at her feet. She slapped the offending correspondence on the table. My father picked up the letter and withdrew a sheet of onion skin paper.

"*Senora Cecilia, les queremos informar que su esposo, el Dr. Rafael Fernandez Rivas…*" My father read aloud: "Mrs. Cecilia, we want to inform you that your husband, Dr. Rafael Fernandez Rivas…" He stopped, peering at the letter as if what he was seeing was too terrible to voice. He passed his hand over his eyes and through his hair.

My mother pushed her plate away and gripped the table with her hands.

"Don't tell me you are going to believe this," my father choked.

Just beyond our table, several men gathered around a sandy pit. We could see them through the open walls of the restaurant. Two men were holding roosters with leashes around their necks. They went to opposite sides of the pit, took the leashes off and released the birds into the battle arena. The men's shouts increased as spurts of

blood spilled from the necks, eyes, and feet of the angry, suicidal birds attacking each other. My mother jumped up from her chair and stuffed the letter into her purse.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," she whispered. "Don't you love me?"

"I was not unfaithful," he said. My mother walked out to the car, opened the door and threw herself into the seat. My father took a few more bites, lifted me off the high-chair and then paid the bill.

"*Las mujeres son malas*, Cecilita," he said, mumbling over and over that women are bad.

SUNDAY

My grandparents' graves were so close to the street that we could park our car on the curb and walk a few feet to pray for their souls and honor their memory. My mother, dressed in black and wearing a small pillbox hat with a short veil that canopied over her eyes, knelt on the grass.

"*Padre nuestro.*" She whispered *The Lord's Prayer* and arranged fresh roses in the vase she had brought with her last Sunday. She placed the old withered flowers in a plastic bag to discard later.

El Cementerio de Colon was wet from last night's rain. The pointed grass blades held tightly to the raindrops before releasing them to slide back on the stalks. Flowers in vases scattered about the graveyard drooped from the weight of the moisture. Black mud streaked the green grass. Puddles floated in crevices along the rough flat gray tombstones of the poor on one side of the cemetery, while the tall, white marble mausoleums of the rich reflected spears of light a short distance away. The water trapped on the roofs of these tombs the size of rooms evaporated into steam as the mid-day heat gained

momentum. The graves of my grandparents were marked with neatly inscribed white stone, signifying the middle class.

My father, despite the asphyxiating warmth, wore a white linen suit with a blue silk handkerchief in his pocket and a blue silk tie tied in a neat knot. He looked away impatiently from my mother, who sobbed quietly and wiped her nose with a tissue she later tucked between her breasts.

"*Vamos*, China," he called out his pet name for her from the sidewalk. He had the same expression on his face when my mother browsed through a rack of dresses in El Encanto, a department store filled with European fashions.

I stood there for a moment, then ran off to relieve the tension, skipping from one tombstone to another, leaning on the walls of the mausoleums to avoid sinking the tips of my patent leather shoes into the mud. The crinoline under my skirt made the shiny fabric balloon out from my hips like the Dresden dolls on the dining room buffet. Sweat mingled with the steam, dripping into my mouth.

My father shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He took a few steps up and down the sidewalk and climbed into the driver's seat of the car. "We have to go and collect the rents," he called out. My mother owned several houses in a working class neighborhood in the province of Matanzas east of La Habana. Collecting the rent was an important item on our Sunday itinerary. It was an opportunity for me, an only child, to play with the dozens of children on those blocks, although they ran around barefooted while I was not allowed to take off my shoes.

Anxious to play, I ran to the car and urged my mother to get up from her knees. Finally, our car moved off slowly through the narrow, winding roads of the cemetery.

The sleek Buick with long extended wings, leather seats, and cool air blowing out of two small grills on the dashboard moved out into the chaos of a city rebuilding itself. In 1957, La Habana was one of the most vibrant cities in Latin America and the Caribbean and celebrating an impressive building boom.

From the back seat window, I could see the dust of bull-dozers rolling over nineteenth-century homes in the Vedado. In their place, skyscrapers, such as the FOCSA apartment building and the Havana Hilton, were going up. The Capri and Habana Riviera hotels, luxurious castles, were also under construction – the Capri with a swimming pool on its roof on the twenty-fifth floor. More construction could be seen toward the south, inland side of La Habana, on another building center, La Plaza de la Republica, where government ministries were being moved from the old colonial section of the city. Further on, crews were at work on a motorway linking the recently completed Via Blanca that led to the resort town of Varadero with the Central Highway.

It took almost 30 minutes to leave La Habana and begin the smooth cruise out to Matanzas. The name of this province translates into "killings," commemorating the slaughter of Indians there by the Spanish conquerors. Stretches of farmland and sloping hills alternated with clusters of rundown shacks with punched-out holes for windows. Finally, we turned into one of the streets; chickens scooted out of the way and dogs ran barking around the car. Our tires rolled into potholes and uncertainly struggled back out. Groups of children surrounded the moving vehicle. My father maneuvered to a stop in front of a row of small wooden houses with raised porches, the ones where dogs and cats and rats scuttle under when it rains. Rocking chairs with torn seats and backs were lined up neatly near the door.

“Ceci!” a middle-aged woman exclaimed to my mother as she ran out of the first house, drying her hands on her skirt. In most Latin American countries, mothers name their daughters after themselves. The woman’s husband, Cuco, stood on the porch smiling and four children of varying ages gathered around, prying open the car door before I had a chance to move. This was the Fierro family. They had lived here for 20 years. My grandmother, Cecilia, who had owned the row of houses, came out here back then to collect the rent. Now, my mother was the landlord, and the friendship continued.

“Do you want some coffee?” Reina asked.

My father, charismatic and with an easy social manner, accepted heartily and gripped Cuco’s hand with enthusiasm.

“*Oye*,” my father said, “I want to go fishing next weekend. Do you think you can make it?”

In his linen suit, with neatly combed hair and splash of cologne, my father made quite a contrast to the farm laborer who was his host. Cuco was dressed in neat but stained cotton pants and a checkered shirt rolled up to his elbows to hide several rips in the sleeves. My father loved to speak with the country folk and hire them to pilot his boat, take care of his daughter, wash his car, and oil his rifles. An extrovert with a keen interest in people, he developed strong friendships with the renters, often inviting himself over for dinner at their houses. The renters knew that he wouldn’t come empty-handed. He always brought the food – his favorite was a pork and vegetable stew called *ajiaco* -- in huge pots from restaurants and then offered to treat their ailments for free.

While he and Cuco planned their fishing expedition on the porch, my mother went into the kitchen. She wrote out a receipt for the rent money from a big ledger she kept in

a worn leather pouch that belonged to my grandmother. Reina handed her the money. My mother placed the bills in the pouch. Then, with a fork missing a prong, Reina beat a froth of freshly brewed, dark brown espresso with three tablespoons of sugar in a metal container, pouring it back into the rest of the coffee in the pot. This procedure was the secret to the popular Cuban refreshment, *el cafecito*. When she poured the boiling liquid into small cups, the coffee became a thick shot of sugar and caffeine that made hearts beat a quick rhythm. The coffee was seductive and strengthening, reaching the farthest taste bud.

"I need this," my mother said, savoring the liquid. "I just came from the cemetery, and I feel very depressed. I have no energy. All I want to do is lie in bed. How's everything with you?"

Reina opened up a can of papaya chunks dripping with syrup and snuggled them against slices of cream cheese on small plates. My father had brought the family canned fruit preserve last month. Reina handed a plate to my mother and took two to the men on the porch. Then she tore large bread chunks from long loaves, crispy on the outside, soft on the inside, soaked them with olive oil and sprinkled them with salt for the children.

"Ceci, we have had such a bad week," Reina answered. "The rain is seeping into the kitchen and the bathroom sink is plugged up."

My mother frowned. She wasn't as generous as my father and always maintained distance with those she considered were not her equals.

"Rafael," she called out the front door in an exasperated tone. "Where's the phone number of the workman we use in this town?"

My father retrieved it from a small phonebook in the inner pocket of his suit coat. He wrote the name and phone number of every person he knew in this book.

"Here," my mother told Reina, "is the number. Call him and I'll pay for it. He can also fix the roof."

Tiring of a game of hide and seek outside, I had been sitting on the floor playing jacks with Isabelita, who was a few years older. Joseito, with a mouthful of crooked teeth and slightly crossed eyes, had followed and now ran to my father. "Doctor, doctor," he cried, "my bump is gone."

My father felt the boy's glands. He had operated on Joseito a few months ago, extracting a large tumor from his neck.

"*Que bueno*, Joseito," my father laughed and patted his head.

Finally it was time to go to the next house. My mother closed her ledger.

"I'm looking forward to catching a big sailfish next Saturday," my father spoke excitedly to Cuco. "We'll meet at the marina at 4 a.m."

"Don't forget the beer," Cuco answered. "And listen," he added as an afterthought. "Do you think there will be more trouble with the government? Don't you think Fidel will help the poor like us?" All over the island, there were reports of arbitrary police executions and arrests leading to permanent disappearances. Bombs and Molotov cocktails erupted in schools, buses, stores, streets.

A few months earlier, Fidel had organized a guerilla army against Batista and set up camp in a wooded mountain range one-hundred miles long, La Sierra Maestra. Castro called his stronghold in the mountains "Territorio Libre" and delivered broadcasts to the people on short wave radios, coaxing them to join him.

Many professionals in La Habana were apathetic, desensitized to the incessant political skirmishes that, from the time of Christopher Columbus, characterized island life. They trusted that Batista, in the midst of one of the greatest economic expansions in the history of Cuba, with millions of dollars in American capital at stake, would call for elections and appease the Castro opposition. But just last week, in a move that took my father by surprise, the Cuban Medical Association issued a letter of protest against Batista. I heard my father say that the doctors were getting tired of Batista's heavy handed methods, often sending the G-2, his dreaded political police, to break up their gatherings.

"The G-2 will pale in comparison to what Fidel has in mind," my father said. "These doctors are communist."

With a sudden spurt of energy, he faced Cuco. "Fidel will enslave the poor," he declared. "Things are bad, my friend. Our country is in a state of civil war. *El Presidente Eisenhower* y *los Americanos* say they will not intervene in Cuba. One day, we may have to flee for our lives."

"Maybe not," Cuco answered.

ELSIE

Before I was born, my mother said, whenever any of the aunts, uncles or cousins spoke about Elsie Lopez, he or she inevitably added the word *solterona*, spinster, as if the forty-something family friend was suffering from leprosy. Indeed, at her age in Cuban middle-class society, Elsie was beyond the possibility of getting a husband. But then, a year after my grandmother died in 1943, and to everyone's surprise, she married my grandfather, Francisco Vargas, a pharmacist and chemistry professor at the University of

La Habana. When she became a wife, a role I never thought suited her, the family gossip turned in another direction. Now she was a seductress, with *fuego uterino,* literally having her uterus on fire, a nymphomaniac.

"How could he marry her?" my mother asked. "Your grandmother was so beautiful. And Elsie is so ugly." She was jealous and angry that my grandfather had married Elsie so quickly after her mother's death. My grandmother, Cecilia Castellanos, a graduate of La Escuela del Hogar, a school for girls intent on learning the tasks of wife and mother, died of a brain aneurism when my mother was 18.

"It was a terrible sight to see," my father said the afternoon his mother-in-law died. "When they called me to the house, Cecilia's head was swollen out of all proportion. She had no chance to survive."

My mother, an only child, refused to speak to Elsie for a year after the wedding, insisting her new step-mother "is so ugly."

"And your mother was so lazy," my father argued back. "She used to lie in bed all day. I think your father needed someone on his level."

Elsie was an English teacher, tall, slender, with small but compassionate black eyes that gazed into yours with intelligence and understanding. She rolled her prematurely white hair into a tight bun at the nape of her neck. When she became a presence in my life, I noticed she wore mainly black, flowing clothes, in mourning for my cigar-smoking grandfather who died of a heart attack in November of the same year I was born.

"How could such a smart man not know that his indigestion was a sign of heart trouble?" my father asked everyone. My quiet and gentle grandfather had been his role

model. “The happiest time of my life was when I lived with my father-in-law,” my father said at the funeral.

No one ever knew if Elsie was happy with my grandfather because the couple stayed out of everyone’s way as if there were some illegitimacy surrounding their relationship. But I soon heard that Elsie, who, like many upper-middle class Cubans of her generation, had been educated in the United States, and was a match not only for my grandfather but also for my father when her politics began to veer left. She articulated her arguments succinctly to anyone within hearing distance. She sympathized with the poor and decried the corruption in Batista’s government.

In 1958, she thought Fidel, who was now openly broadcasting his leftist views from Radio Rebelde in La Sierra Maestra, was a good alternative. That year, Batista stepped up his election plans but strikes, an arms embargo against him, and calls from the Cuban bishop for peace kept excitement and tension in the air. Murders, bombings and disappearances were in the papers every day.

One afternoon, on one of our now frequent visits to Elsie, who had finally won over my proud mother, I overheard a muffled phone call in the kitchen.

“*Si*, take the provisions to the designated place in Oriente,” Elsie said into the phone. “There will be someone waiting there.” Later, I realized that Elsie, along with many other Cuban professionals, had been active in delivering food and supplies to the guerrilla army Fidel had organized in the mountains.

When Elsie came back to the living room, my mother began to speak to her rapidly in English. It was their private language, the one that held all my mother’s secrets and kept them away from me, something I resented then and now. The staccato sounds

hit my ears like pebbles thrown against a wall. The sounds were harsh and jumbled up into a massive outpouring of blows into the air. I found out later the secret words were about my father's infidelities. When I went to the bathroom, she switched to Spanish.

"I got another letter today," my mother said, staring out the window of Elsie's small apartment. "It must be directly from his mistress this time. She says there's a baby. A baby boy. Could this be possible? Could this woman have borne him a son?"

I heard despair in my mother's voice but quickly forgot it on the couch shuffling a pack of cards. Ironically, the card game was called Old Maid. My mother's tragic face frowned into the emptiness outside. What could all this talk be about?

Elsie, an avid reader of philosophy, literature and history, stopped unpacking a box of books that she was placing on a long shelf under the window. I saw that it looked like an encyclopedia. The name "Lenin" was on each volume, but it didn't mean anything to me then. My mother was oblivious to the books and tightly crossed her arms in front of her with a shudder as if shielding herself against a cold wind.

"Ceci, maybe there is nothing to these letters," Elsie said. "Maybe it's someone who wants to do a lot of damage."

"He denies it," my mother said. "But I know it is the truth."

I placed the cards on the coffee table and flipped through my grandfather's chemistry textbook, the one he wrote with his colleague Daniel Carrera. Then I spied the scrapbook. I turned each thick page slowly, taking in the smell of paper and glue. Each week, Elsie cut out a comic strip of a stray but intrepid mixed-breed dog named Scamp from the newspaper *El Diario de la Marina.* She pasted the week's installment in the scrapbook and when I visited we went through Scamp's new adventures.

“Cecilita,” she said to me, walking away from her pile of books now scattered on the floor. “Let’s look at what has happened to Scamp since you were here last! Here he is standing on top of a doghouse and looking down at the children. What do you suppose he could have done now?”

In her Vedado apartment, after my grandfather’s death made her a widow, Elsie continued to tutor students in English in a spare bedroom. It was a small apartment with two small sofas, and a table piled with papers. A photograph of me on the beach decorated one wall. My mother was now straightening the frame, which was tilted to one side.

“Let’s play Old Maid, Elsie. I love Old Maid,” I cried. The rules of the game were simple. Players matched up the doubles and chose a card from the other’s hand in order to make pairs. Whoever had the Old Maid at the end of the game lost.

“Elsie, why do you always know where my Old Maid is?” I complained, continuously the loser.

“*Mi hijita*,” she leaned closer to whisper. “Don’t be so predictable. You always put your Old Maid on the right side. I know exactly where she is, so I avoid her.”

I looked aghast at my new hand. Yes, there was the Old Maid, on the right side where I always placed her. Disappointment darkened my eyes. To brighten the mood, Elsie jumped up, offered my mother a glass of freshly-squeezed limeade and took a small box from a cabinet.

“Let’s see what this is,” Elsie said, handing the box to me.

I lifted out a pair of long, red, dangling earrings. Red beads and white crystals were woven together in delicate ropes, sparkling in the now waning light from the

window. I laughed with joy and jumped up and down with delight. I couldn't stop laughing as I held them up to my ears and admired myself in the small mirror on the other wall. My mother turned away and blew her nose into a wad of tissue she retrieved from the cuff of her long sleeved sweater.

THREE PATIOS

I

Our front patio jutted out like a pouting lip over the sidewalk below. From its dizzying height on our third floor apartment in fashionable Nuevo Vedado, I watched Senor Pablo hurrying home in the evenings to eat *bacalao* prepared by his cook; the delicious odors of the marshmallow-soft codfish submerged in olive oil and garlic floated up to reach us. In the mornings, before school, I watched yellow-haired Oscarito across the street assemble armies of plastic soldiers on the living room carpet. In the afternoons, I could see Senorita Carmen in the corner house playing the piano while her mother stood by the window singing an aria from the Spanish operetta, *La Gran Via.* Sometimes her voice competed with the whine of lawn mowers as gardeners trimmed the hedges surrounding Colegio Kopi down the street, where I went to kindergarten.

If I stared straight down long enough, the mottled granite of the porch on the first floor began to move like waves. To one side, the edges of two wooden rocking chairs with woven cane seats and backs, where Carlito's grandparents rocked in the dusk, swayed in and out of my field of vision. But my favorite place to view was the front patio of the apartment building right next door. There I could clearly see four-year-old Cristy playing with a pile of toys so big it looked like a barricade. The building was only an arm's length away, and, from our patios, Cristy and I carried on daily conversations.

"Cecilita, do you want to play?" Cristy called out. Above a smooth, complacent face, golden lights sparked from her thick hair, which seemed to be on fire in the sunlight. I, on the other hand, had thin, dull, limp, brown hair, but people thought my eyes shone with life and emotion and my face reflected a variety of feelings.

"Do you have your dolls with you?"

Playing with Cristy really meant talking back and forth from our front and back patios on spacious flats that took up an entire floor. But my apartment was special because it also had a side patio. Hers didn't. What is it about our first homes that hold us hostage to the past?

It was December 1958. Civil war finally had erupted in Cuba. Radio Rebelde transmitted daily broadcasts from Fidel up in La Sierra Maestra, asking for support. As I played on the front patio with Cristy on her patio, I could hear the radio and, beyond that, arguments between my parents. That day I had lined up chairs and created a classroom. I wanted to be a teacher like my mother. Cristy had done the same on her patio, and we took turns teaching the dolls.

"Stop arguing," I called out to my parents, holding a book of fairy tales from which I was reading to the dolls seated on rows of chairs.

"We're not arguing," they answered. I could hear the murmurs about infidelity, a few jealous exclamations, and tense words about Fidel, hiding with a band of followers.

"*Sigo repitiendo, eso es comunismo*," my father said of Castro's rumored coup against Batista. The island's communist party now openly backed Fidel.

Before going to bed that evening, my father told my mother that her stepmother, Elsie, had admitted she supported Castro. "We should not talk to Elsie ever again," my

father cried. The words bounced hard against the wall of my bedroom next to his. “We have to leave Cuba.” Lying down, I moved the mosquito net aside to let in more air.

II

When Ana Maria was 15, my grandmother hired her to keep house and later help care for her only child, my mother. Ana Maria, who lived in Matanzas on a small farm, jumped on a milk truck early every Monday morning to go to work in La Habana and stayed at my grandmother’s until Saturday evening when she went back home on the same milk truck. This country woman with her hair tucked in a pompadour all around her head and her eyes aglow with love was now my caretaker.

“Por favor, Ceci,” Ana Maria begged my mother. “Take Cecilita with you to school. It’s her birthday. She’ll behave better tomorrow; she promised.”

A descendant of Spaniards who went bankrupt in Cuba, Ana Maria wore flowing flowered dresses and a pair of tiny pearl earrings my grandmother had given her as a gift years ago.

“Impossible,” my mother cried. “I am going to punish her.” My mother, who was beautiful, stylish, and in her thirties, wore her hair in a cloud around a face so white and smooth my father called her “La China.” She worked as a teacher of English as a second language at the Centro de Ingles Numero Ocho from six to nine in the evenings. I loved to sit in her class, so this was maximum punishment. I stayed silent, knowing it would do no good to protest.

Amparo, a tall black woman who my mother hired to help Ana Maria look after me, tried her influence. Her family came to the island long ago in a slave ship, in chains.

"*Senora*, it wasn't the girl's fault," she said. Running through the living room, I had bumped into the buffet and caused a crystal vase to crash to the floor.

"Don't interfere," my mother retorted.

Amparo, who wore a blue, checkered uniform with a short dainty white apron around her waist, rolled her eyes. Both she and Ana Maria, in their 50's, took the bus from their homes early each morning to my house to take care of me while my mother graded papers, visited family and friends, or went shopping. Then they took the bus home when my mother went to work. Ana Maria still traveled each day from her farm in Matanzas and Amparo from the nearby *solar*, or slum, that at night resonated with the African drum rolls of *santeria* rites.

And now, because my mother did not relent, my fate was to spend the night, not with these two kind women but with a trio of maids who lived with us, a cook, a washer woman and a cleaning woman. They were my babysitters at night until my mother came home. These three were sisters, whose names I can't remember, in their early twenties, slender, and with caramel colored skin. All had frizzy hair pulled back in small buns covered with nets. Their eyes were round, hard, black. They lived in the "maid's quarters" in the side patio that opened out from the kitchen.

This patio was lined with large steel wash basins. In the center, a wrought iron table with several chairs served as an outdoor breakfast area. The floor tile was chipped and uneven, unlike that of my front or back patios. Suspended from above, a long white clothesline sagged with the wet weight of my father's pants, shirts and *camisetas* or undershirts. Our apartment had no air conditioning. So the kitchen door was always open to catch the breeze, making the patio impossible to ignore.

That night, as I sat eating dinner, two of the maids dressed up in my mother's fancy house-robes while the third continued to clean up the kitchen. One had on a rich, red velvet robe with a high collar. The other wore a soft midnight blue satin with a gold sash. The two had let their hair free from the habitual nets. The black fuzz around their heads jerked up and down as they paraded in front of me, making strange whistling sounds and twisting their arms over their heads as in a Flamenco dance.

"What are you doing?" I asked, confused. They ignored me, continuing with their bizarre shuffling steps.

"*No hay nadie ahi*," the third maid told me. "There's nobody there. It's your imagination." I looked hard at the two women. Maybe I was imagining them, as I often imagined people sitting with me on my front and back patios. I looked hard again and reached out to touch the sleeve of one of them. They were real.

I couldn't eat anymore. I had a floating feeling in my stomach. Fear and anger propelled me to action. I was angry they were wearing my mother's clothes and fearful of the trickery in their tones of voice. I ran out to the side patio, rushed into the maids' room and locked the door behind me. I lay on the narrow cot, looking out the window that opened to the empty field beyond but the pane was frosted and I couldn't see anything.

The maids ran after me, laughing and pounding on the door. One made a low moaning sound and, leaning out the patio wall, she reached over to the window and waved a white cloth in front of it, making the rag dance like a tired ghost. The heat closed in. With the door and window closed, I was sweating. It would be a long time before my mother came home, but here in this room the door had a lock and they couldn't get to me.

"Cecilita, come out," one of them called. "You have to go to bed now."

"Forget about her," another decided. "Let's just do what we always do before *la senora* comes home."

"Chango!" the third shouted. "Obatala!"

They called forth Yoruban gods that in the Afro-Cuban religion called *santeria* coincide with Roman Catholic saints, asking them to intercede on their behalf to almighty God. I had heard this from the maids' conversations in the kitchen. They chanted in a strange language. But the sounds were familiar. I had heard them many times before falling asleep in my bed, and I realized now this was a nightly ritual, just louder tonight since my parents weren't home. Laughing, shrieking, they beat on the now overturned wash basins, their tortured voices swirling in the space outside in rebellion. I was in their world of the invisible, in the land of the dead where descendants of African slaves regularly communed with ancestors.

"*Llevame.* Take me," one of them cried out.

A wave of tobacco smoke sneaked under the door. Then a pungent burning spice mingled with the smoke. I sneezed, but did not move from the bed. I turned my face into the pillow that smelled of sweat and unwashed hair and closed my eyes. I started singing in a low voice as was my custom before going to sleep:

El patio de mi casa no es particular

Si llueve, se moja como los demas.

(The patio of my house isn't special

If it rains, it gets wet like all the rest.)

I dozed, dreaming I was inside my house, but the ceiling was filled with holes. When I looked up, raindrops pelted my face. I climbed a ladder to patch the holes with tissue paper. But the flimsy material absorbed the water into a wad that fell out.

III

Early on the morning of the first day of 1959, I woke up with a sore throat. "Rafael, *la nina* gets a cold every week," my mother spat the words at my father.

"She has to go again for aerosol treatments twice a week," my father offered as a solution. These treatments were part of Saturday morning errands. I went to a clinic and sat in what looked to be a dentist's chair, breathing through a tube. The warm steam from a mentholated liquid filled my lungs with the mist my father said could cure my frequent upper respiratory infections.

My nose was running. I was sneezing. The fever made my movements appear as in slow motion and sounds were forced as if through a tunnel of echoes. I felt dizzy, but my mission was to escape into the cool breeze of my back patio that reached out over a field to touch the edge of the sky. The entire floor, suspended in air, was a haven from the tension of my household. My mother was furious about another anonymous letter she had received outllining an affair between a nurse and my father. My father, meanwhile, was in an uproar about the stand-off between Castro, who stressed government reforms, and Batista, who promised elections soon. Here in the open back patio, the howls dissolved into whispers.

I peered through the wire fence my father had attached along the top of the wall to enclose the patio and keep our Boston terrier, Negrito, from jumping out into the field three floors below. Instead, our dog jumped against the fence as if to catch a glimpse of

the field and bounced back. He did this constantly every time he was in the patio and now the fence was bent over like a hunchback. To me, the field was not just an arid grassy expanse with clumps of bushes scattered in careless patterns. It was my sketchbook. On its emptiness I painted stories about my family, my friends, the streets of La Habana Vieja, the spires of the cathedral in the center of a cobblestoned plaza. I held the images out there on the field to look out for a long time. In this patio, I was free to imagine in silence, and every day I came out onto the chalky-red Mexican tile to dream.

I imagined scenarios about poor children and hungry mothers begging on street corners as I had read in the stories "The Little Match Girl" and "The Red Shoes" by Hans Christian Anderson. Elsie's comic strip dog Scamp became the hero in several stories where he took food and provisions to dying people stuck in snowdrifts. Soldiers in olive green uniforms with muskets at their sides figured prominently in several plots since I had recently seen them line up on the street corners.

This first morning of the year, after taking a strong dose of tetracycline, the antibiotic that stained children's teeth an orange-yellow, I sang and cranked the hand gear on the sturdy *Tio Vivo*. This contraption was a merry-go-round with two seats at opposite ends somewhat like a seesaw that my paternal grandparents had assembled in the middle of the patio. I whizzed around in a circle, leapt out of the seat and skipped inside the wooden playhouse, resembling a miniature home. Elsie had brought me this beautiful little playhouse for Christmas.

I stood up to my full height in the playhouse. I slammed the door closed and leaned out the window with shutters that closed against the rain. Inside was a little girl's paradise: a small steel stove and refrigerator, a round table with four chairs, a crib with a

baby doll, a high chair and shelves lined with stuffed animals. My playhouse was also filled with books. They were scattered everywhere: on the stove, the table, inside the crib and on the high chair. Here, as in the front patio, I set up dolls in the chairs to resemble a classroom. Piles of papers, colored pencils, and notebooks were in one corner. Instead of mixing a meal on the stove for the dolls, I sat them there for lessons.

I imagined a girl who lived on the next block seated at the table with the dolls. She needed a lesson this morning because her family couldn't pay for the school in the neighborhood. This was a little girl my age, with serious, silent tar-black eyes. In the mornings as I passed her house with Ana Maria on the way to school, she ran out barefooted and stared, wearing dresses resembling potato sacks. One time, I stopped and looked inside her open door.

"*Nina*," Ana Maria warned, "don't be so curious. It's rude."

Inside, I saw two rocking chairs with the woven cane seats ripped in several places. A bed with a rumpled, stained coverlet was against a wall. Three other children gazed blankly from the window. Their hair was uncombed, lying in tangled, greasy clumps. One child had a red scarf tied around his head. Another wore a long necklace of gold plastic beads. No parents were in sight.

"They're gypsies," Ana Maria whispered. "Your mother wouldn't like it. They are not the same as you."

But I was so drawn to this gypsy girl, I insisted on visiting her several times a week. One time, I dressed in one of my mother's wide skirts which reached down to the floor. I strapped a belt around my waist and stepped into her high-heeled shoes. We

walked down block to her house, Ana Maria peeking out from the parasol she used against the sun and me gaily talking up a storm and showing off my long skirt.

Even at that early hour of the first day of the year, as my imagination called forth beach scenes and neighbors and family dinners and I kept up a steady coughing, the new black and white television set in the living room exploded with chanting that intruded into my daydreams. The country had been taken over by Fidel.

"*Cuba si, Yankees no. Cuba si, Yankees no*." The chanters were in a frenzy. The news anchor delivered sharp words I couldn't make out. I ran out of the playhouse and went inside, making my way carefully past the mahogany buffet filled with gold-edged plates and cups, imported from England by my maternal grandmother years ago when she was a bride. My father, unshaven, sat in front of the TV holding his head in his hands, rocking back and forth. I looked at the screen and saw people waving their arms in a plaza, what came to be known as La Plaza de la Revolucion. Ana Maria and Amparo, my caregivers, were seated with my mother next to the television. The three other maids stared at the images on the screen from the hallway shadows.

"The peasants are our heroes," Fidel Castro told the crowd as he and his group of revolutionaries marched down from their outpost in La Sierra Maestra and into Santiago to begin an eight-day march to La Habana. The men who had holed up in the mountains with Fidel during those long months waved to supporters who flanked their slow moving vehicles. Bearded and dressed in olive green fatigues, the men made stops at Channel 2, at radio station CMQ, and the newspaper *Revolucion* and announced their victory over the deposed Batista who, after a New Year's Eve party the night before, fled from La Habana to exile in Miami.

“What are we going to do?” my mother asked my father.

My father looked at the maids who were shifting their weight from one foot to another in the hallway. “Nothing right now,” he mumbled. “Tell the maids to hurry with the dinner preparations. Our guests are arriving at 4 o’clock.”

That afternoon, my uncle Cesar, my paternal grandparents Amalia and Rafael, doctor friends of my father’s and several of my mother’s cousins and aunts sat down to dinner with us. But by then, my sore throat forced me into bed, and all I could hear until I fell asleep was the clanking of crystal and the swish of hushed tones.

MY FATHER

Soon after the official triumph of the revolution, the television news broadcast Fidel Castro dividing large privately-owned farms into tracts for state control. With much fanfare, he parceled out land owned by the deposed Batista to the peasants, talking about an agricultural initiative he had just launched. Fidel sat smiling, signing documents, promising elections, his face showing patches of skin where his curly beard refused to grow. His olive green headgear, like a baseball cap forced into the shape of a box, stood firmly up like a crown. The tips of his ears, like large mussels, extended over the edges of the cap. His deep set eyes gazed at the camera at an angle.

“That’s how communism starts,” my father said, watching the news. “The rich lose their property first, then the middle class. Soon we’ll all be cutting cane out in the fields.”

For weeks, there had been looting in the streets of La Habana. Screams and gunshots mingled in the hot air. Men filled with revolutionary fervor invaded the casinos. Others smashed the Shell Petroleum headquarters. Fidel called for a general

strike to mark the end of the old regime, and Batista's officials were rounded up, jailed or killed. The bearded men of Fidel, the *barbudos*, were everywhere in La Habana now, running up and down the steps of the Presidential Palace and crowding into all the public places.

My father sat in silence for a while. It was rare for us to be alone. But when we were, he conversed with me as if I had the understanding of an adult, speaking of politics as easily as of literature and women. But today, his mood was somber and the government revolt was the only topic on his mind.

"The owners of Bacardi Rum and Hatuey Beer," he said, "have offered to pay their taxes in advance to show support for those *barbudos.* They don't know yet they'll be boarding planes out of this country anytime now. That is, if they escape with their lives." He talked about the economy, ruined now, and the kidnappings and hijackings of the past months.

We watched as the television news rebroadcast Fidel's arrival in La Habana, on the eighth day of January. Signs inscribed with *Gracias, Fidel* met him and his group as they drove slowly in jeeps and tanks. Fidel held a rifle with a telescopic lens at his side. My father frowned. His black hair was slicked back with grease. His long lashes shaded caramel-colored eyes streaked with light. His gaze was open, inquiring, unlike the impenetrable black of my mother's, as if a curtain had dropped on stage after a performance. His skin color, always a matter of concern to Cubans vigilant about the mixture of black and European blood, was the shade of light toast. He wore a crisp white shirt and smelled of cologne.

"Life as we know it," he said, "is over forever."

My father was a man who went everywhere with a book in his hand. He read Agatha Christie mysteries and histories of the Greek and Roman empires. “I memorized the entire periodic table for a chemistry exam,” he bragged once. He liked beautiful women like Elizabeth Taylor and Lana Turner, stopping in his tracks if one walked by him on the street. On Sundays, he concocted saltimbocca and crepes Suzette from gourmet cookbooks. As a gynecologist he made a comfortable, but not extravagant, living. Fishing expeditions were his favorite outings.

One morning in the height of summer, shooting across the choppy waves of the ocean in his boat, I saw him struggle with a marlin which, as in Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, refused to give up. In his excitement, my father tripped over buckets of sardines he used as bait, letting the line run and then reeling it in. Several other men were there as well as my mother. I cowered in a corner, watching and listening to shouts and curses. Finally, with one superhuman heave my father hauled his prey on board. The fish spanned more than five feet in length. When it slammed against the floor, I screamed and covered my face with my hands. The fish gasped for air, twitching energetically. My father took out a small revolver from the waistband of his pants and pumped several bullets into the writhing fish. His face was red not only from the sun but from the pleasure of triumph. That was my father in the prime of life. That was my father up to the moment of his death.

“No more fishing for a while,” he said as he turned off the television.

In November 1959, my father was gone. I never saw him pack a suitcase. He never said good-by. Although his absences were nothing new to me during my early years, this absence was different. Now, it was quiet in my parent’s bedroom. The three maids left.

I asked few questions, involved with my own life of books and toys. I assembled a family of dolls to keep me company: a ceramic one with a carefully painted face that Elsie had given me, a boy doll I named Rafaelito after my father, and a dancing doll exactly my size whose feet I wrapped around my ankles with ribbons so I could waltz with her around the room.

But when I finally did ask, "Where's my father?" my mother had an answer.

"He went to Mexico to get an American visa for us," she said. "We're going to leave the country soon." The day of departure was still too far away to worry about. My days continued their leisurely rhythm; my mother was silent as always, while my father, I later found out, filled out paperwork in Mexico City, and slept on a pallet on the floor in the house of Cuban friends who also opposed Fidel.

"I had to carry a knife everywhere I went," I overheard him say at a party years later. "Mexico City is a savage city, a barbaric, dirty city filled with disease and thieves. Women making tortillas sitting on the sidewalk slap mosquitoes right into the batter."

On the same day that he took a plane to Mexico, his executioners came to the door of the clinic where he worked. He was convinced Castro's police had come to kill him. They smashed cabinets and destroyed lamps and equipment.

"I outsmarted them," he told me. "They had no idea I would be gone by then. My cousin told me they would come for me sooner or later. I was against Castro. I told everybody he was a communist and that our property would be taken away. Someone turned me in. I didn't care who it was because I knew I would leave before anyone came to get me."

But other dissenters weren't as lucky. They didn't leave La Habana in time and were dragged out of their homes or offices, shoved into waiting cars and disappeared. Why didn't they take my mother or me instead? My father thought perhaps Elsie, who supported Castro's government, exerted her influence and protected us. He remembered that, as he prepared to leave, Elsie insulted him for his lack of loyalty to what she called the rebuilding of Cuba.

"There was a bureaucratic snag with the money I was taking out of the country," my father said. "Elsie laughed and said I deserved it. But she didn't want you to be hurt."

After his departure, my mother, who had resigned from her teaching job, listened more intently to the goings on in the neighborhood. She watched from the front patio, the side patio, the back patio. Shouting in the street always made her run to a window. "There might be retribution from the neighbors because your father left," she said. "And we can't leave until he has a job in the United States. I hope he gets one soon."

My nannies, Ana Maria and Amparo, still came every day to help clean or do the laundry. They whispered and never spoke aloud. "*La querida*, his mistress," I overheard them say. "She went with him. Ceci must suspect this. I called the clinic and they said she left the country."

If my mother suspected that my father had dared to make such a brash move, she accepted it quietly. She, too, wanted to leave. "Communism is intolerable to me," she said. "They're already sending the teachers out to the fields to work in the literacy campaign for the *guajiros.* It's a miserable existence out in the country, and I don't want to go." And, she added, she thought her marriage had a better chance outside of the island, and that had nothing to do with Castro.

As we waited to get word from my father, everything around us changed rapidly, just as my father had predicted. Contingents of peasants rode their horses to La Habana in support of agrarian reform. A new law empowered the state to take over failing firms, allowing officials to carry out the nationalization of hotels and the companies Bethlehem Steel and International Harvester. Castro traveled to Washington, DC and shook hands with Vice-President Richard Nixon, denying accusations of imposing a communist regime, while the Russian vice president visited the island to negotiate buying the sugar crop. And Castro's political police was now almost as feared in "bourgeois" circles as Batista's had been, arresting anyone on charges of conspiracy.

One night, an electrician worked for hours in our apartment and left a gaping hole in the wall of the side patio. He said the new air conditioning unit my father had installed months ago was malfunctioning, and he would try to get a replacement. The electrician took the unit with him, and my mother placed a sheet over the hole to keep out mosquitoes. I sensed her fear about the opening on our side patio wall. The hole made our apartment vulnerable to the discontent now evident everywhere. A neighbor whispered that a woman had been found dead in the field in back of our building.

"I hope that because we're on the third floor," she told Ana Maria, "it will be difficult for someone to climb in."

But the hole transformed our already questionable peace into constant anxiety. We watched the hole and waited for the electrician to come back. He never did.

COLEGIO KOPI

Each morning, my nanny Ana Maria walked me to Colegio Kopi, a private neighborhood pre-school just two blocks away from home. The school was in a two-story

house with a wide verandah clinging to the edges like a bib. It had several classrooms, a kitchen, and two baths. It had a fenced-in front yard where we marched around the slide to Philip Sousa's *Stars and Stripes Forever* in a display of patriotic fervor. For Fidel Castro or for Fulgencio Batista, I never knew. But as we marched each morning and afternoon in that enclosed space with the wet grass and mud sticking to our shoes, life as we knew it was transforming into something no one had ever dreamed possible.

Neighborhood watch committees or *Comite de Defensa Revolucionario* were organized to quell dissent against Fidel. Cries of *"al paredon,"* to the execution wall, filled the streets. The new government abolished Santa Claus as an imperialist idea and a hated United States import. The Institute for Agrarian Reform took over another 70,000 acres of U.S. owned property. And, while the United States and Fidel haggled over sugar prices, the Soviets increased their presence on the island. In March, a French freighter, bringing 76 tons of war material to La Habana harbor, exploded, killing and maiming hundreds of Cuban dockers. Fidel accused the imperialist "Yankees" of sabotage and on television, frenzied demonstrators screamed "*Cuba si, Yankees no*," while waiving giant placards of Fidel's likeness.

A year after the Revolution, the students of Colegio Kopi had escaped the curriculum change to Marxist theory because the school had not yet been nationalized. But we watched with interest as the *Pioneros*, children committed to the Revolution, wearing red kerchiefs around their necks, saluted *El Comandante* and shook hands with him on television as he outlined his literacy campaign in an eight-hour speech. Most parents did not explain what was going on. They were secretive, often stopping in mid-sentence when anyone entered the room. We absorbed the metamorphosis of our lives as

a feeling that nothing stays the same. Since my father left Cuba a few months before, it felt as if I had emerged from a dark room in a photo lab. Everything was filled with a dazzling light, and it was hard for my eyes to adjust. The rumors of invasion by the United States, conspiracy within our own government, and violence against anyone who disagreed with Fidel sharpened our senses to danger. The anarchy in the air made me feel free, of what I couldn't name, and I responded with unruly behavior both at school and at home.

I was particularly cruel to Guillermito, a fellow student who sat in front of me at Colegio Kopi. Whenever anyone spoke to him, he lowered his eyes in shame. He walked lightly, as if fearing his step might make a permanent indentation on the soft mud that circled our school. His presence was like a spirit hovering around the rest of us rowdy students. His eyes, streaked with green and orange, were filled with a sadness that should not have been there at his age. His hair was greased flat on his head and parted deeply on the left side, making him look as if he were wearing a shiny helmet like the ones pagan warriors wore, believing they were at the mercy of forces beyond their control. It was this passive acceptance of fate that stirred in me a feeling of scorn. I wanted to humiliate him. And one day, as he sat at his desk with head bent, staring at his folded hands, I did.

"*Maestra*," I said. "Guillermito insulted me. He said bad words." I spoke convincingly.

"Guillermito, is this true?" Senorita Adela, a fashionable young woman with short hair, dressed in a snug flowered dress and black, patent leather high heels, came up to his desk.

"No," he whispered, still looking down.

"Speak up! Tell me the truth!"

Shame flushed his ears red. He coughed. I could see his profile as his face crumbled before delivering a strenuous sneeze, launching a missile of green and yellow muck thick as applesauce, and, I noted in a flash of recognition, the color of his eyes, right onto his open notebook in front of him. I watched in repulsion from my seat behind him as the slime dripped off the desk to the floor. Exasperated, Senorita Adela took Guillermito by the arm and led him to the bathroom in back.

"Wash your mouth," she ordered. "And get some tissue to clean up your desk."

Guillermito, with the most downcast face I have yet to see, slumped forward as he walked with Senorita Adela. He took up a piece of white melted soap from a holder, opened the faucet, wet the soap and worked up a good lather. He looked out over everyone's head, blankly, and scrubbed his mouth. The students snickered behind their hands. And when he walked back to his desk to wipe up his snot and then laid his head down on his arm to hide his eyes, I laughed the loudest.

At home, I liked the freedom I felt when my mother was out running errands.

"*Oye*," I yelled at the cook, just days before she was dismissed.

"Go play with your dolls," she urged, busily scrubbing the sink.

"This is my doll," I announced, dragging a lantern that was at least two feet tall. I had dressed it up in my old baby clothes. I lifted the lantern up by the handle as if I were lifting up a child by the arms. "This is my baby." I got no response, so I pulled up the cook's wide loose skirt and laughed at her underwear ornamented with rips and worn-out spots. She chased me out of the kitchen. I dragged my "doll" to the telephone and called up randomly, chatting with strangers for hours. That night, I painted my nails bright red

in the bathroom and managed to hide them from my mother and Ana Maria. But at school the next day I displayed them proudly.

"*No se permite eso,"* Senorita Rosa declared nail polishing was not permitted in school and handed me a bottle of remover. "When you finish, stand in the corner and face the wall." When she wasn't looking, I grinned and made faces.

Another time, during an after-school activity, I went to the bathroom and discovered there was no toilet paper. I did not wipe. I took off my underpants and threw them in the trashcan. I went back to the activity and sat on a chair to wait for Ana Maria to take me home. When I got up, the chair was smeared with feces. Unfortunately, Senorita Adela was standing next to the chair. She peered at the chair, incredulous.

"*Ay, nina*," she exclaimed. "You are behaving so badly these days."

Luckily, Ana Maria had just arrived. I inched away from the chair and out the door. "Tell Cecilita's mother I must speak to her," Senorita Adela called after us. But by then, I had skipped outside and straddled the fence, arching backwards so that my hair—as well as my skirt-- fell toward the ground. Ana Maria ran over and tugged me off the fence, hurrying us home.

"*Vamos, que vienen los comunistas*," she whispered that the communists were coming. I didn't know who they were but I figured they were the ones shooting people against the big wall, the *paredon.*

On March 16, 1960, Cuba's Communist Party issued a resolution asking for arms from the friendly socialist countries. The next day, in Washington, President Eisenhower accepted a recommendation of the Central Intelligence Agency to arm and train Cuban exiles for an attack on the island. Then, our government froze the bank accounts of about

400 Cubans accused of collaborating with Batista. On March 28, the chairman of the Havana hair-dressers association was sentenced to three years in prison for writing anti-communist slogans on walls. The regime took over CMQ, the most important television center in La Habana, but not before the owner, Abel Mestre, delivered a tirade against Castro on the air and escaped into exile. The government took control of the College of Journalists and the printers association. The U.S. Embassy protested each time U.S. citizens were placed under arrest but received no response from the government.

One by one friends and neighbors left their homes and went abroad--to Spain, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, the United States. One day Guillermito did not come back to school. Next door, my friend Cristy did not answer insistent calls. School functions, however, continued as before. At a holiday performance, my teachers chose me—despite my disciplinary track record-- for the lead role in a ballet adaptation of *Snow White.*

"She has the darkest hair and the darkest eyes of all our students," Senorita Adela told Senorita Rosa, the second in command.

I looked around and, sure enough, I saw that the rest of my classmates had hair the color of straw and eyes the color of the sea. Mine were dark, like our book's representation of Snow White's. No one challenged me, and I was the most important person at school for months.

For the performance, my mother's seamstress designed a long dress with a vibrant blue skirt, white bodice, black puffy sleeves and a flowing red cape. I wrapped a red headband around my dark chin-length hair, which I wore with squared off bangs just above the eyebrows.

Up on stage, on the evening of the ballet, with my lips painted scarlet and my eyes lined with my mother's dark brown eyebrow pencil, I lay down on a soft mat of shredded green paper and, surrounded by fake paper bushes, I waited for my prince. The dark eyes that had secured me the role were wide open, refusing to stay shut. I looked at the audience and they looked at me. I looked at the fairies dancing all around me. I looked straight into the eyes of the prince who was slowly approaching.

"Close your eyes," Senorita Adela hissed from behind the curtain.

"Keep them closed," added Senorita Rosa. But I continued to look out, holding the gaze of the prince who pretended I was asleep when he came to kiss me awake. His face came up to a fraction of an inch from mine, and I saw that his pores were wide open, scrubbed red by a strong soap. I turned my face and he kissed my cheek. He helped me up by the hand. I stepped on the hem of my skirt and wobbled before we began the dance we had stayed after school to perfect. We waltzed up and down the stage in a scene I would reenact throughout my life: a constant dance that went nowhere.

A month later, I was once again in the spotlight. Not only did I have the darkest hair and eyes, but I also was the tallest of my classmates. My height thrust me in the lead in an Alsatian circle dance thought up by the teachers to teach us European geography. In fact, I was so tall that my dance partner had to be brought in from outside the school. He was Senorita Adela's nephew, a ten-year-old with green eyes and copper freckles that spread over both cheeks and down to the base of his neck.

This time, I wore a dress with a wide flowered skirt and a blue and silver sequined apron around my waist. A handkerchief tied over my head and under my chin. My partner wore knee-length pants and a cap at a rakish angle over one ear. He towered

above me. He held one hand behind my back and the other one poised just at shoulder level as we circled the stage to the music on the record player. The next week, my mother took me to a photo studio wearing the Alsatian outfit.

"Do you know that the *Alsacianas* do not have the money to wear such finery?" asked my mother's stepmother, Elsie, when I presented her with the photograph. "They are poor country people and cannot afford a dress like this."

"Who are the Alsatians?" I asked.

"Let's look the word up in the dictionary."

Elsie brought down a bulky brown book, and I flipped the pages until we found the word. A long paragraph explained that Alsace was in the northeastern region of France. The last definition held my attention: "a Bohemian or adventurer."

"What does this mean?"

"How interesting," Elsie mumbled. She got up, searched for a nail in a kitchen drawer, hammered it into a wall and hung up the picture.

ALMOST THERE

No one in the neighborhood trusted any one else.

"*La mama de Oscarito* has denounced her husband to the government," Ana Maria told my mother.

"I heard that Marcelino turned in his own sister too," she answered.

No one dared speak out against Fidel. When I marched with my classmates around the Colegio Kopi playground, keeping pace with Sousa's march, I sensed a split in loyalties in the neighborhood families.

"To whom does our flag belong anyway?" one mother asked another when they came to pick up their children. Some talked of our colonial past, our Spanish governors who gave way to the *independistas* backed by the United States in 1899; others mentioned colonization by England before being "liberated" and transformed into the Cuban Republic on May 20, 1902.

"Yes, but all our presidents have been dictators," someone in the neighborhood complained. "Maybe Fidel's ideals of equality and justice are what we need." While many celebrated Fidel's revolution, a steady flow of emigrants continued to leave quietly: businessmen, ranchers, Batista sympathizers, men without families, families without men. At Colegio Kopi, a student disappeared every day.

"*A los Estados Unidos*," whispered Senorita Adela and Senorita Rosa.

Elsie shook her head at the departures. She had denounced my father's lack of support for the Revolution just before he left.

"How can you justify taking money out of the country?" she asked.

"It's my money," my father answered. "Castro should not be interfering if I want to make a bank transfer."

"You deserve to lose it," Elsie told him.

The boil on the side of my left calf erupted. The top layer of skin ballooned out like a tent and then drew aside for a flow of pus to leak onto the bedclothes. This festering boil signified that departure was near: it was the side effect of the smallpox vaccine all Cubans received just before they were granted exit visas. The night of the injection, I lay shivering from the fever it caused under the mosquito net draping my bed.

I now knew I was going to the United States, and I pictured it as a big beach where my father was sailing his boat along the shore. The fever raged until the morning, and I saw shapes coming in and out of the wall. The toy chest holding Cinderella and Minnie Mouse loomed in a corner like a menacing giant. The Disney characters jumped off the shelves and ran around the room. My dolls, with caps of golden hair, joined them in the fracas. Only the porcelain figurine of a Chinese woman stood immobile on a shelf. One of her hands was missing. My mother had taped it to the doll's side when Fidel rode into La Habana the year before.

"I'll put it back once she grants my wish," she had said. I squinted into the gaping hole where the hand should have been.

After a week, the boil burned into a round permanent depression that looked like a gray moon crater on the side of my left leg. "Why did the doctor inject her in the leg?" Ana Maria examined the deflated wound.

"Because I didn't want a scar on her arm," my mother answered. "It won't look as bad on her leg when she grows up. She can always wear pants."

I recuperated and went back to school, but at home I was lonely. All the children in the neighborhood were gone. I played with my dog Negrito, but he had to stay outside on the patio. So I took as my companion a baby chick dyed blue my mother had bought me for Easter. The blue dye was falling off now and he grew daily, following me everywhere. Sometimes I stepped on his toes without meaning to because he was so close. When that happened, I ran for the bottle of Mercurochrome, the antiseptic that cured all, and painted his injured toes red. I used the Mercurochrome freely on myself as

well. My mother's anger often meant blows on my arms, thighs, hands. When she hit me, I painted all the "injured" places with the tincture.

"Now go stand in the corner," she said after I had finished the curative measure. But when she wasn't looking, I edged close to the big black telephone and started dialing. I liked the way the metal wheel felt against my finger. My mother was so immersed in her thoughts that she never heard me converse with strangers in low tones.

"*Hola, como estas*," I whispered into the handset. "*Yo tengo un pollito y un perrito.*" How delightful to hear these voices ask me about my baby chick and my dog!

After Easter, Russian oil began to arrive in Cuba. In May, Russia dispatched an ambassador to La Habana. Fidel closed down the *Diario de la Marina* and its editor fled to the Peruvian Embassy. The government took over *Prensa Libre*, saying the paper was attacking "truth, justice and decency." The archbishop of Santiago issued a pastoral letter denouncing relations with Russia. The literacy campaign began in earnest with 800 students dispatched to teach the peasants in La Sierra Maestra while students took over the University of Havana. At the same time in Miami, the CIA persuaded Cuban exiles to organize against Fidel. Those who agreed were sent to Nicaragua to train for an invasion. Texaco, Royal Dutch and Standard Oil refused to process Russian oil. In June, all U.S. oil directors fled and the government took over the Esso and Shell refineries. Sugar dropped to its lowest price and if the United States didn't buy it, we could starve!

The heat in La Habana occupied space like a closely fitting oxygen mask as my mother and I walked into the coolness of a neighborhood three bus stops away from home. My father had sent word that I needed to have aerosol treatments before we left:

my upper respiratory infections were severe now and left me weak. My mother had brought an umbrella to shield us from the hot sun rays between the bus stop and our destination, but the wide branches of trees formed a canopy above our heads and a light breeze rippled our hair.

The medical office, a living room in one of the homes, was stale and hot. I sat in a chrome and leather chair and placed a tube in my mouth from a machine that held a clear liquid. I inhaled and exhaled forcefully. A steamy concoction filled my lungs. I did this for an hour twice a week in the months before our departure. The goal was to allow me to breathe at night. The doctor gave me a prescription for a ten-day course of tetracycline. Nobody knew then that tetracycline—taken before the second set of teeth have come in--condemned a child to a lifetime of permanent yellowed teeth no whitening agent could bleach. But for then, my six-year-old teeth were like glittering white pearls.

A week later we had the most important errand to run downtown—after that we never left the house. I walked behind my mother's swinging hips to the bus stop. Inside the crowded bus, I sat on my mother's lap so she didn't have to pay the fare for me. Then, a few blocks and we were in the business district, next to what looked like a vast warehouse. Inside the building, government officials were writing and shuffling papers on heavy wooden desks lined up in straight rows.

My mother, dressed in a dark blue, tailored Coco Chanel suit with her legs wrapped in the most translucent silk stockings, did not speak nor explain why we were there. The room had high ceilings; it took a while for my gaze to reach the top. Other families were waiting too, standing against the walls. Finally, it was our turn. A man dressed in a white, wrinkled *guayabera* with a brown stain on the collar summoned us to

his desk with a wave of his hand. He brushed aside a long clump of hair to reveal a bald scalp. He looked over our papers. Then, eyeing my mother up and down, he stamped down heavily, imprinting the government seal that gave us permission to leave our home. He handed back the file with a dismissive flick of his wrist.

We walked away, my mother gripping the documents, and made a detour to a lunch counter at the far end of the building. I stepped up carefully, feeling dizzy, distanced, as I always do when I enter a hostile world, and sat on a stool. All the workers here were Fidel supporters and we were *gusanos* who wanted to leave.

"*Les puedo servir*?" May I serve you? The waitress, a young mulatto woman, wearing a tight net around her hair, scowled at my mother.

"*Dos coca colas, por favor*." Two Cokes please.

As I held the glass up to my lips, I glanced inside. There in the brown thick cold liquid were two cockroaches swimming toward me. All twelve legs rowed in slow motion on the swirling river of brown cola. I placed the glass on the counter. I looked at the waitress, who was now laughing behind her hand. My mother had seen the insects, too. She put her glass down, along with a few coins, and we left without a word.

With the documents tucked away under a pile of linen in a drawer, my mother began to pack in earnest. She shipped to a Miami warehouse our mahogany dining room set. She stuffed tall boxes with embroidered linen sheets and cotton towels, a set of English china etched in 24-carat gold leaf that had belonged to her mother, a collection of high-ball glasses illustrated with the drawings of French artist Henri Toulouse Lautrec. Smaller boxes held my white baptism gown, baby clothes, the Snow White costume, a Spanish dictionary-encyclopedia, an elaborately illustrated volume of European fairy

tales, Fanny Farmer and Betty Crocker cookbooks, family photographs from the early 1800's, a wooden darning egg, and remnants of my grandmother's trousseau.

My father had sent word that he had left Mexico City and had obtained a job at a hospital on Miami Beach with the help of a friend, David Roe, a car dealer whom he had met in La Habana in the early 1950's. In the last weeks before departure, I read, played school and spent a lot of time watching our black and white television set. On the news, I saw people still yelling in the streets, "*Cuba si. Yankee no. Pa' rriba, pa' bajo, los yankees pa'l carajo.*" Upwards, downwards, to hell with the Yankees. But cartoons and other programs still came from the *imperialistas* of the north, *los norteamericanos*.

I loved the show *Ozzie and Harriet*. I had a crush on the youngest son, Ricky Nelson. This boy could really move and could he sing! When he rocked down low with his guitar and looked into the camera straight at me, I felt faint. With Ana Maria watching worriedly, I jumped up and ran out. Ricky Nelson sang to me as I stood hiding my face in the corner against the wall. "Aayyy, Reekee Nel-son….*Me gusta mucho*."

One particular cartoon show fascinated me. I watched nervously as Popeye threw a can of spinach into his mouth seconds before he ripped thick ropes from around his girlfriend Olive, tied to the train tracks. I liked Popeye's muscles bulging out of his white sailor suit. "Help. Help. Help," Olive cried.

"He-o. He-o. He-o," I yelled. It was the first English word I uttered. It came in handy later as a Cuban girl lost in America.

GOODBY TO ALL THAT

The day we left La Habana, I woke up on wet sheets. It really wasn't a matter of controlling my bladder: I didn't want to stop the hot liquid overflowing my pajama

bottoms in the middle of the night because it felt good, like a comforting bath that helped me sleep better. I lay in bed, fiercely sucking my thumb--the bitter-tasting antidote I dipped it in before going to sleep doing nothing to stop me—while Ana Maria and Amparo pulled open the curtains and set aside the mosquito net draped around the bed.

"*Hora de levantarse*!" Ana Maria said brightly. It was time to get up. She bent down to hug me, and I squirmed in the wetness. The sheets were plastered to my rear end and back, hard and scratchy and reeking of urine and sweat. But this morning Ana Maria, her wide flowered skirt swaying around her ample girth, didn't mind that I had once again wet the bed. Amparo, dressed as usual in a light blue uniform with white cuffed sleeves, was right behind her. As soon as Ana Maria released me from her arms, Amparo scooped me up in a tight hug. I clung to her neck, sitting up in the squishy moisture, both of us sniffling.

"*No te olvides que siempre seras la hija de mi corazon,*" Ana Maria whispered as she set out my dress, matching socks and shoes. She didn't want me to forget that I was the daughter of her heart. I hopped out of bed reluctantly, and Amparo picked up the wet sheets. She wiped away tears from her face with the dry corners.

How do you remember love from your early years so you know when it's the real thing later? I stood there absorbing this feeling. I knew love because of Ana Maria and Amparo, poor and illiterate, with calloused hands rough on my skin and uneven nails that snagged my clothes. They were there, solid, accepting, while my mother and father led separate busy lives. If memory is hunger, like Hemingway's wife Hadley said in *A Moveable Feast*, then it, along with loss and regret, started here.

Ana Maria opened the window and door that led to the back patio. The hot humid air trapped in the bedroom eased out. It was wet outside because of a quick spurt of rain but with just a tease of a breeze. Rain with thunder like the sound of bombs had made us all scream the night before. Everything was steeped in moisture, making it damp and sticky all around. Down the hall, a white sheet still covered the hole in the wall by the maids' quarters and my mother now slept in a chair at night, guarding the entry into our third floor flat. Shots rang out often, mostly at dawn, from the spooky open space behind our building.

The island was now in a state of military alert. A group of lawyers in militia uniform took possession of the Bar Association headquarters in La Habana. On July 6th, President Eisenhower reduced the sugar quota for Cuba by 700,000 tons, saying that this action amounted "to economic sanctions against Castro." Khrushchev quickly announced that Russia was prepared to take the spurned sugar and that artillerymen could defend Cuba with rockets. In the Plaza de la Revolucion, Castro spoke for hours on U.S. economic aggression. In the meantime, the owners of more than 600 American companies were ordered to present sworn statements showing their inventory, the first step toward nationalization.

"Hurry up and get ready," Ana Maria said, "you're going on a trip today."

"*A los Estados Unidos*," I said. What an adventure! And then I'd be back home with Ana Maria and Amparo. Of course.

"There's a lot of packing to do still," Amparo added. I splashed in and out of the tub, then struggled into a dress and pulled on socks and shoes.

"Yiya is here," my mother called out from the living room.

A tall woman with a loud voice and broad hips, Yiya was a friend of the family. She came into my bedroom carrying a leash in her hand. She kissed everyone hello and went out into the patio where my dog was sunning himself. Yiya walked back in with Negrito in tow. He looked at me with sorrowful brown bulging eyes. His ears lay flat. His tail was limp.

"Where's he going?"

"Negrito needs a new home for now," my mother said. Ana Maria stood next to her, frowning. "He can't stay here alone."

"Why, why," I cried, "can't he go with us?"

Yiya hurriedly waved good by, and Negrito was gone before I could hug him. My mother, Ana Maria and Amparo continued a flurry of last minute packing. The baby chick, now fully grown, fluttered around my legs. He was no longer blue or yellow, but white and brown. I picked him up, but my mother took him from my arms and handed him to Ana Maria. "Here. For fricasee."

Ana Maria accepted the chicken, tucked it under her arm, and went back to what she was doing. What did that mean? Fricasee? There was too much activity to stop and get answers. "*Te queremos mucho, mi hija*," Amparo said. "Write to us." I ran for the address book and scribbled their names and addresses.

"I will never forget you."

That afternoon, at the airport, I walked with my mother down a long hallway flanked by glass windows. My paternal grandparents, Amalia and Rafael, whom we hardly ever saw since my father left, were on one side and my mother's stepmother, Elsie, now a declared communist and family outcast, was on the other. No one explained

to anyone why we were leaving. No one shed tears. No mention was made of when we were going to see each other again. We waved good by, walked out onto the tarmac, up the rickety steel steps and into the plane. Up in the clouds, I looked down on the island sprawled like a sleeping crocodile on the Caribbean Sea. It got smaller and smaller and then disappeared. I opened my purse and retrieved a pad of onion skin paper. I wrote:

Querida Elsie,

A little girl on the plane left her gold bracelets in the bathroom when she went to wash her hands. They say that the Fidelistas sitting in front of me stole them. They're dressed in green uniforms and have big beards. Why would they do such a thing? Everyone is silent because they don't trust them. Why is that? I miss you so much already. Will you come and visit me for my birthday?

Te quiero mucho, Cecilita.

CHAPTER TWO

MIAMI

My father waved his jacket furiously from side to side as he stood on the parapet of Miami International Airport that sultry, moist, early evening on the 20th of July, when the air sat like a box around us, just six days short of the first official anniversary of Fidel's revolution in Cuba. The sun was orange bright and sinking, and the light started turning gray. Shadows fell from the air traffic control tower in the distance, and I descended the stairs from the airplane and stepped onto the tarmac. I walked toward him as if on air, my mother alongside me. The afternoon slowly slipped into night as we walked, and I saw him, the last rays of sun reflecting from thick aviator glasses, against a backdrop of tiny blinking lights.

He waved his jacket from left to right, left to right, a blur of black, as if he were stranded on the seas, calling out to a passing ship in the expanding darkness. And it is this image that I see when I tell others what my father felt about me then because it expresses an emotion I want to keep alive. I suppose it was love and it was directed at me, so that meant he once loved me. It is important to me to know that and to write it here.

My mother and I stepped up to a long narrow counter. She was wearing an elegant two piece suit. She had a quiet beauty, and men always looked at her. The agent stamped our passports, and gave a low whistle. Then we followed the crowd into the waiting area, crossing an invisible barrier so distinct it suspended my breath. That evening in its early darkness, I moved toward a place that irrevocably altered my life.

It felt as if I had thrown off my mosquito net and the light changed, as if I were coming up for air after a long submersion into a turbid sea, like cutting through a sticky spider's web, or walking through a wall, or stepping into a waterfall. It was as if I had

peeled off a strip of adhesive tape from a piece of writing and the letters came off, imprinted backwards. As imaginary as it was real, that line separated Then from Now. Stepping over it, I tell you again, was such a distinct step I can relive it over and over again and it always feels the same. In this new world, I began to love my father and hate my mother then love my mother and hate my father. The long walk on the tarmac toward the airport marked a transition from proper doctor's daughter to someone I had to work hard to define.

"*Pelonita*!" my father shouted when he was close enough to touch. It was his pet name for me that meant, literally, hairless one. Some months before he left Cuba, my mother had shaved my head as a cure for thin hair. But by now it had grown to almost chin length. His grinning face in the twilight of that early evening sparkled. When had he first used that term of endearment? I felt the same warmth I did when I read his inscription on a framed photo he gave me before leaving La Habana: *"Para la hijita mas linda del mundo, del papito mas lindo del mundo."* To the prettiest daughter in the world from the best looking dad in the world.

He certainly did look handsome in the picture: horn-rimmed glasses, white shirt, tie, dark gray jacket, and the smooth olive of a freshly shaved face. Decades later, we stopped speaking. After all the neglect and the betrayal, it was better that way. But at the airport that night, with the runway behind us and the sun now completely submerged, he was the one who lifted me from my mother's melancholic silences and into the world of the living. I clamped my arms around his legs, fiercely, while he hugged my mother as best he could. Did we cling for long minutes, waiting for the frozen grief of separation to melt as we curled inside of a hug? No. Here we were, reenacting a family reunion like the

one so many thousands of Cuban families experienced, yet each one of us was poised on the brink of a separate adventure where our lives would intersect on brief occasions and then take different turns. Did we know that then? The unspoken grief that lingered had to do with knowing that everything was changing.

The adventure in America began when we climbed into my father's battered white Chrysler that smelled of wet leather and drove to Miami Beach. On the way, bright neon signs screamed unreadable words from doorways, sides of buildings, billboards. My father pointed to yellow flashing words. "Pick'n Chick'n," he read. "And those over there, the red words, are Joe's Hot Dogs." The signs were set off impressively against the night. We crossed a bridge where the water below churned in a mass of waves. I smelled the salt and heard the slap against concrete pilings. The 1950s art deco hotels that greeted us on the other side squatted short and stocky along tangled narrow streets. The Fontana Hotel crouched alongside them on Collins Avenue, trying to look dignified but needing a coat of paint.

"I'm not making a lot of money now," my father said. He took our luggage inside the room and stood by the door, ready to leave. "We'll look for an apartment tomorrow. Something small."

"Aren't you staying?"

"I have to go back to the resident's hall at the hospital," he said. "I'm on call." My mother hesitated, and then her face relaxed into resignation. Why hadn't he swept my mother off her feet and into his arms? Why did he leave so soon? His hand lingered on the doorknob, but my mother turned away to unpack.

“I have to live in the resident dorms for the next three years,” he said. “There’s no surviving otherwise. They’ll pay me extra.”

My mother accepted his explanation as the truth. We were already a broken family. The American Dream was too difficult to imagine.

FIRST HOME

It was a sparsely furnished, one-bedroom apartment in a pink and white low-rise building in North Miami Beach. Most of the varnish had been scuffed off the wood floors. A brown water canal flowed alongside the street, its banks overgrown with weeds, chopped off tree roots and brambles. I wish I could say that slow-cooking black beans and *lechon* were part of our new life. Instead, my mother served nightly TV dinners from the corner Pic ‘N Pay: meatloaf, fried chicken, mashed potatoes, corn, apple muffin all packed tightly in place on aluminum tins I collected to use as toys. Sometimes she scrambled or fried eggs and scooped them onto a plate of rice. Her plantains, scorched pieces of overripe banana, dripped with oil.

“I never had to learn,” she said, “because I always had a cook. And I hate cooking.”

I wish I could say my mother kept up with the relatives, writing long letters at our rickety dining table, placing desperate calls to the island, waiting anxiously for each new arrival as most Cuban families did in those early years. Instead, she wrote a few times and then stopped altogether. News of the arrival of her sixteen aunts and uncles and thirty-two cousins she met with a careless gesture of her shoulders.

“I’m too busy trying to survive,” she said, struggling with a plastic basket filled with dirty laundry. No more hired help to ease the burden.

Her days were taken up with practicing at a rented typewriter or a cashier register in the hopes that she could get a job in an office or a store. Her nights were spent alone in her double bed, staring at the ceiling, hugging her pillow. I slept on a twin bed shoved against the wall next to hers. When I was sick with a sore throat, which was often, my mother sat on the edge of my bed writing on yellow pads the stories I dictated in Spanish and English about fairies, Santa Claus, reindeer, and dogs. It was at this moment that I can say my literary aspirations were born, the feeling all mixed up with the love and closeness of my mother, the bond of sharing language. My father remained on the periphery of our lives. We saw him only on Sundays when we drove in our old station wagon to pick him up at the hospital. I missed his vibrant, loud voice in contrast to my mother's quiet one.

"Why can't you live with us?" I often asked him. My mother never did.

"I'm always on call. I can't leave the hospital," his answer was always the same.

It was such a magical time for me when all three of us were together. This Sunday ritual included fishing off the bridge in Crandon Park on Key Biscayne. My father concocted an oatmeal paste, threw it into the water and then lowered a wire frame that held rows of thin hoops. Within minutes, we caught dozens of sardines. He then cut them up and used them as bait to catch bigger fish. My mother's gaze was always fixed on the horizon.

"Maybe I'll see Cuba," she said. It was the only indication that she missed her home, her relatives, her job. As for me, I was having fun. Everything was new and exciting.

After the fishing, my father barbecued huge Porterhouse steaks on a park grill planted into the ground, reading medical books as he waited for the meat to cook. My mother sat still in her aluminum chair. After eating, she dropped my father off at the hospital, and we drove back home. She never complained, never argued, stoically bearing the separation. What was she thinking? Why didn't she tell him she was lonely?

CRISTY

But we weren't alone in the neighborhood. My best friend Cristy, from the balcony next door in La Habana, had left the island with her family some months before we did and now lived in a house nearby.

"Cristy, Cristy," I yelled with joy as we hugged.

Then, she skipped to her room and came out with two hula hoops. I stepped into the smaller, pink one and furiously churned my waist around with no success. Cristy swung the large blue hoop into the air and moved to a rhythm only she could hear. The hoop twirled around her steadily.

"Let's do the Twist," her teen-aged sister Pilar shouted, turning on the radio and pumping the volume. "This is Chubby Checker. Let's do it!" She shuffled her feet from side to side and swung her arms at the same time. I abandoned the hoop that refused to twirl around my waist and copied her movements. This I could do! I twisted back and forth and even down low almost touching the floor with my knees. There had been nothing like this in La Habana!

Pilar switched to a new station and changed her step: "And this is the Mashed Potatoes," she exclaimed. She made one foot fly to the left and the other fly to the right. I copied the move and in five seconds was rocking right along with her while Cristy, not a

good dancer, hula hooped with fervor. It was Elvis Presley who was singing, my new hero, supplanting Ricky Nelson!

In the kitchen, my mother and Lena, Cristy's mother, oblivious to the effects of rock and roll on us, talked politics, shaking their heads at the new developments on the island. "*Ese desgraciado*," Lena cried, referring to Fidel as the disgraced one. Her tirade burst through the music.

The Cuban telephone and electric companies, the oil refineries and sugar mills now belonged to the state. And, during the First Congress of Latin American Youth in August, Che Guevara told the group: "Our Revolution has discovered by its methods the paths that Marx pointed out."

"How can we ever go back?" my mother exclaimed in despair.

In a few weeks, Cristy Abella left for Puerto Rico. Before the family departed, her father, a TV salesman, brought us a used black and white set. It filled the evening emptiness: Friday night with Mitch Miller, Saturday morning with the Three Stooges, Dale Evans, and the Lone Ranger, Sunday night with Lawrence Welk.

"Cristy's father got a job in Puerto Rico," my mother said. "He and Lena couldn't learn the language here. It was too hard for them. Puerto Rico is a lot like Cuba."

THE ROES

With the Abellas gone, David Roe and his family moved to center stage in our lives. David had been instrumental in helping my father leave Cuba. He ferried my father's yacht to South Florida, helped him transfer money, pulled strings to get my father the position as a resident at Mount Sinai Hospital. Many years later, father stopped

speaking to David, a forgotten friend, just like a forgotten daughter. But then, David was my father's best friend. And my father relied on him to keep his wife and daughter out of trouble. I was forced to learn English to communicate with the Roes. That first summer, the English language felt like the soft taps of a hammer on my head. That was when I was listening. When I wasn't, the words were like the hum of bees, simply a background noise. Then, suddenly, miraculously, before the summer was over, I spoke English.

"Stop it! Stop it!" I yelled at David's daughters, the twins Sherry and Elise, curious six-year-olds running around me, bewildered at the Spanish I spoke. They became my closest friends.

David was a car salesman doing business in La Habana when he met my father in the early fifties. My father bought a shiny 1955 Chrysler from him, and the two men hit it off. Later, I heard that David had ties to Meyer Lansky, a reputed South Florida gangster rumored to control much of Cuba's nightlife. Without David, my father's start in America might have been a lot harder. My father lived with David before he moved to the "resident's hall," and now David opened his North Miami ranch-style house to my mother and me, and we became frequent visitors.

As Sherry and Elise jumped on me and poked me with their fingers, David scolded them.

"Don't worry," he told me. "Nothing will happen to you. I'm your second father."

I understood those words and fell in love again, forgetting Ricky Nelson and Elvis Presley. David was tall, with a shock of slicked-back, black hair over eyes that laughed and stormed in anger in the same gaze. His hooked nose gave him the look of an elegant

Middle Eastern prince. He talked to me and hugged me often, both of which my father rarely did.

"David, look after my daughter when I'm not there," my father said once.

"But Rafael, she's your daughter," David had answered.

At the Roe's home, since I had never seen wall to wall carpeting before—in Cuba, all my floors were tiled-- I stepped carefully, afraid to stain what seemed to be soft luxurious fabric. Central air-conditioning, rather than wall units, cooled off the house. All the windows were closed and covered with heavy draperies that made it dark inside. In the family room, a bar laden with bottles of liquor stretched around three walls. Two giant poodles, Onyx and Calypso, guarded a locked cabinet filled with rifles in one corner and in the backyard a pool glistened under the sun. The smell of dog hair, cigarette smoke and dampness hung over everything.

It took ten minutes for my mother to drive us to the Roe's home from our apartment in her newly acquired car, a used olive green Ford station wagon that looked like an army tank. David, who soon became my mother's confidant and intermediary in my parent's marriage, had helped her choose it from his lot. Today, David looks hungrily at a picture of my mother stretched out on a lounge chair at his home back then. I can see the desire, a gentle romantic gleam in his eyes. "She was so fragile," he says in a low voice. "So fragile."

When I climbed into the old car, I never sat in the front. "Sit in the back and don't talk," my mother ordered from behind the wheel. This was the first time she had driven a car. She drove slowly and carefully, stopping at every sign and looking at all the corners several times before she accelerated. "David gave me lessons in the parking lot and said

you were safer in the back seat." There weren't seatbelts then. The leather was splitting on the seats and rust was beginning to corrode the chrome handles on the doors, but the price was right.

Each morning, we picked up the twins and headed to the summer morning movies at the 163rd Street Shopping Center. David's wife, Sheila, a slim woman with jade green eyes and a cloud of dark hair, never let me go without offering me a drink of water. "*Agua*?" she asked.

In the afternoon, Victory Park was a favorite destination. It was like a small forest. Pine needles and pine cones covered the ground. A merry-go-round, swings, and slide were arranged in the center of a clearing. My mother sat on a bench while the twins and I climbed to the top of the monkey bars, shouting like Christopher Columbus when he sighted land. That afternoon, another family came to the park. The children spoke in Spanish to each other. They pointed at me. I was speaking English to the twins who were on the other side of the slide and couldn't hear the new kids.

"Look at that girl," one said. "Her blouse looks funny on her. It's too small! We can see her stomach! She doesn't speak Spanish so we can say whatever we want. Ha, ha, ha. She looks stupid!"

I stared at them. *I speak Spanish! Can't you see that by looking at me?* I screamed inside my head. I felt a strange sense of separation from my self. The two Spanish-speaking kids hadn't realized I spoke their language. I remained invisible, as far as they were concerned, part of the American world they were still trying to figure out. Did that mean that the English words I had just exchanged with Sherry and Elise were free of the Cuban accent? Could they even tell the difference yet?

FULFORD ELEMENTARY

In the fall, I started first grade. All the students stared at me when I tried to pronounce words I couldn't get quite right. I wanted to make new friends, and I wanted to fit in. The teacher gave me crayons and pencils as thick as two thumbs, and paper that felt like newsprint with three inch spaces between the lines. I added, subtracted and wrote block letters with ease. At Colegio Kopi in La Habana, I had black and white copy books with narrow spaces between the lines and long, slim pencils and pens. The teacher at Fulford, Mrs. Abel, took my mother aside.

"I think we should move her to the second grade."

"No," my mother answered. "I do not wish that to happen. I don't want my daughter with older children."

What! I couldn't believe it! I wanted to be with the older group. "*Mami,* the teacher thinks I'm a good student, better than the others," I protested, "and the children in the second grade have a lot more fun in the cafeteria. I want to go to the second grade."

"The schools are better in Cuba," she answered, curtly. "That's the only reason you know more. It's dangerous to be with kids who are older than you are."

With that, my mother sealed my fate. The next day I returned crestfallen to class, and looked with longing at the second graders who filed past at lunchtime. If only I could be one of them. Since that disappointing beginning to my school career in America, I've wondered if, had I been placed one year ahead, would I have had fewer problems in school? Would I have been better able to handle the neglect and loneliness? Already, my first report card pointed to trouble. Next to a row of As, the teacher had checked off the

“self control” column. Despite struggling with the new language, I talked to everyone who sat around me and laughed heartily and loudly out in the playground. One day, I even climbed the wall that separated my classroom from the playground to get out to the fun more quickly rather than spend the time to go around on the sidewalk. My mother, once again called in to a parent-teacher conference, didn’t know what to say.

“She has high spirits,” she said lamely, when the teacher suggested I could be bored. Nothing could move my mother to advance me to second grade, and she reiterated her points firmly. I realized later that one advantage of having a mother who speaks English is you never have to translate. A disadvantage is that she doesn’t need you to survive in a foreign land. Years later, I noticed that my Cuban friends were constantly called upon to help negotiate important matters with American neighbors, store clerks, or government workers. I saw that they enjoyed a closer bond with their parents, while I was dispensable. Even so, I was proud that my mother spoke English and navigated the school system like a professional. Language, like a lot of things, is a double-edged sword.

In this new land, it was a common practice for students to practice leaving the building in case of fire. We silently lined up outside in monthly fire drills. Then we learned a new procedure. The teachers announced we were going to practice how to survive in case of a bombing. When the bell clanged, they instructed us to file into a large room, crawl underneath a desk and stay there until given a sign. None of the students knew my country was connected with the events that spurred these bomb drills. But I knew. David, our family friend, had told my mother that Cuba and the United States were getting close to a declaration of war! While I couldn’t totally comprehend the

concept, I felt nervous. Did war mean my relatives in Cuba would be bombed? Or that my parents and I would be the victims of the bombing? Would we all die?

That September, Castro announced he was accepting Russia's offer of rockets to repel a rumored invasion from "*los Americanos*." In October, presidential hopeful John F. Kennedy accused President Eisenhower of creating "Communism's first Caribbean base" in Cuba because he was soft on Fidel. Eisenhower countered by announcing a ban on all U.S. exports to Cuba. Fidel showed his muscle by taking over nearly 400 private enterprises, including all the banks, all sugar mills, 18 distilleries, 61 textile mills, 16 rice mills, 11 cinemas, and 13 stores. My father, occasionally commenting on these new developments, shook his head. News about Cuba plunged him into foul moods, making him pace up and down or smash his fist into his hand.

"I did the right thing," he said, "to leave Cuba. Our country is lost, totally lost, LOST! " I, on the other hand, felt a big wall was going down on everything I had known before on the island. I wanted to feel connected with my relatives and friends. It now took weeks before letters from Cuba arrived. In the last letter, our old housekeeper, Ana Maria, explained the fate of Negrito, my Boston Terrier.

"He went crazy without you," Ana Maria wrote. "The woman who took him over tied him up outside on a tree, and he went crazy." I felt desperate because calls to Cuba were not allowed at that time, and I wanted to find out more about my dog. I was isolated from all my relatives, my father was never home, and conversations with my mother were limited: she was a woman of few words. Maybe we could communicate by telegram! Too expensive, said my mother.

MELTING POT

That October, 1960, the American culture was revealed to me in another way. At the school's Halloween party, I was mesmerized by the "Beatnik" costume many of the first and second graders were wearing. Black tights, black pullover and a cigarette held in a long ivory colored holder. This costume seemed to make a statement about freedom in a strange way. I wanted to feel safe in this new country, but I also wanted to explore and do new things. I looked at my own costume, the long Snow White dress I wore at the ballet performance at Colegio Kopi in La Habana the year before. How different I really was from my fellow students! The dress constrained all my movements. That evening, I trick-or-treated for the first time. The Roe twins were wearing "Beatnik" costumes and ran a lot faster from door to door than I could in my long dress. What joy it was to get handfuls of candy for simply yelling "trick or treat!" I hiked up the long skirt around my thighs and tied it in a knot. Next year I'll be a Beatnik, and look mysterious and grown up, I thought. Already, I was feeling that my mother was too preoccupied with other things and that I could do more of what I wanted to do.

In November, after Kennedy was elected President, my mother was excited about the possibility of having Fidel ousted from power. We heard rumors that Cuban exiles were training secretly in Guatemala for an invasion. Small guerilla bands of Cubans on the island still resisted the regime, skirmishing with Fidel's troops deep in the Escambray Mountains with air cover by Cuban piloted American planes. While the details buzzing around in my parents' conversations didn't form a concrete picture in my head, I sensed danger and turmoil and felt nervous.

My father once again used these new incredible developments to justify his

position. “Fidel will be there for life,” he told David as we sat down to our first Thanksgiving dinner. “The important thing is that no one takes my money again. I’m going to stay in this country and be a physician. I have to work hard because I am not a rich man. I lost everything. I’m not thinking of going back like all the other exiles, doing nothing but waiting for Fidel to fall.”

David brandished huge knives above his head and carved a 20-pound turkey while Sheila brought in brimming bowls of corn, mashed and sweet potatoes, cranberry sauce and biscuits. How different from our roasted pork, black beans and rice! The twins’ grandparents were visiting from New York, and everyone was laughing and talking. Suddenly the two poodles, Onyx and Calypso, jumped at each other’s throat in a maelstrom of roars. They were under my feet, and I could feel their breath on my ankles. I didn’t move, hoping their jaws wouldn’t clamp down on my flesh. My body shook as I slowly got up from the table. Everyone else laughed.

“It’s just a father and son fight,” David said about his dogs. “You have to toughen up. This isn’t Havana where everything was a lot easier, you know.” I thought of my spacious apartment in Nuevo Vedado, my doll house, my dog, our two loving housekeepers. Things were easier back home, I agreed. But this America was interesting. Later that night, David disciplined his daughters with a belt. They had uttered “curse words”-- words I couldn’t make out at all. I looked in horror at the long strip of leather David pulled from his waist. He took the girls upstairs to the bedroom. I heard the sad moans from the girls. It was a terrible ending to the festivities. My mother’s slaps were nothing compared to this strap.

Christmas Eve this first year of the decade was the coldest on record in what were usually warm winters in South Florida. None of our family members were here yet and the Roes were Jewish, so this celebration was just the three of us: a trio of Cuban immigrants riding the trolley in the heyday of Lincoln Road on Miami Beach.

The cold air whipped my face as I sat in the small bus, hiding behind heavy plastic curtains, trying to stay warm in a thick red coat my father had bought at the Goodwill outlet. We got off the trolley to look inside the windows of the different stores and then back on for warmth. We did this for the entire length of Lincoln Road. The lights flooded the streets, and we watched dozens of tourists strolling in the chilled air as if it were summer. This was a new kind of cold, nothing I had ever experienced in La Habana. "*No tienen frio*?" I marveled that they weren't cold.

On Christmas Day, Santa Claus brought me a record player, a Kingston Trio record and a baby doll with a stroller. The record player was the best gift and in a few years, when the Beatles took my new world by storm, it was always on with *I Wanna Hold Your Hand*. This year no one said anything about Los Reyes Magos, our traditional Three Kings celebration on January 6. I left my shoe out anyway, but there were no presents when I woke up. Slowly the trappings of our island life were being shed, layer by layer.

NORTH MIAMI BEACH

This is why I liked my new home better than La Habana: birthday parties at Greynold's Park with paddle boats, minnows swimming right off the shore, ducks walking all around and a rock castle on a hill; the Barnum and Bailey Circus; the school play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* where I was a fairy; an arts and crafts program where I

received first place for a nifty bowl and spoon I designed out of clay; blond, blue-eyed John Kelly; a playground potato sack race; a second hand bike I painted pink in the utility room of the apartment building, then rode just to the edge of the brown water canal, veered to the right and fell into a heap of weeds; and the Beatnik costume I finally wore on my second Halloween.

These events filled long letters to my relatives in La Habana. Unlike my mother, I eagerly kept up with the activities of our two housekeepers, Ana Maria and Amparo, my mother's stepmother Elsie, my mother's Tio Cesar, and my paternal grandparents, Amalia and Rafael. Why did they show so much interest in me while my own parents acted unconcerned? In La Habana, my parents lived intense lives that often did not include me, but the vacuum there was readily filled by all the other people in my life. Here in this new land, my parents' lack of attention translated into a silence hard to overcome. The letters were snippets of connections with people who loved me. I saved these letters carefully in a small valise, reading them over and over. There was the big sprawling pencil handwriting of Ana and the tight cursive in fountain pen ink of Elsie. Once, Elsie even included a tiny card with stick figures she had drawn. For the skirts, she had pasted a miniscule shell from the sea. The card caused such longing!

By writing to my relatives, I pretended they were closer than they were, and I was practicing my Spanish that, without knowing, was quickly taking a back seat to a new language. Fidel was not discussed in our correspondence, but I later learned that my step-grandmother had championed Castro's campaign to wipe out illiteracy in the countryside while my paternal grandparents were in an uproar when the editor of *Bohemia,* the

island's main cultural and political magazine, was forced to flee for his life after accusing Castro of submitting to "Russian vassalage."

My mother, angry with Elsie for her left-wing views, complained when she saw me writing to her. But my need for love was stronger than any political ideology. I continued to write and insisted she mail the letters. I often felt able to tell Elsie my real feelings, while hiding them from my mother who was never interested enough to read what I was writing.

In Miami, the U.S.-sponsored Cuban invasion was no longer a secret. "Politics makes me sick," my father declared. "I don't want to know anything more about Fidel." On April 14 of 1961, Brigade 2506, named after the serial number of one of its members who died accidentally during training, set off by sea from Nicaragua's Puerto Cabezas. Luis Somoza, the country's dictator, watched from the quayside. In the early hours of April 15, U.S. planes began bombing Cuba. But then Kennedy abruptly called off the air support and hundreds of Cubans either died or were taken prisoner on Playa Giron.

"*El presidente es un comunista*," my father declared about President Kennedy. "Communists are everywhere in the world." As a result, I quickly made the connection that communists were dangerous people who not only took our homes away but also wanted to kill us. My father often told the story that, had he not left Cuba when he did, the communists would have killed him in his office.

Even my mother came out of her lethargy. "*El presidente es un sin verguenza*," she said, calling Kennedy shameless for not supporting Brigade 2506. "He doesn't know what it is to lose his country."

As for me, the talk about our country brought a mixture of feelings. Were we ever going to see our country again? Or our relatives? Were people we loved going to die? Were we safe here in the United States? The frowns and silences of my parents did not offer a clue.

THE HUNT

The springs of the back seat in the station wagon pushed through the padding and into the small of my back. I plumped up my pillow and twisted into a new position. My mother accelerated up the Julia Tuttle Causeway connecting the mainland with the island of Miami Beach. She turned into dark side streets off the parking lot of Mount Sinaii Hospital. I looked out the window, drowsy now from the swaying motion of the car. Spotlights swept the black of the sky like windshield wipers. Someone at school said the lights were trying to uncover enemy aircraft. But I thought they looked like blue fairies, like the one who visited Gepetto when he wished upon a star.

"Twinkle, twinkle little star," I whispered. I wanted to pray, but all that came out was "I wonder where you are." Was God up there? Was he watching over our country? My father said the *comunistas* were going to take over the world. He told me that they had already moved into our homes back in La Habana and wanted to move here too. The crisis of the spotlights in our new country had to do with Russia installing missiles pointing at the United States. I later learned that throughout the summer of 1962, Russian surface to air missiles had been arriving in Cuba. A U-2 reconnaissance plane had aerial photos of ballistic missiles with a 2,000 mile range. There were 42 of them. President Kennedy had called for the mobilization of 150,000 reserves. The decision whether or not to instantly attack Cuba by air hung over everything. Then, he dispatched a naval

blockade to stop Russian vessels from reaching Cuba: 16 destroyers, 3 cruisers, an antisubmarine aircraft carrier and six utility ships. While all these details were unknown to me then, the atmosphere of tension and anxiety that surrounded my parents when they watched the news or listened to the car radio is vivid in my mind today. Danger surrounded our home back on the island. And danger lurked in many corners in our new home, too. Was my father ever going to spend the night with us in our apartment? Maybe we would be safer if he did?

The car shook to a stop. Then we were creeping along again. My mother looked up at a building I couldn't recognize. She hopped out and peered through the bushes into a lit dining room. Her gaze crept up to the second floor window. The curtains glowed from the inside. She hopped back into the car and drove off. She turned a corner, and I realized we were close to the resident dorms where my father was supposed to be living. This was the spot where we picked him up on Sundays. Sometimes we went up to play ping pong in a vast recreation room overlooking Biscayne Bay. Other times, my father took a fishing line and just threw it into the water right behind the parking lot where we were stopped. My mother drove slowly up and down, sweeping each car with her gaze.

"Are we here to see *papi*?" I was unable to sleep in the bouncing back seat.

"*No creo que esta ahora*." She didn't think he was here.

"*Porque estamos aqui*?" I had no idea why we were here.

No answer as she swerved out of the parking lot, back onto a side street and sped back to the building she had just closely inspected. The car bumped through potholes and rocks. This time, she turned into the building's parking lot. She drove up and down the rows of cars until she stopped by my father's white Chrysler.

"*Esta aqui*!" I struggled into a sitting position. "Are we going to see him?"

My mother dug into her purse and found a piece of paper. She tore a small square and scribbled something. She put it under the wiper. Then, she kicked the Chrysler's side door, muttering words I had never heard before.

"I want to see *papi*," I shouted as we drove away.

Back home in my room, I noticed my mother had ripped opened a letter addressed to her and had flung it on my bed. She must have forgotten to put it away. I picked it up and slipped a sheet of onion skin paper out of the envelope. At this late hour, my mother was in the living room talking on the phone in English. I looked at my grandmother's ornate cursive flowing in rich blue fountain pen ink. These letters were a vital connection with our relatives since no phone calls were allowed to or from the island. I read in Spanish: "*China* (this was my mother's pet name), *don't let any woman take your place. Remember you have to fight for your family. Carinos, Cuca.*"

I folded the thin paper and put it in a valise with all the other letters I was now receiving regularly from Cuba, the ones I now keep in a wooden box, treasures that keep me connected to all that has gone on before. Did this letter have anything to do with the visit we had just paid my father? Why hadn't my mother knocked on the door of the apartment? If my father were there, wouldn't she want to know why? Why did we just drive away? Why couldn't my mother make my father come home with us? Was my father going to go away with whoever was in the apartment with him?

GLADYS

My mother's secret life of woe and despair leaked out in bits and pieces. She befriended an American woman who lived in the neighborhood in a house that smelled

like talcum powder and moth balls. Gladys Springer was as tall as my father, six feet tall, with wide hips set off by a tight belt at the waist. Her red hair fell in ringlets to her shoulders. Gladys spoke Spanish. She had spent part of her childhood in South America. When I was around she spoke Spanish, but on the phone, the conversation between her and my mother was always in English, just like with my step-grandmother Elsie when we were in La Habana. Didn't my mother remember that I now had an excellent command of English?

"I don't know what to do," my mother moaned. "What do you think he was doing there? I think it's the same woman. She is so cheap, so low class." I heard only half her words as I watched The Three Stooges pummel each other. But it was the tones of frustration and anger that held my attention.

"Who is she? You're asking who she is?" my mother cried into the phone. "I know exactly who she is. She was the nurse in his office in La Habana. I found out that he brought her here to this country!"

Even then, I found this piece of news shocking. How could my father have done that? Did this mean that he loved this woman more than he loved my mother? Did that mean that he would never come home and spend the night? It was an unsettling feeling.

Gladys visited us often in our apartment, and this cheered up my mother. The tall American always brought over records of lively music from the twenties and thirties. When she came over, my mother shoved aside the typewriter and cashier register that she practiced on every day and set out sparkling glasses. She squeezed limes into water and ice and scooped in three teaspoons of sugar each. My mother stirred the mixture, laughed and talked and gave us each a glass. The atmosphere became light and festive, and I

joined in the conversation whenever I could, telling stories of my days in school. By then, I was avidly writing these stories in multi-colored notebooks my mother bought at the Pic 'N Pay and saving them in a pile on the floor of the closet.

"Let's listen to this," Gladys cried gaily. She opened up my prized record player, adjusted the speed from 45 to 33 rpms, and placed the arm of the needle in the middle of a heavy black disc. "I used to dance to this when I was a girl."

Gladys swayed onto the center of the living room floor, and, swinging her arms wildly, she lifted the right leg, threw it in front of the left, leaned forward and then kicked it back. She did the same with the left leg.

"Come on, I'll teach you!" Her reddened freckled face crinkled in laughter.

I jumped up and copied her movements.

"This is the Charleston," Gladys said. "We did it in the South where I went to school. The men were wild about me. Don't you just love this song: *Ain't she sweet. See her walking down the street. And I ask you very confidentially, ain't she sweet*!" Everyone roared with laughter.

I grabbed my big rag doll. The one that was as tall as me and that we had brought from Cuba. I strapped her feet to mine with the ribbons from her ballet shoes. Holding her close, balancing the merrymaking with the sorrow I could feel in my mother's heart, I danced wildly up and down the floor while Gladys kept up a steady rhythm with the Charleston step. I waltzed up and down in imitation of the dancers I had seen in the Lawrence Welk Show on Sunday afternoons. "Good night ladies" Lawrence Welk called out from the dance floor, as bubbles rained down from the ceiling. "We're going to have some fun tonight!"

ROMANCE?

"What about Jim?" Gladys asked my mother one afternoon as we drove to a nearby gas station.

"I don't know." My mother smiled in a way that she never smiled at me. I saw her profile from the back seat of the station wagon.

We stopped at the gas station. She climbed out and waited. A man wearing grey overalls with the name "Jim" stitched over his left front pocket walked up to her.

"I miss you," he said. Gladys turned around and talked to me loudly about my tests in school, but I wanted to listen to my mother's response.

My mother, dressed in black pedal pushers and a flowered sleeveless blouse, looked fresh and relaxed. Jim took the gasoline hose from the tank and started to gas up the car. She murmured something, and he looked her up and down. I frowned. Was Jim my mother's boyfriend? Did he want to marry her? I felt something eerie in my heart. Maybe I should tell my father that my mother had a boyfriend. What would happen to all of us if this were true? There was danger surrounding our country, but also danger inside our family.

"Here, take these." My mother handed me two small white pills when we arrived home. "You have a sore throat."

"I do?"

"Yes, you don't look well. You need to lie down to get better."

I later realized that my mother used these tranquilizers to keep me out of the way while she took care of her complicated life. I never knew where she went. She could have

been meeting Jim or David or my father. She could have been negotiating something: her future in this new scary land.

I took the pills. When I woke up, my mother and Gladys were gone. I felt dazed and stared at the ceiling from my bed. Shapes danced all around me, speeding up and down the wall and out the window. Then the door opened and my mother looked in. I could hear Gladys in the background. The phone rang and she walked back out.

"It's your father," my mother called from the living room. "Are you well enough to get the phone?"

I moved to the living room on a cloud.

"Who's there?" my father asked.

"It's Gladys," I whispered. My mother and Gladys had gone out to the hallway and were laughing about something. I struggled into full wakefulness.

"That witch. She's putting ideas into your mother's head. She is always talking bad about me."

"No, she's not."

"She is. I just know it. Women are all the same."

"Not me, *papi*, not me"

"No, *tu eres muy dulce*." My father always said I was sweet.

"But," I lowered my voice even more. "There's a man." For one confused moment, my loyalties were split. If my father had a girlfriend, why couldn't my mother have a boyfriend? I wanted my mother to have a boyfriend. The feeling had something to do with evening up the score. I didn't want her to be a victim. But shouldn't my father know? I also wanted to warn him my mother might leave him for Jim! But what if my

father left her for whoever my mother was talking about on the phone? What a terrible feeling!

"What?!"

"Jim. Jim is his name and he's *un americano*."

The next morning was Saturday and my mother went to the Roe's to pick up Onyx, their beautiful black giant poodle. Gladys was out of town and my mother needed a babysitter for me because she had to run errands. She tugged on the leash and led him out of the station wagon. Onyx's fur was soft and thick like a cuddly blanket.

"Cecilita, don't open the door to anyone," my mother instructed me. "Onyx is staying here with you to make sure nothing happens. I won't be long. I have to go on several errands. Read your books or write letters to Cuba." By now, I had an impressive collection of books, Grimm's and Andersen's *Fairy Tales* my mother had picked up at a garage sale, short stories called *Habia Una Vez* my step-grandmother Elsie had mailed from Cuba, and a set of The Bobbsey Twins and The Happy Hollisters. I wanted to be a famous writer, just like the authors of my new English books, Laura Lee Hope and Jerry West. I had collected these books by tricking my father into buying them.

"Please, *papi*, buy me these," I said, mesmerized at the shelves of books in the discount Met store on Coral Way when we went shopping. "I need them."

"We don't have money for anything but the basics!"

"But they are required in school," I lied. "I'll get bad grades." Incredibly, he believed me and purchased a new volume each time we went to the store.

Onyx hobbled up the stairs after my mother and limped into our apartment. He lay on his side next to the bedroom door and stretched out his legs, breathing deeply.

"What's wrong with him?"

"David says he had an operation," my mother leaned down to pet Onyx. "But that he will be all right. David says he is a good watchdog and that you will be safe with him. Sheila and the children aren't home right now. They are traveling, so we're going to take care of Onyx too." But David was home. He had just called my mother on the phone. Could she be seeing David and Jim at the same time? I petted Onyx, but he didn't move. He looked nothing like the lively dog that had snarled and barked at Calypso under the dining table that terrible Thanksgiving night.

"Here, take these pills. They're vitamins. And lie down to read."

"They look like the ones I took for my sore throat."

"No, they don't. Hurry up. I'm late. Come on, lie down."

I went to bed and took the pills with a glass of water my mother set down on the night table. She took up *The Bobbsey Twins at the Seashore* and handed it to me. I settled in bed with the book. A few hours later, I woke up. It was dark in the room. I moved slowly out of bed and out to the hall. I was dizzy. No one was home. The light filtering through the living room window was dimming. I kneeled down next to Onyx and he struggled up, panting, tongue out. He tried to stand on all four feet, but could not. He sat on his haunches and then slumped back down, unable to hold up his weight. I looked down. A pool of blood had collected on the wood floor in the spot where he had been sitting. I screamed. The sound echoed throughout the apartment. Onyx whimpered and lay back down on the blood. My mother opened the front door. I turned toward her and saw her dark silhouette against the last light of the afternoon, blazing around her like a halo.

THE MISTRESS

For the first three years of our lives in America we lived in the shadow of my father's mistress. The idea of her existence pervaded everything we did. She was a threat that lurked unseen but had the strength of a million ghosts in a horror movie. I bonded with my mother during that time in ways I didn't understand. My mother was the betrayed woman. Not me, I said. Not me. Then, one early morning, when the air was laden with a different texture of moisture that signaled the end of school and the beginning of summer reading, the mistress became real.

Our olive green station wagon hummed steadily south, turned left toward the beach and creaked to a stop in the parking lot of the Rascal House restaurant just before the 79th Street Causeway. It was in a run down shopping center, but this was my father's favorite restaurant.

"Aren't we going on a vacation? Isn't *papi* supposed to pick us up at home?"

"I'm going to make a stop here first."

"Why? We already ate breakfast."

"Don't talk now."

The Rascal House was famous for its tiny pastries filled with peach and apple preserves, blueberry muffins, and bulging bagels crammed in a basket that preceded every breakfast: corned beef hash and eggs, fish and eggs, ham and eggs, omelets filled with cheese. For lunch, steel bowls overflowed with cucumbers, pickles, sauerkraut, cole slaw, onions and tomatoes, appetizers before the main platter of thick pastrami sandwiches. But I wasn't hungry this morning.

I walked inside with my mother and followed her to a table. As if by magic, there was my father. He was sitting with a woman having breakfast. I shrank back. The woman had the blackest hair I had ever seen. It was slicked back with oil. Thickly painted arches served as eyebrows over eyes that never met mine. Her lips were burning red. They sat before a breakfast feast of eggs sunny side up, bacon and ham, grits, hashed brown potatoes, a basket of muffins and pastry and coffee. Neither moved a limb. Were they expecting us?

Nevertheless, the threat had a face now. Here was the mistress. *La querida.* The loved one. My mother shoved the table with her hands. The dishes clattered and the water slopped over the glasses. She shouted. Her pain and rage echoed throughout the dining room and everyone at other tables turned their heads to look at her. The words were indecipherable. My father did not look at me. He spoke soothingly and coaxingly to my mother and inched out of his seat. He signaled to a waiter, took my mother by the arm and propelled her outside. I was left standing alone with the mistress. I looked at her, but she was staring at something on the other side of the room. I backed away and found the door out of the restaurant and into the parking lot. My mother shouted. My father spoke softly. She banged on the hood of the car with her fist. He moved in closer as if to restrain her.

"We were supposed to go to New Orleans today!" my mother exploded. Was she going to slap him? "It's our vacation, don't you remember? What is the meaning of all this? Aren't your three years up as a resident? Aren't you going to live with us?" Why didn't she slap him?

"Just go home and I will pick you up in a few minutes. Everything is all right. We'll be on our way very soon."

With an exasperated look, my mother turned and climbed into the car. Why did my mother leave the scene of the battle? Why didn't she demand answers to her questions? I slid into the back seat. In less than an hour my father was at the apartment, and we were ready to go on the car trip to New Orleans. I wrote in my diary about everything I saw out the window on that long drive. It was a shiny red travel journal with a key, one of many that I used to record the stories of my life. However, I suppressed all thoughts of the event I had witnessed and did not write about that. Yet, the scene deeply implanted itself in my life's narrative, defining many of my future actions. The humiliation and fear of that moment are still vivid. What would happen next? What would happen to all of us?

"Aren't we going to get an apartment for the three of us?" my mother asked again.

"Si, papi por favor."

How was it that my father could get away without answering any questions? We drove all the way to New Orleans, that summer of 1963, stopping only once for gas. My father picked out a hotel, and we entered a room with a single king sized bed. I plopped down to sleep, exhausted, in between my mother and father.

TROUBLE IN SCHOOL

The bell rang and hundreds of children spilled out of classrooms and into the playground at Fulford Elementary. Close to the street, parents were taking bundles of newspapers out of their cars to a covered shelter that was the hub of a newspaper drive that afternoon. My mother was parked there too, waiting for me to help her take several

piles of papers from her car. I ran to get one bundle, struggled back with it and placed it in a corner at the same time that Billy was dumping his papers into the area. We bumped bodies. Loose papers under my feet acted like a sheet of ice, and I felt I was skating, losing my balance.

"You Spic," he shouted. A few children stopped and laughed. Another one echoed, "you Spic." Then another. I had never heard this word before. It sounded ugly. It sounded like "spit." But no one was spitting. This word was directed at me, and I knew it was a mean word. I stumbled across the papers on the floor and fled to my mother's car.

"They called me Spic," I said, giving vent to loud wails in the back seat. "What's a Spic? They yelled at me and laughed at me. The boy with the Bugs Bunny teeth started it. Am I a Spic? What's a Spic?"

In those early years, my mother sometimes was able to think on her feet.

"It has something to do with being Cuban. *Pero no te preocupes*," she said, "Don't worry. *Estos Americanos* don't know a thing about grammar. Just tell them that you know English better than they do." Could that be true? Why hadn't I stood up to Billy?

The next day I got into a fight in the playground. But it wasn't with Billy. It was with Laverne, who, when she scratched her legs with her nails, left big white streaks on her black skin. My mother didn't want me to be her friend, but I spoke to her anyway every afternoon on our "party line"—often narrowly beating those with whom we shared it to the phone-- since we couldn't afford regular service. That day, after lunch, we argued over a candy bar. I slapped Laverne and took hold of her neck. She kicked me, and we tumbled to the floor. One of the teachers ran up screaming. Another teacher

rushed over as back-up, and they pulled us apart. One took me by the arm and the other grabbed Laverne, and they marched us into the principal's office.

This was during the time of the protest march from Selma, Alabama, to Washington, D.C. and Martin Luther King's speech, *I Have a Dream*. Sit-ins at lunch counters and voter registration drives were taking place throughout the south. School desegregation was all over the news, and a Ku Klux Klan church bombing had killed four black girls in Birmingham. The issues of betrayal and racial prejudice reenacted that day in the principal's office still bring forth shame in my heart.

"Who started this?" the principal demanded in a no-nonsense voice.

"She did," I answered promptly, pointing at Laverne who was hugging herself tightly with her head bowed. The principal looked at Laverne with an "I knew it" face.

"What do you have to say for yourself?"

"I didn't start it," she whispered. "I din do nothin."

"Yes, she did. She hit me first," I lied, "and grabbed me on my neck."

"Young lady, I will call your mother right now," the principal addressed Laverne. "You will not be able to come to school for a few days. Cecilia, go back to class."

Laverne was Fulford Elementary's first black student, and she sat next to me in Mrs. White's fourth grade class. Her voice resonated with fervor when she joined in the Lord's Prayer in the morning. But when she came back from being suspended, prayer had been banned in school after a Supreme Court ruling declared it unconstitutional. So, when we finished the Pledge of Allegiance, there was no Lord's Prayer. For me, it was just as well. At catechism class on Saturdays, the Lord's Prayer ended with "and deliver us from evil, Amen." But at Fulford, everyone kept on praying until "the power and the

glory, forever and ever, Amen." I felt disloyalty to something I couldn't name, so I stopped at the word "evil," stealing guilty glances at my classmates. But Laverne showed courage. After the Pledge of Allegiance, she placed her palms together and said the Lord's Prayer under her breath. Our friendship continued as if nothing had happened.

A few days later, at lunch in the cafeteria, I cradled my head on my arm and huddled in a corner. Was I crying? Was I sleeping? The loud noise of laughing and clattering of trays and scraping of chairs came in and out as if someone were playing with the volume of the radio. All the students went back to class, but I stayed immobile. A teacher roused me from the trance and walked me into the principal's office for the second time that week. The secretary called my mother. But it was my father who came to pick me up. It was his first time – and only time – that he went to school. He was wearing a white shirt and tie and a pair of dark slacks. My father never went anywhere without a tie.

"Wha' hah-pen?" my father's English was not as good as my mother's.

"You're daughter seems to be having a problem," the principal said.

"She's just tired," my father said. "She's pooped."

"*Papi*, please move in with us," I said.

A week before Thanksgiving of 1963, the country was shaken with the news of the president's assassination. The principal's voice over the public address system was agitated, sometimes he gasped for air: "Boys and girls, President John F. Kennedy has been assassinated in Dallas, Texas." We tried to make sense of those shocking words. We sat in silence for a long time. Mrs. White, our fourth grade teacher, so obese she rarely got up from her desk, lumbered slowly up and down the rows picking up scraps of paper

or pencils as if to set something aright. She smelled of grease and sweat. We all sat stiffly until the bell rang and school was dismissed. It was November 22, my saint day, the day of Saint Cecilia, the patron saint of music, and my mother and I were in a somber mood at dinner.

"This is worse than in our country," she commented, setting out white rice and *picadillo*. "There is no law and order here. Even Fidel, who is hated, cannot be killed in broad daylight."

MIAMI BEACH

A band of kids screaming in Spanish had taken over the building at 1230 Ocean Drive, and I was one of them. "Ra, ra, ra," we shouted, running up and down stairs and in and out the front door and all around the dilapidated, musty apartment building. Ana Maria and Ileana were now my best friends. We carried plates of cookies and jugs of Kool-Aid to the abandoned gutted Avalon Hotel next door and threw raucous parties on the veranda. Radio blasting: *I Saw Her Standing There, I Want to Hold Your Hand, It's All Over Now, Where Did Our Love Go.* The owners, Mudda and Fadda, spoke in Yiddish to each other and in scratchy English to us. Mudda wore loose print dresses and flip flops, and Fadda sported baggy gray pants that pleated over the belt holding them up. His shirts were buttoned all the way up to the neck. They sat calmly smiling and nodding in plastic chairs on the front patio while we raced wildly around them and to the building next door. It didn't bother them. Now, I think they must have been deaf at more than 80 years of age.

This was our new home, this beach-front, run-down Deco apartment building that my father had chosen. His stint as a resident at Mount Sinai Hospital was now over.

Miraculously, he had kept his word and all three of us were living together again. That's what mattered most, and I felt something akin to relaxation. Our neighbors were newly arrived Cuban families who were also attracted here by the cheap rents. My world echoed with their Spanish voices.

"Your Spanish is getting a lot better," my father commented when he came home from work. His friend David had come to the rescue again, introducing my father to Dr. Gray who had hired him as an assistant in his Miami Beach office. "I can't get any other jobs," he complained bitterly. "They don't want to hire Cubans in the hospitals. But Dr. Gray is giving me an opportunity. He's a very good physician."

My mother interviewed for several jobs as a teacher's aide, but so far no one had called her back. "I'm glad because I have no one to leave you with," she said. So she lounged around Ocean Drive, today internationally known as fashionable, glittery Deco Drive, strolling to the beach or sitting in the breeze. Then, there were no fashion models and no tourists. The streets were nearly empty.

That summer of 1964, our adopted land was going through convulsions that kept everyone talking. The Civil Rights Bill passed the U.S. Senate, riots erupted in New York, New Jersey, and Puerto Rico, three civil rights workers helping poor blacks register to vote disappeared, Martin Luther King was arrested in Florida, Malcolm X founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity, the number of troops in Viet Nam rose to 21,000, and my father vociferously supported Barry Goldwater for President.

In my world, school started again and each morning my mother walked me to Ida M. Fisher Elementary past boarded-up, abandoned hotels like the Carlysle and a few bustling ones like the Amsterdam and the White House. "I can't believe I'm back here

now after all these years," my mother said one day as we walked by the Tides Hotel, where she and my father had stayed after getting married in the forties. "Your father and I were out on that balcony." She pointed upwards.

I was struggling in school, trying to adjust to new teachers and classmates. Slowly, the academic advantage I had brought from starting school early in Cuba was slipping away. One day, I could no longer keep up with the more advanced students. In a math race, I ran breathless to the board, wrung my hands, chewed on the chalk and then wrote down the wrong answer. My team members went wild. I walked back, hiding my embarrassment with a stiff smile. The next day, I was demoted to a slower team. What about my literary talents? In this area, I was still shining. I was always called upon to read aloud since I miraculously knew all the long, hard words and did not stumble. My essays always received high grades. But one day I wrote a poem, and the teacher slashed it with red marks. Apparently, she wasn't impressed that I had emulated a poet in my English book. Why did the poet in the book get away with repeating lines in alternate stanzas and I could not?

After school, we went to the beach. Sometimes I pulled an over-sized black inner tube with me into the water and drifted far out to sea with never a thought for sharks. My mother watched from the shore as I bobbed up and down in the waves. She was always quiet, always staring out over the ocean but not really looking at anything. In the early evenings, one of our neighbors, sixteen-year-old Iraidita, raced her collie up and down the grassy embankment that separated the street from the sand. The collie was sleek, like a streak in the twilight, his coat brushed vigorously every day. Mirtica, a twelve-year-old who lived downstairs, suffering from cerebral palsy, watched from a wheelchair, her

mother and grandmother standing guard. As the sun moved west, leaving only a trace of light, couples leaned on a low rock wall lining the grassy area and protecting the sand on the other side. The sand stretched for oh so far away. Natural, white sand, cool in the dusk.

"Not quite as fine as in Varadero." My mother made a circle in the sand with her toe. The ocean crashed just beyond; some days, the sea was turbulent and filled with rage and on others it was calm *como un plato,* like a plate. This particular afternoon, my mother was dressed in a silky blue dress splattered with flowers. Pink lipstick contrasted with a set of perfectly even shiny white teeth. She walked away from the sand, over the grass and into the front patio of our building. She sat in a plastic chair, next to my father who sat in another studying for his Foreign Board examinations. Mudda and Fadda were nodding in their chairs as the screaming kids whizzed by. My father looked at my mother. For an instant, there was a look of interest. How could he compare her with the acned, plump woman we had seen at the Rascal House? At night, lying on the living room couch – my makeshift bed -- I stared into the sky with its riot of stars and sang "Twinkle, twinkle little star, I'm so lonely and so far" while my parents buzzed in conversation in the bedroom.

In September, Hurricane Dora swept the beach. Back then, no one evacuated if he or she lived along the coast. We huddled inside the apartment and watched from the window as the water from the ocean inched its way up the sand over the rock wall and the grassy embankment and all the way to the building's front door. It flooded the first floor apartments and inner courtyard. In the morning, I watched with awe as my father climbed up on several palm trees bent to the ground as if they had been made out of clay. It was a

motley crew that spilled out to see the damage: an Argentinean family with girl triplets, Mirtica in the wheelchair with her mother and grandmother, Iraidita with her shiny collie who dashed along the edge of the beach barking at the waves, Ileana's loud potbellied truck driver father, Ana Maria's voluptuous mother whose breasts pushed out of the top of her blouse, and several other bedraggled families with a dozen children between them. "This is nothing compared to Cuba," my father rated the hurricane. "I don't understand the big deal."

That fall I caught pneumonia. My father walked me into Mount Sinai Hospital where the nurses set me up under a huge plastic oxygen tent. I stayed there ten days, contentedly reading and drawing with a new set of soft lead colored pencils I had once again cajoled my father into buying. My mother drove to see me each morning and afternoon. On one of those drives, she got into a car accident. She had whiplash and wore a huge cushion around her neck for months.

LITTLE HAVANA

In the winter we moved to a small 1940s house on Northwest 29th Avenue and Ninth Street, just north of the Cuban neighborhoods and south of the black communities, on a stretch of road that looked like a crooked thread running through a garment. My mother paid the down payment with a settlement she received from her car accident. I was now in Mrs. Chambers's fifth grade class at Kensington Park Elementary School, just across the street.

My mother picked this neighborhood because the houses boasted an elegance that reminded her of home with their hardwood floors and faux marble fireplaces. Our house was neat and small, white with yellow trim, a flat shingle roof, and tall, emerald-green fir

trees flanking the entrance to the red-tiled front porch. During hurricane season, wide, white awnings with yellow stripes closed their lids above jalousied windows to protect us from rain and flying objects. My parents filled the house with new furniture from Modernage. They stocked the kitchen shelves with the fine china we had brought from La Habana and the fancy highball glasses featuring imprints of Toulouse-Lautrec's posters. My mother set out the sterling silver tray with the ornately carved sides and curved feet on the dining table.

This was the first time I had lived in a house with a yard, and the open spaces invited all the neighborhood kids --- Lola, Elizabeth, Marilyn, Maritza, Aurora and I – to play hide-n-seek day and night. Outside, the terrain was similar to the Cuban landscape: sensual. Rebellious underground tree roots pushed up sidewalk slabs, tripping the elderly on foot and kids on bicycles. In the heat that made breathing difficult, gardenia bushes and mango trees kept the air sweet and wet.

It was a typical 1960's neighborhood of tired and retired Northerners wishing for quiet, unable to understand the passions of their new neighbors, young Cuban exiles obsessed with ousting Fidel. Every Cuban in the neighborhood wanted to go back to the island, insisting their stay here was only temporary. But my father said that would never happen. Cubans were here to stay. Earlier in the year, Castro had signed an important sugar agreement with Russia, now the island's main military and commercial ally, that ensured Cuba's enslavement to the United States' giant communist enemy.

The old timers, unable to fathom the political intricacies of our Caribbean island, lived absorbed in the past. They were tired of life but afraid of death, and formed a framework of stillness around the noise in the Cuban houses. They were so in tune to the

new noise outside that they ran to the window at the slightest sound in the street. In 1959, they had watched the black and white newsreels of Fidel triumphantly entering La Habana, then news film of the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961 and the Missile Crisis in 1962. I heard them say that the politics of the newcomers was causing chaos in the nation. They asked us: didn't Castro liberate Cuba from the tyranny of a dictator? Isn't he teaching the poor how to read? He's a communist, my father answered.

Only the widower who lived at the top of the slope seemed indifferent to all the comings and goings of the new Cuban neighbors. His was a gray, two-storied house with a chimney. Nobody knew his name, but gossip had it that he went crazy after the death of his wife. His front windows were boarded up as if he, too, were waiting to die. Cats were everywhere, on the sidewalk, yard, porch, and roof. The Animal Control officers came out once but didn't do anything.

That Halloween, we knocked on his door, yelled "trick or treat," and looked the other way when he came out on the porch to fill our bags with candy. On a dare, I summoned up courage and broke the silence. I wanted to see if the widower could talk. "What's your name?" I asked him, holding out my trick or treat bag and averting my eyes underneath the mask I was wearing.

"Jim McCoy." His tone disturbed me.

We stood there motionless, taken aback by the sound. Underneath my mask, I felt exposed to the resonance of his voice. I wanted to peek out of the eyes on my angel's mask, but I couldn't. Instead, I felt rather than saw a form dressed in black, with a beard covering skin whiter than egg shells. We continued to stand there until the widower took a step forward.

“Let’s get out of here,” one of my friends yelled. “He’s spooky.”

I ran, following the group of trick or treaters down the stairs of his porch, confused about my desire to look into the widower’s face. What did I want to see? Perhaps I needed to check the reflection of my own sadness in a stranger’s face. Or imprint the look of surrender in my mind. I was always fighting, not only with my mother, but with myself, and with anyone else who made me angry. Sometimes I was tempted to retreat just like the widower.

My father didn’t last long at our new address. It seemed nothing could hold him in one place. Not our beautiful house, my more relaxed mother, his growing daughter. In December, he announced he had a new job at Edgewater Hospital in Chicago. He bought thermal underwear and a thick woolen coat down to his knees from the Sears catalog. “It’s a good opportunity for me,” he said. Just as the year slipped away, he was ready to go. “In a few weeks, we’ll be together again,” he said. “You’re moving to Chicago as soon as your mother rents the house.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

He nodded.

One morning before dawn, he jumped in his car, waved good-by and drove off. My mother immediately went back to bed. I stood at the door watching the lights from his car dissolve into the night, like a lump of white sugar swallowed by black coffee. I walked back to my bedroom, took up his picture from my night table and pressed it to my heart. I did not go back to sleep.

A week later, the mailbox held his first letter. By then, my mother had packed up several boxes to move to Chicago. His first letter went like this:

Querida Cecilita,

I had a very good trip to Chicago even though it snowed the last two days. It hasn't stopped snowing since I got here and there are mountains of snow in the streets. I just got an apartment around the corner from the hospital. It's very small but good enough until we find something else better. I miss you so much. Can't wait for you to come. There's a school near the hospital.

Lots of kisses. Tu papi.

CHICAGO

Silver and shining, the train shuddered and gained fleeting speed as it left behind the city of Miami. My mother had shipped all the furniture to Chicago, turned off the phone, packed all the English china and highball glasses, and put our clothes in special boxes. She stuffed our thermal underwear, woolen socks and scarves in a handbag. We draped long wool coats over our arms. We slept in a sleeper car and ate in the dining car, black porters and waiters closely attending our every move. Three days later, the train barreled into Chicago. I stepped out onto the platform, and the cold fell on me like a sheet of ice that March of 1965.

I looked around in wonder at the drifts of snow piled higher than my head. I kneeled to examine the ice crystals that crunched under my new rubber boots. The thermal underwear was tight and scratchy, but it barred the freezing blasts of wind. I never knew there could be such cold air even if the sun sparkled and made the day clear and shining. All of a sudden my father was somber and distant. My mother hesitated and took a step backward. They exchanged words that fell like lead on my ears, sharp,

seething with resentment, crackling through the air like darts whizzing headlong toward the target. That night my father did not stay with us in the apartment.

The next day, angry and confused, I pulled on the woolen coat, staggering under its weight, and rushed into the snow. The white ice had packed itself into an unyielding terrain. I slipped and waded through the piles with determination. The soft snow sucked down on my rubber boots, reluctant to release my feet. I used all my strength traveling through the dingy frozen water. I rushed ahead blindly, gaining speed in some places, slowing down in others.

Then, there in front of me was the Museum of Natural History. It spread high into the sky with gray and brown bricks bristling in the weak sunlight. I entered, entranced, jumping at the sight of a huge bear frozen in the act of clawing up to the ceiling. I walked through the hallways, lost in the sights and silence of the musty museum. Hours went by. The dusk was dropping fast. It was closing time. Six o'clock. I pushed myself out again into the snow. This time the snow reached almost to my thighs. Finally, I saw our apartment building and lights shining from the windows. My mother opened the door and said nothing. I fell asleep with the radio humming: *red roses for a blue lady*.

My father arrived early in the morning to drive us back to the train station. We stood on the platform for an awkward minute. I cried. My father, slipping out of my grasp, kissed me good-by, unable to set a date when we would see each other again. My parents said nothing to each other. Another three days back to Miami. So disappointing. But my spirits lifted when I saw what seemed to be a rock band sitting in one of the cars. I loved the Beatles and the Rolling Stones and rock was already part of my being. It was the group Jay and the Americans, laughing, joking and smoking, instruments piled all

around. One of the band members, was it Jay? started humming "*the concrete and the clay beneath my feet begins to crumble but love will never die,*" and the others followed suit, breaking out in full song. Soon the singing drowned out the dull whir of wheels on steel tracks. I sat with them when they went to the dining car, and they continued to hum through mouthfuls of mashed potatoes: "*if I had a hammer, I'd hammer in the morning.*" My mother sat next to me. Pink lipstick glowing, hair smoothly in place, face like a porcelain China doll. Expressionless.

"Why did we leave again so soon?" I asked in the sleeper car, hurt still pressing on my heart.

"Your father said something to me that I didn't like."

A week later I tore open a letter from my father.

Querida Cecilita:

You don't how much I miss you. The snow is gone now and it's not that cold. I'm sending you ten envelopes with stamps so you can write to me. I'm also sending envelopes with 13 cent stamps so you can write to your grandparents in Cuba. Call me collect from your neighbor's house in the evenings after seven. We will be together again. Nothing can separate us.

Tu papiton.

The Chicago fiasco was the straw that broke the camel's back, to use a cliché. That's when my father saw his chance to reinvent his life. I want to say that's when my mother saw hers too, and that she exited triumphantly into a better life. But that didn't happen.

I tried to tell her to be sexy with him, to act more like a woman to him, but I couldn't reach her, our family friend David Roe told me later. She just sat there shaking her head, as if she didn't understand. She always seemed so fragile, so delicate, so beautiful. I don't understand why she didn't like sex.

For my mother that departure from Chicago signaled the beginning of crying spells, of days spent in bed in a darkened room. It signaled the beginning of a cycle of poverty and dead-end jobs and a terrible downward spiral into madness. She fought with the neighbors. She heard voices outside her bedroom window. The silences were so long and heavy between us she seemed to disappear into the bed, the walls, the floor. She was like a turtle crawling inside the shell, deliberately cementing each opening against the world. As for me, I blamed her for letting my father get away.

"Are we ever going to live with *papi* again?"

"No. I've called him many times, and he won't take my calls or call me back."

Why hadn't she tried harder to keep him? Why didn't she get rid of the mistress?

MY MOTHER

No father. No rules. I went to sleep when I wanted and woke up when I wanted. Neighborhood kids were in and out of my house all day and all night. We skated, biked and played freeze tag on the streets. At night we played *cuarto obscuro*, hide-n-go-seek in a dark bedroom.

My mother tried her best to keep order. We argued every day, arguments that made me breathe fast. When we weren't arguing, she was lying down with the curtains drawn against the light. I couldn't stand the silence, so my record player was on constantly. I listened to "The Jerk" and the Lovin' Spoonfuls' song about how summer

made your neck feel gritty. The music blared out the front door, open to catch a breeze. Our air conditioner was broken, and my mother didn't have the money to fix it. It was hotter inside than outside. Tall, oscillating fans were on in my room and living room. My mother had a small one on her dresser. The Grosse Pointe Public Library a few blocks away on Seventh Street offered a break from the heat. I went there daily and read 26 books that summer, winning first prize in the reading contest. My name and the titles of the books I read were posted on pieces of colored construction paper on a bulletin board.

My mother didn't notice much of what went on in my life because she was crying in bed all the time. But in this new Little Havana neighborhood, where I first lit up a cigarette in the back yard, I became a witness to the drama of sadness in the lives of my mother and those of my neighbors. I learned about the pain of child abuse as Conchi across from us relentlessly beat her niece, Aurora, cowering in a corner. I felt the horror of Rosa down the street as she tried to pull her father off her mother, whom he had stabbed repeatedly with a knife. I saw the gut-wrenching disappointment of Enrique, Conchi's husband, who planned failed military maneuvers in the Everglades in an attempt to get his country back.

My mother was oblivious to all of it. I knew she was thinking about my father, but I also knew she was drifting unanchored in a new country that so far had offered only disappointment and loneliness. Sometimes, she talked to visitors on the porch, but when I went outside, there was nobody there. At night when she was in bed, she talked to someone by her bedroom window.

"Go away," she said, angrily. "Stop bothering me."

When we came back from Chicago, I found my father's revolver in an unpacked box in the walk-in closet of my mother's room. I used it to make me feel safe against burglars and the invisible visitors. It had no bullets, but it was comforting under my pillow. When I heard my mother's voice, I pulled out the gun, tucked it under my pajama top, and rushed to her room. I reasoned that the mere sight of it would scare the burglar. I was terrified of burglars after our next-door neighbor, Mrs. Lockliar, told me a thief had crept into our kitchen through the back door just before we bought the house. For weeks I imagined what I would do if I had to face a burglar. I kept the gun out of sight so my mother wouldn't take it away or tell my father. So I stood in her room with the gun hidden underneath my pajama top. My mother jumped out of bed and leaned out the window. There was no screen.

"Get out," she shouted.

"Who's there?" I said and peered out into the darkness with her; not a leaf stirred.

"No one." She dove under the covers. I went back to bed, angry and scared.

The Widow Lockliar lived next door in a house painted pink inside and outside, including the awnings. Another widow, Mrs. White, who lived in a duplex – also painted pink -- on our other side, sat in the living room drinking tea with her. Mrs. White smiled gently, her eyes not focusing.

"I don't want you to talk to us anymore," my mother said in a soft almost imperceptible accent. She was the only Cuban mother in the neighborhood who spoke English. She stood proudly in Mrs. Lockliar's living room with shoulders back, wearing dark glasses that hid swollen eyes from all the crying. She looked glamorous, like Jacqueline Kennedy, in a knit, teal blue, Chanel suit and white patent leather pumps with

bows on the toes. I had my journal and a book under my arm. I took them with me everywhere so when things got boring I wrote stories or read. But there was nothing boring about this confrontation. Would my mother slap our neighbor?

Mrs. Lockliar, an imposing figure, tall with a booming voice practiced in the art of protest, walked to the back and slammed shut the screen door, complaining about the mosquitoes and ignoring my mother. The widow's living room was heavily curtained and carpeted with thick area rugs. Glass figurines displayed on shelves lined the walls from ceiling to floor. Outside, in the backyard, fruit trees oozed a sugary steam into the heat of the day, the pungent odor mixing with the still air inside. Each night, before going to sleep, I smelled the sweetness and when I woke up from the burglar nightmares, the smell was still there.

"I don't know what I have done to offend you," Mrs. Lockliar finally said. My mother had not moved from her position by the window and obviously expected an answer. "All I said yesterday was that you can count on me if you need anything."

"I don't need your help."

I felt anger at my mother's rudeness. I feared that Mrs. Lockliar and Mrs. White, who was now frowning, wouldn't let me play with their Siamese cats. "Do you understand what I am saying?" my mother continued.

The widows said nothing.

"*Vamonos*, Cecilita. Let's go." She turned to go as if she were a queen. I rolled my eyes. All I wanted to do was play with the cats, have fun with my friends and stop being afraid of burglars. My mother had no reason to battle the widows. She had one personality some of the time, and another personality other times. I spent those early

years running after the tiny spark of light in my mother's eyes. That light meant she was OK. But most of the time, the light would turn off before I reached her and then I was plunged terrifyingly, bewilderingly into a black pit with no explanations. This was one of those dark moments.

Mrs. Lockliar and Mrs. White, old-timers in the neighborhood, wiggled their fingers at me in a sign of goodby as I turned to look at them before closing the door.

THE BERTOTS

The news warned of 75 to 80 mile winds with Hurricane Carla's landfall expected by midnight. The sun scorched the neighborhood, but the wind was picking up already and it was only noon.

"Why don't you come and wait out the hurricane at our house?" Marilyn asked. "We'll have a lot of fun and my cousin Manny might be there."

Marilyn, who lived across the street, was my best friend now. She lived with her parents, Conchi and Enrique, two sisters, Maritza, and Marlene, and two cousins, Aurora and Felicia. From my front window, I enviously watched relatives come to visit every weekday, every weekend. They lined up their cars on the front yard: cousins, aunts and uncles, nieces, nephews in old Fords and Chryslers. I wished I had a brother or sister, or maybe even a cousin.

"Ok, I'll ask my mom." I liked Manny, and I was always ready for fun. When I went home, Conchi had already invited my mother to spend the night. I was surprised that she accepted. Maybe she felt friendlier toward Conchi than with Mrs. Lockliar because Conchi was Cuban and closer to her age. Maybe they recognized the mutual sadness in their eyes when they talked about Cuba. Whatever the reason, I was

happy to have company that night, and I helped my mother gather flashlights, batteries and a transistor radio to take to the Bertots. It was hours before the hurricane, and everyone was in a party mood.

Back at Marilyn's, I went into Conchi's bedroom to call my father collect. My mother had not turned on the phone yet since coming back from Chicago.

"It will be nothing," he said. "We've gone through so many hurricanes in Cuba and we're still alive. The news is making too big a deal out of it."

"Papi, I feel very alone. Mami never speaks. When can I visit you in Chicago?"

"Cecilita, I'm going to Beaumont, Texas to work in a private office next month," my father said. "I'm going to arrange for you to come as soon as I'm settled. It's near the beach and the weather is much better than here in Chicago."

I heard a click on the phone.

"Did you hear someone pick up the other line?" I asked. "Maybe someone is listening to our conversation."

"No, I didn't hear anything."

"When can I have a boyfriend?"

"You can't have a boyfriend until you're fifteen."

"I also want a car."

"That won't be for a long time."

"I want a red or green car," I insisted.

When I hung up, Conchi was waiting for me by the door. "I don't care what you have to say to your father," she screamed. "I wasn't listening on the other line. Do you hear me, it wasn't me listening!" I nodded.

Conchi's eyes sparkled black, bulging and rolling. If she wasn't listening, then how did she know what I said to my father? I usually went to Rexall's Drugs on the corner to use the pay phone. But it was a lot easier to go across the street. Conchi marched outside where Marilyn's father, Enrique, cousins and uncles were boarding up doors and windows, and peeled out of the driveway in her car. When she came back, loaded with canned food and candles, no one mentioned the incident.

Already, boxes of mangoes lined the walls in the living and dining rooms. The Bertots had three mango trees in the back yard, and their house was always filled with the gooey fruit. Relatives started arriving. My mother crossed the street and sat primly on Conchi's couch. The sun set, and we settled in for the hurricane. We played Parcheesi and cards. We ate ham sandwiches. It was midnight. Suddenly, a funnel of wind sucked up the heat and cooled off the air, pounding on the windows and doors with the roar of a runaway train. Sheets of rain wiped the dust off the sidewalks and furiously pelted the walls and roof of the house. We were quiet for several minutes. Then, the giant sleepover began. It was amazing how many beds fit into the Bertot house. Everyone rushed to one and got comfortable. Marilyn had to sleep with her two younger sisters, so I was stuck with a cousin, Magda.

"Move over." I shoved Magda, whose ample body squeezed me close to the wall. The boards nailed to the windows strained against the wind. Someone in the living room shouted that water was seeping inside.

"Grab some towels and place them next to the door sills," Enrique yelled. "Stand back from the windows!" The house trembled as if coming down with a chill.

Was my mother still on the couch? Did she go home to her bed?

"Mami," I called out.

"*Estoy aqui*," she answered from the living room that she was there.

The next morning, I woke up to the scraping of Enrique's hammer as he pried the nails out of the boards shuttering windows and doors. An overcast sky met us outside but no more rain and a lot less heat. The hurricane was moving fast to the west coast of Florida. The electricity was back on and we piled into the dark, cool, family room to watch *American Bandstand* on TV. My mother went home. As the air gusted in small swirls outside, in that magical time when the light lingers before night, we started a game of freeze tag. Our shrieks echoed up and down the block. The curtain at Mrs. Lockliar's window fluttered and fell back into place.

DIVORCE

It was in an office in downtown Miami, and it still seemed like summer. Traffic whizzed by an open window on Northwest Flagler Street, the air thick with immovable heat that November. My shoes squeaked on slippery, slick hallway floors. Heavy unvarnished wood doors stood silently guarding the entrances to tiny offices on both sides of the hall. The doors were rough to the touch: you could pick up a splinter if you rubbed them. Tarnished brass plates bore the indecipherable names of those ensconced inside. We knocked, walked in, and sat at a desk stacked high with papers in the center of a cramped room.

I was in that awkward stage just before puberty. I danced the "monkey" to Roy Orbison's *Pretty Woman* and admired myself in the mirror. The Beatles were causing pandemonium with their music, ecstatic fans going crazy at their concerts. Why were some of them crying? My friends and I sang along to *All My Loving*, and *She Loves You*

and tried to figure out which Beatle was singing. Was it Paul? No, it must be George. I was also shedding innocence: Santa Claus didn't exist, I learned from a neighborhood boy. What a letdown! But I wasn't going to tell anyone so my father could still buy me Christmas presents.

I asked your father, David said, how is Ceci, how is her mother? He answered: I don't want to talk about them. I just want to move on with my life. You know, have a good life. I've had enough trouble already. I'm going to be a physician in this country. That's all that matters. I'm going to have a new life.

In a tiny office in this quiet building where the chairs were pushed so close to the desk the edge dug into my ribcage, a lawyer my father had hired pushed a messy pile of papers in front of my mother. A hot breeze came in from the window. The humidity made everything sticky. My mother was resplendently dressed, with fresh lipstick and cloudlike wavy hair caught back. She looked like Hedy Lamar, a film actress. But inside her head, the swirling confusion of personal grief wasn't an act. My mother held her head high with dignity as she looked over the papers.

I remembered my grandmother's letter from Cuba:

China, Don't let another woman take your place. Carinos, Amalia.

My mother didn't have her own lawyer. She didn't ask anyone's advice. Not our friend David, nor her friend Gladys, nor her aunt and uncle Carmela and Manolo, nor my step-grandmother Elsie or my paternal grandmother Amalia. She signed the papers and sat back. The contract stipulated that my mother could never ask for more money. My father, whose career as a surgeon was on the verge of skyrocketing, offered her $150 a month for alimony until she remarried and $150 a month for child support until I reached

eighteen. My mother could keep the house. After all, it was her money from the accident that they used for the down payment! The lawyer said something. My mother raised her voice. Her words were hurtful against my father. They were a blur in my ears. My heart pounded. I pushed back my chair, and it slammed against the wall like a drumbeat. I struggled past my mother who was blocking the way. The lawyer stood up. He was about my height. I was in danger. I was afraid. He spread cracked lips into a smile. His flesh stretched tightly over a row of yellow teeth. I could see through the opening of his cavernous mouth a deep dark pit without end.

"Cecilita," my mother reached out to hold me back.

I squirmed away from her grasp and freed myself from the chairs. I reached for the door, but it was stuck. A sharp tug and I was out on the slick hallway floor. My saddle shoes clung to the smoothness. The silent, shiny hallway stretched out on both sides. I turned and ran to each door, checking for a sign of the bathroom.

Finally, there it was. I pushed myself inside and felt a ripping motion in my stomach that paralyzed me before I could reach the toilet. There, on the floor, this one a rough, dirty one with tiny tiles in a black and white pattern that came in and out of focus, I squatted and relieved myself.

PHONE CALL

I closed the sliding door and sat down inside the phone booth at Rexall's Drugs on the corner. I clutched the receiver, dialed the operator and asked for a collect call to Chicago. We still didn't have a phone.

"Papi," I said when my father accepted the charges.

"*Si*, Cecilita."

“We don’t have any money left. My mother says….”

“I know your mother put you up to this. I send enough money to her.”

“No, it’s the truth.” I remembered my mother’s anguish searching her purse for that last dollar.

“I said no.”

“Are we going to move to Texas with you?” Tears slid down my arm.

“I’m going to arrange for you to visit as soon as I’m settled.”

“Will we ever live together again?”

“Is that what your mother wants to know?”

I placed the receiver softly back on its hook.

BEBA

My father drove hurriedly toward his medical office in a suburb of Beaumont, a small Texas town south of Houston and north of Galveston, leather-gloved hands clamped on the wheel. It was December 1965, and I was visiting him for Christmas. Early Saturday morning and the sun had not yet come up. Outside the car window, everything appeared swathed in shadows, including the stout woman who waited for us on the sidewalk by a bus stop, gripping a bulging handbag and an overstuffed briefcase.

“This is Beba,” my father said perfunctorily. He slowed to a stop, reached behind and pushed open the back door of the car. “She’s my nurse.”

The woman, whose face still had not emerged from the shadows of that cold dawn, was dressed in a starched, white uniform over which she had pulled a baggy yellow sweater. She climbed into the back seat. I snapped around to look into her face, illuminated for just seconds by the light in the car before the door shut and we went back

to darkness. I saw just a hint of a smile, her eyes lowered, long lashes brushing acne-marred cheeks, hair grease-slicked back on the sides.

A face appeared in my mind, pushing itself up through years of trying to forget. I wasn't totally sure. Was this my father's mistress? Had he brought her out here to live with him in Beaumont? Maybe this woman just looks like the other one. In the silence of the ride that cold morning, with the tires crunching scattered ice on the road and the heater whirring in the background, some inner knowledge spread slowly into my brain. This woman bouncing up and down on the potholes of a deserted Beaumont street was the same one who was eating breakfast with my father at the Rascal House on the 79th Street Causeway the day we were supposed to leave on a family trip to New Orleans.

On that drippy-humid morning, Beba had sat next to my father and looked away, with neither a smile nor a frown, as my mother and I walked toward their table. I remembered the greasy hair, slicked back on the sides by heavy hair cream smelling slightly of rust. She wore that same cream in the back seat while I tried to cover up my anguish in the front. New information pushed into my consciousness. Now I knew who had lived in the apartment near Mount Sinai Hospital where my father was a resident. It was Beba's apartment my mother and I had visited at midnight to find my father's car parked outside. That time my mother had decided to drive away. Was Beba also the woman mentioned in the anonymous letters my mother received just before our departure from the island? Or were they about some other woman?

The jolt of my father's brakes ended the thinking. He inched forward into a small driveway, hopped out of the car and threw his gloves on the seat. The building was a concrete structure with two windows taking up the entire front wall. It was flanked by

trees whose branches touched the roof. No houses around for a least a few blocks. I held my red and black angora sweater tightly around me and slid inside the building. My father turned on all the lights and made for his office. Beba walked down a hall and into a back room, delivered herself of the heavy purse and briefcase, and began sterilizing speculums in a heavy iron boiler. She arranged syringes in a row on a chrome tray and filled glass containers with cotton and band-aids.

I struggled to keep the sick feeling out of my stomach. I picked up a stethoscope and wrapped it around my neck. I went into an examining room and rearranged the vials of gauze, tongue depressors, and swabs. I ran my hand across the cool shiny surfaces of the steel table. Everything was either chrome or glass in these rooms with the odor of disinfectant clinging to the air. I pictured my mother back home alone in Miami, lying down, crying, pointing at people I could not see in the doorway, at the windows. I saw her smooth complexion was puffy from grief, her sad eyes closed.

And here was my father, just six years after leaving Cuba, reinventing himself with another woman, an ugly, fat woman with greasy hair and a battleground of acne scars on her face. I didn't know yet how far he would turn away from me in his new life. But already I felt a distance between us, an estrangement I couldn't identify. "You're the only thing I have," he used to tell me on the phone when he first moved away to Chicago and during the first few months in Beaumont, and I looked adoringly at his framed picture on my nightstand.

A slamming door pushed out the memory. A jolly, tall woman with short, charcoal hair and round blue eyes stomped her way to the front desk. "Good morning!"

she shouted. My father and Beba repeated her words absent-mindedly. They were huddled together, going over patient charts.

"This case reminds me of the one in Havana," my father said.

"Do you think he needs a biopsy?" Beba inquired, a hand on his arm.

The new arrival looked at me standing uncertainly in the hall. "I'm Luann, the receptionist," she said, as she settled into the chair. "Come up here with me, baby, and keep me company." The phone rang and patients started walking in. I knew she felt sorry for me because she kept patting me on the hand in-between making appointments while I sat next to her, filing charts.

"I have a daughter just your age," Luann said. "Maybe you can come out to the ranch some afternoon. We have horses and a lot of dogs."

I nodded, watching Beba warily as she ushered patients into an examining room, chart in hand, and started taking vital signs. My father had promised me I would be assisting him. Already, she was taking charge, pushing me out of the way. In less than six months since my father's arrival in Beaumont, he had a thriving practice. He had set up his office with two other Cuban doctors, Garcia and Reyes. Garcia, who had not passed the revalidation medical exam, was a silent partner. His sister was Reyes's wife.

"Garcia used to be a pharmaceutical rep in Cuba," my father said. "He was never a doctor. I don't know what he's trying to pull. He doesn't know anything about medicine."

Garcia, Reyes, their families, my father, Beba, and an older couple were the only Cubans in Beaumont, Texas in 1966. They formed a tight community that played dominoes on Saturday nights and cooked *lechon* and *congri* on Sundays. I had already

bonded with the kids, Mary, Carmen, Machito, Lila, and Raulito, and we took several car trips together to Galveston and Houston in the two weeks that I was there. That Christmas Eve, the party was at my father's small apartment, one of many in a row of gray buildings clustered in a circle. He set up a barbecue on the balcony and grilled a long strip of beef tenderloin while we kids played freeze tag in the cold air.

"This is *chauteaubriand*," he explained. "They make it at a French restaurant in Houston. I thought we might try something new with our rice, beans and fried plaintains."

After the meal, my father peeled over-ripe bananas and threw them in a concoction of butter and sugar heating in a frying pan. He cut slices of Sara Lee pound cake and placed a scoop of vanilla ice cream on each. Then, he spooned the banana mixture over that. "This is Banana Royale," he announced, pouring liquor from a bottle and setting a match to the whole thing. The flames leapt up from each small plate to sounds of "ooh" and "aah" from the group. Beba made café Cubano. The other kids and I sat on the floor playing cards.

CARNAL KNOWLEDGE

Back at school in Miami I flirted with Aldo Carraza and Eddie Dieguez, the two cutest boys in sixth grade at Kensington Park. One day, I walked with one to class; another day, I strolled with the other. We had big square dances on the basketball courts. Touching hands and grazing shoulders with the boys turned into hot explosions inside me. On slow songs, my body tensed expectantly against Eddie's, then against Aldo's. I discovered I could be driven toward a boy with the force of the moon pulling at the tides,

but then had absolutely nothing to talk about with him. I practiced French kissing on the back of my hand.

I spent my evenings reading, writing and thinking about romance. I signed up for The Book of the Month Club to get discounts: ten books for ten cents. I read *Gone with the Wind* and was mesmerized by Scarlett O'Hara. She was strong, beautiful and made things happen. I wrote poems about love and stories about bordello madams. I recorded my life in a journal and made up fantasy sex scenes where the sheets were see-through.

My sexual awakening coincided with a new wave of Cuban refugees in what would become an unprecedented mass exodus from the beleaguered island. The Freedom Flights, a new immigration agreement between the US and Cuba that had started last year, were in full swing. Our community grew by the thousands, and we became isolated, "ghettoized," from mainstream America. Viet Nam, student protests, race riots, women's lib: nobody cared, including me. Issues before the Miami City Commission or the Dade County School Board made no impact on Cuban parents who were too busy trying to rebuild lives. But they were not too busy to reinforce gender stereotypes and impress upon their children, whose language of choice was now Spanglish, that sex was wrong outside of marriage.

I was different from Marilyn, Lola and Elizabeth because I didn't have a father at home. My father was still living in Beaumont. Not only that, but my mother had little interest in drilling me about the traditional Cuban gender rules. Parental neglect gave me the freedom to listen to what my body was saying and dodge the brainwashing.

"I now am able to bear children," I told Marilyn the morning after I saw the blood on the toilet paper. A classmate had punched me in the stomach the day before while we

horsed around on the playground, and I figured the cramps were the result. But when I saw the blood, I thought with excitement: I'm a woman now.

"A good reason why you shouldn't have a boyfriend," Marilyn said. "You know you could get pregnant."

"Too smart for that," I said. "And I'm not waiting to have a boyfriend until I'm 15, like my father thinks." I had cut out a picture of a cute boy from a magazine and placed it in my wallet. "See, this is Ruben." No one guessed he wasn't real.

"You have too much freedom," Marilyn said. "Your mother lets you do whatever you want." It was true that I never had to ask permission to visit any of my friends, or to cross the busy street to go to Dago's school supplies or the library. I never had to give an exact time for when I was coming home.

I now missed my father only sometimes. I was emerging from a place where my parents acted upon me, to a space where I was the principal actor. I imagined I was just like the vivacious, daring heroines of my books. I vowed I would never go to Catholic school and wear ugly uniforms like Lola and Elizabeth.

"I'm glad *papi* doesn't live with us," I told my mother. Had he lived with us, he too would have sent me to Catholic school, forced me to do my homework and not allowed me out of the house after dark.

"Hm," my mother answered, lying down.

But sexual awakenings had a harsh edge too, particularly one afternoon at Rexall's Drugs, a quiet and cool place to escape the afternoon heat. I sat with Marilyn, Lola and Elizabeth at the soda fountain. The menu offered seven layer cake and pie a la

mode, but we ordered ice cream sodas and paid for them with a row of As on our report cards. The pharmacist joined us on a stool, and I looked at the ringworm on my hand.

"Is there a cure for this?" I asked. Marilyn and Lola wrinkled their noses.

"I have something in the back," he said. "I'll show you the new games I just stocked, too." Marilyn and I, wearing shorts and frilly blouses, followed him to the back room where the chemicals were stored on shelves that reached the ceiling. Lola and Elizabeth, known as "goody- two-shoes" and dressed in their starched blue and white Catholic school uniforms, stayed behind, probably thinking we shouldn't talk to strangers. Their parents used most of their factory wages to send them to St. Michael's Catholic School. Neither girl was allowed to say bad words and had to be home by 4 p.m. They could not even look at boys when the parents were around.

Just as I entered the back room, with Marilyn a few feet ahead, a hard object pushed into the small of my back, hard but yielding in places. The pharmacist pressed his body forward again, rubbing himself on my butt, side to side. I sped up to get away, but so did he.

"These are great," Marilyn exclaimed, pausing to admire the Parcheesi and Password. I pushed past her, fear rising. I walked to the stool, sat and swiveled to face the pharmacist. I felt powerless, and struggled to pretend nothing had happened. This was different from the romantic fantasies that I thrived on every day. This had nothing to do with romance. The pharmacist was old, and he smelled bad. I watched him stand behind his counter and place pills in a bottle, the ringworm ointment forgotten.

"What's wrong?" Lola and Elizabeth asked at the same time.

"Nothing."

BEAUMONT

"*Papi*, I'm boy crazy!" I greeted my father when I emerged from the plane at Houston International Airport in the summer of 1966, wearing shorts and a scarf top that tied around the neck. Around me, men in cowboy hats and silver-spurred leather boots walked arm in arm with women crowned by piles of teased hair and wearing flowered dresses. The men carried briefcases, and the women gripped straw purses. Teenaged boys and girls with hair to their waist milled around in old, scruffy clothes, some with flowing threadbare robes. Their overstuffed packs bulged on their backs. Excitement and energy filled the air.

"*Ah, si*?" He looked at me in surprise.

"I want to get a boyfriend here in Texas," I said. "I had a great time at my sixth grade prom and every boy liked me. I wore a beautiful pink, green and white dress!" My hormones and emotions were rolling along at a quick pace. "I can't wait to start seventh grade next year! Do you think we can go buy new clothes and make-up and a new bathing suit?"

"We'll go tomorrow."

I had just read a copy of the book *Sex and the Single Girl* by Helen Gurley Brown published in 1962. Brown also offered straightforward tips about catching members of the opposite sex in her magazine *Cosmopolitan*, which I read from cover to cover. The stories talked about empowering women and supporting their desire to shape their own lives. I agreed with every word. I wanted the exciting life my father had and not the narrow, silent one my mother led at home.

My father drove for nearly an hour to his apartment in Beaumont. The town had changed from when I first visited last December: now there was heat and bright light from the sun and a slight smell of salt in the air. We drove past fields that ran into the horizon, with horses and cows, heads down, tearing at the grass. We zipped through quiet streets with small houses. Then he turned into his gray brick apartment complex.

"Here we are," my father said, kicking the door open.

I hurriedly dropped my bag in my room and went to the kitchen to prepare *empanadas.* My father loved to cook and eat, and I had a keen interest in my grandmother's recipes, which she sent tucked in her letters from Cuba. I followed the instructions written with a fountain pen in elaborately artistic cursive and threw flour and water together, molded the *empanadas*, chopped up some ham, placed it in the center, folded over the dough and dropped them in a frying pan with olive oil.

"It's the only oil that doesn't cause cholesterol," my father insisted. "Crisco, Wesson, UGH! How can you get oil out of corn? It's nothing but automobile oil, that's what it is. In this house, we only use olive oil."

I placed the *empanadas* on a plate, but my father wasn't interested. He seemed nervous. He walked around the living room. I noticed a record album on a table that I hadn't seen before: "A Taste of Honey." Huh? He went to his bedroom and made a phone call, mumbling into the phone.

"Well, let's go to the store. Didn't you want a new bathing suit?"

I jumped up and down, "Let's go."

"Beba's coming with us."

I stopped in mid jump.

“She moved to the apartment upstairs. I had to drive too much in the mornings to pick her up to go to the office,” my father said. “She’s lonely. She’s here all alone without her family. They are all still back in Cuba.”

My parents were now officially divorced. They had signed the final papers on March 7. Was Beba going to marry my father? For one guilty, disloyal minute I considered that maybe I could have a normal family life with Beba around. The shame of the disloyalty toward my mother made me dash the thought away.

On the ride to the department store, I peered intently at various styles of bathing suits in the new issue of *Cosmopolitan.* No one had a lot to say. My father went to the sporting goods section, and Beba came with me up and down the aisles packed with beauty supplies: hand creams, night creams, eye creams, daytime moisturizers, nail polish, polish removers, shampoo, conditioners. I packed the carefully-chosen bottles in the basket, and we walked over to the swim-wear section. In the dressing room, I tried on one two-piece after another. Finally, the red one seemed just right. I stepped out into the hallway.

“You have no waist!” Beba exclaimed.

“What?” I looked at the mirror in horror. I was twelve years old, but I saw how the curve moved in from the middle portion of my body and out to the hip.

“You need to strap on a belt each day and tighten it as far as it will go,” Beba said. “That way, maybe you can mold yourself a waist.” Her square frame turned and she started to walk off, the mounds of her hips blocking the aisle.

“I had a twenty-two-inch waist at your age,” Beba said as she walked away.

When we got home, Beba said good by and climbed the stairs to her apartment. I carefully organized all my new stuff in my bedroom. I hung up the clothes and arranged the bottles of cream on the dresser. My father started pacing in the living room again. I heard two quick thuds from Beba's apartment. My father looked up toward the ceiling.

"What's wrong?" I came out of my room, frowning.

"Nothing." But he was ill at ease, even nervous.

` "What do you have with that woman?" I pointed my chin at the ceiling.

"Nothing." My father was aggravated. "There's nothing going on. Your mother is brainwashing you. I am doing nothing illegal or wrong. This is all about what your mother is pumping into your head." He did not mention he and my mother were divorced and, technically, he had all the freedom to do as he liked. Our struggle was about the past. Didn't he see I had known all along about his mistress? His emotional outburst made me afraid and angry, and I shuffled back into my room and sat on the bed. The bottles of cream and shampoo caught a spear of sunshine from the open window and sparkled for a moment before the water from my eyes made them go out of focus.

Before bed that night, I tried on my new red two-piece bathing suit and examined myself in the mirror. I posed this way and that, looking critically at my waist. I applied eye cream, night cream and hand cream. I pulled off the suit and pulled on baby doll pajamas. I turned off the light. In what seemed seconds, a pounding outside made me jump from bed. My father was already at the door, engaged in a heated conversation with a neighbor.

"Peeping Tom?" my father exclaimed.

"Yes, Peeping Tom!" the neighbor answered. "I saw him at your window. When I came up, he ran over there behind the bushes."

My father ran toward his room, emerging with the rifle he used at the gun range. His face was red, and his eyes were wild. He threw himself out the door and began jogging in a circle around the apartment building, his gun at his side. I watched through the window, in the darkness, as he ran toward a clump of bushes and poked at them with the rifle. He ran to another set of bushes and did the same. He jogged back around to the front door and called the police. I buried my head under the covers. This was the last time I can remember my father coming to my defense.

The next morning, a letter arrived from my mother:

Mi Querida Cecilita.

I was very happy when you called me on the phone. I am sending you the headband you left behind and a teen magazine. I haven't been feeling well. The doctor said I have anemia and gave me sleeping pills. But it's one o'clock in the morning and I still can't sleep. I feel so alone. I sent you a record I heard on Saturday Hop. It's called Help Me Escape From Cuba. Did you get it?

Muchos besos de tu Mami.

I read the letter several times. I missed her. My father was distant, not the affectionate parent who told me on the phone I was the only thing in his life. Soon, I wasn't going to the office with him anymore. Instead, he dropped me off at Dr. Garcia's house. I spent most of my time with the Garcia kids, Mary, Machito and Lila, and Dr. Reyes's two children, Carmen and Raulito. Every morning their mothers drove us to the

pool, the movies, the mall, the beach. In the afternoons, we played 45s on the record player and practiced the swim, the monkey and the latest move.

O Sweet Pea, come and dance with me….come on, come on, come on and dance with meeee….

On weekends, all the families went to the gun range so the men could practice shooting. We drove to Houston to eat deer in a fancy restaurant. We went to breakfast at the Toddle House. We went to Galveston and walked out on the pier, sometimes throwing in a fishing line.

One Saturday, my father asked me if I wanted to sleep over Mary's house. "Yes, what fun," I cried. I packed my bag and my father and Beba, who now went everywhere with us, dropped me off. I wasn't fooled. I knew he wanted to be alone with Beba, but the thought of staying up all night talking and dancing with my friends soon made me forget them.

After the music, the popcorn, the dancing, we finally went to bed as the sun was coming up. I dropped into a deep sleep only to awaken minutes later with Mary's hand caressing my breasts, the other hand in my pants. I can't say I felt shame at the time. I lay still for a minute and then turned. She took my face in her hands and lowered her mouth to mine. I pushed against her shoulders.

"No," I said. "I reserve that for boys."

Mary scrambled up from the sheets and screamed curse words. I pulled up the covers, surprised. She paced up and down, pushing chairs and kicking the bed. Mary's mother poked her head in the room.

"Mary, leave her alone."

Mary sat on the bed, burrowing her face in the crook of her elbow. Her mother motioned to me to get up. I followed her to another room and finally sank into sleep. I never discussed that evening with my father, but I declined each time he suggested I sleep over at Dr. Garcia's house. In his attempts to get rid of me for a few days, he suggested I spend the Fourth of July at the horse ranch of his receptionist Luann. I shaved my legs for the first time that weekend with Luann's daughter, Susan. I rode her horse in the morning and sat in the huge family room at night while her older brother had a party. Bottles of beer and wine packed the refrigerator. Onion dip and potato chips were out on the counter. Ice clanged in every glass as girls and boys piled into the family room. The lights were dimmed and the stereo went full blast. Luann was nowhere in sight. Susan and I sat on one couch, grinning stupidly. No one paid attention to us. After a while, couples began to form and drift to various corners of the spacious room. For some time, we watched them sway back and forth, tightly pressed together, like grinding shadows.

CHAPTER THREE

CITRUS GROVE

The kiss was the open mouth “French” version I had dreamed about, and we held it for as long as we could hold our breaths. I had practiced many times on the back of my hand to see how it felt moving my mouth on flesh. But this was different. My mouth was filled with Lucio’s thick probing tongue, like a chunk of tough, overcooked steak that I couldn’t chew and wanted to spit out. I tried not to gag and stretched my mouth as wide as it would go. It was a rough kiss with no sensuality.

It happened when I was thirteen and in the seventh grade at Citrus Grove Junior High in 1967, between one building and another, in a narrow grassy walkway opening up to the main drag, next to a tree that spread its branches to blot out the sun. I wore a smart orange skirt and top from Lerner Shops. Lucio, my boyfriend of two days, wore a long-sleeved maroon Gant shirt and black pants.

Cars sped by. I leaned back, propping myself up with my foot against the concrete. Lucio, bending down from his six inches above me, flattened me against the wall as if I were in danger of falling off a precipice. I felt no flutters in my stomach. But Lucio, eager as a pup, lapped up all he could before it was time for me to go home. The sun was sinking, and I had at least twelve blocks to walk. I turned my head slightly and, before I could disengage from Lucio, I locked eyes with the Spanish teacher who was sitting in her car out on the street. Mrs. Martinez leaned out of the window and waved me over to her. Her eyebrows made a straight line above her eyes and quivered in anger. Her face muscles were tense. Lucio looked up, followed my gaze, straightened up and lifted his hand in a weak wave back. Then he jumped on his bike, and sped off in the opposite direction.

I walked over to Mrs. Martinez as if I were walking the plank on a pirate ship. Guilt choked me, but I held my head high and, with a haughty expression, I climbed into the back seat. Martica, her daughter, also in seventh grade, sat in the front. She was a "square," a boring homely girl who did everything her mother told her to do, unlike me who lived like I chose, coming and going while my mother worked or rested in bed, crying into her pillow, with the door closed.

No one spoke in the car. Mrs. Martinez, still frowning and now shaking her head, drove me home, pulled up into the driveway and jumped out of the car. Martica didn't move.

"I want to speak to your mother." I felt anger now, not fear.

My mother had just landed her first job after the divorce: babysitting, from daybreak to sundown. But this afternoon, she was home. I opened the unlocked front door, and we walked into the living room. My mother sat on the green upholstered couch my father had bought at Modernage before the divorce along with a set of two mustard-colored swivel chairs, wood side tables and a coffee table with little trays that opened out to hold a water glass or soft drink.

"*Hola, como esta*? *Soy la maestra de espanol*," Mrs. Martinez began on a strong note, but her adamancy flagged when she noted that my mother barely moved.

"*Si*." My mother did not ask Mrs. Martinez to sit down.

"Your daughter," Mrs. Martinez paused, "your daughter was….." She cleared her throat. "She was kissing….a boy….outside the school."

My mother remained immobile, staring at Mrs. Martinez with sad eyes. I dropped into one of the swivel chairs and swung sharply from side to side. Mrs. Martinez began to

back out toward the front door. My lips puckered up and turned down at the corners into a scorn filled grimace.

"Cecilita, *es verdad*?" Is it true, she asked.

I shrugged.

"Thank you for telling me," my mother turned to the teacher, now at the door.

Mrs. Martinez walked out.

My mother's black eyes shifted over to me. They were red and puffy and the dark glasses she used to cover them when she went out on errands were on the coffee table.

"*Es una estupida*. *No sabe nada."* I declared her stupid and ignorant, jumped up and stomped to my room. My mother sat on the couch for a long time, and we didn't eat dinner that night. We never spoke of it again.

Cherish is the word I use to describe our looooooove…..

The record player blared music at 6 each school morning. It floated out the open door and windows of my house, welcoming my friends Gloria, Sylvia, Helodia and Ibis. At the end of the song, the arm of my record player jerked up and moved over to the beginning of the 45, over and over again playing the same song while we applied turquoise eye shadow and hot pink lipstick. I pulled on brown ugly saddle shoes the orthopedic doctor had prescribed to straighten out a tendency to turn in my toes as I walked. He had told my father I couldn't ride bikes anymore because it would exacerbate the condition. His advice fell on deaf ears: I rode my bike everywhere. It was enough that the shoes were an embarrassment, and I cringed when anyone said, "You look so good….but only down to your ankles!!!"

Anyway, I ran to the record player and put on the Rolling Stones. "*I can't get no satisfaction,*" we screamed along with Mick Jagger. Ibis and Sylvia lit up Benson and Hedges cigarettes. I took a puff and sneezed three times. Laughing and skipping, we hustled out the door, which I hurriedly locked, a latchkey kid. My mother left each morning before dawn to make the slow trek by bus to Miami Beach where she babysat for the Goizuetas, a prominent Cuban family who had left our country with their fortune intact. She didn't come back home until eight o'clock at night. My father was still in Beaumont, Texas, and we spoke on the telephone about once a week.

As we hurried toward the bus stop, we could see the neighbors peeking out from behind the blinds. They were a mixture of Cuban matrons, bewildered at our apparent lack of concern with propriety, and American retirees, aghast at how their neighborhood was changing with each new influx from the island.

The bell rang at Citrus Grove Junior High at 7. We only had 15 minutes to get there. But we didn't care if we were late. We ran to the corner on Northwest 7th Street just as the bus pulled away. I spied an ice cream truck stopped at the red light.

"*Heladero*," I called out. "Can you take us to school? We're late!"

"That's hitchhiking!" Gloria resisted.

"So what? It's now or never."

The ice cream man, who wore a dirty white apron and stained dungarees, nodded and waved for us to jump in. He laughed as recklessly as we did. We jumped inside and hung on to a counter nailed to the center of the truck.

As he wove in and out of traffic, leaning on the horn and cursing out the window, he called back to us, "One day I'm not going to be here to help you out."

CLASS

We made it on time to homeroom. Reynaldo, a recent arrival on the 1965 Freedom Flights that brought 60,000 Cubans from the island, poked me and we whispered and giggled throughout a film on how nicotine can damage your lungs. I looked up long enough to see a man puff into a handkerchief and display a brown stain that had spread across its whiteness.

"This is what happens to your lungs if you smoke," the announcer said. Fortunately, this piece of advice sank in, and I abstained when my friends smoked pack after pack. I also sneezed uncontrollably each time they lit a cigarette, helping me avoid this addiction.

"Any questions?" The homeroom teacher, Miss Fleming, was a silent, haughty woman who did not engage her students in conversation before or after class. She just ignored them, although she often chaperoned the "sock hops" in the cafeteria on Saturdays.

"Miss Fleming, I have a question," I called out. "Why is it that boys like you more when you don't like them and the other way around?"

Unbelievably, she smiled. "That happens only if you're immature."

After homeroom, there was a test in Mr. Malone's math class. I hated math. When Mr. Malone turned around, I grabbed the test of the boy in front of me, Rene Carnoto, quickly copied down as many answers as I could and threw the test back on his desk before Mr. Malone could sense anything was wrong.

"Who are you?" Rene whispered in anger.

"Don't you know who I am?" I hissed. "I'm the most famous girl in school."

“Mr. Carnoto, are you cheating?”

“No, sir.”

“Why are you talking then?”

I kicked Rene’s seat.

“I…I…I’m not, sir.”

“See me after class.”

After that, Rene fell in love with me.

I also hated science, social studies, and physical education. I absorbed what I could from the teacher in class when I wasn’t talking to my friends and never studied for tests, confident I could cheat my way out if I didn’t know something. This was the year when my grades took a decided drop downwards. They ranged from A to F, depending on my interest that day and how much I hated or loved the teacher, with an unvarying 3 for effort and F for conduct. But what did I care? I lived for the moment. I lived to wipe out loneliness and anger against my parents. I lived to feel the extremes of sensation that took me away from hurt.

“Don’t you want to have a good job, get married, have your own home?” my mother asked, desperation in her voice and my report card in her hand.

“No, I want to live an adventurous life.”

“But how will you ever have any money to live?”

I shrugged.

I loved English and was obsessed with reading and writing. I joined the creative writing club, and I started writing short romance stories. I sent away for a brochure on the Famous Writers School and dreamed about taking the correspondence course. I even won

the Seventh Grade Spelling Bee, beating out, as my mother pointed out, the American students whose first language was English. Unfortunately, the day before the Dade County spelling competition—sponsored by the Miami Herald--I came down with the flu and could not represent my school. The lucky runner-up went in my place.

"That's too bad you couldn't go," said Mrs. Priore, the English teacher. "You must know so many words because you always have your nose in a book in my class." She was a tall woman with hair teased into a high bun and draped in loose, long dresses. She taught her lessons sitting down behind a desk and never got up. "But at least you're quiet," she added.

I didn't answer, already deep into the world of the novel I had just received from the Doubleday Book of the Month Club. I read, with tremendous speed, the featured selections such as Kathleen Winsor's *Forever Amber*, Daphne de Maurier's *Rebecca*, and the Victoria Holt "gothic" novels *Daughters of Deceit, The House of a Thousand Lanterns, The Black Opal*, and *The Legend of the Seventh Virgin.* I read them all in class—mesmerized by the high spirits of the heroines who successfully overcame any obstacle-- and picked up the grammar lessons and narrative techniques through osmosis. There was no pressure to do anything in Mrs. Priore's English class as long as I kept my mouth shut.

I also loved my French class. Miss Banks was a vivacious teacher who strode so fast from one side of the room to the other my eyes could barely keep up with her. My friend Ibis and I became her favorite students, and she could never understand the reports of bad behavior from the other teachers. We meekly repeated after her and answered all the questions.

"Celine, ou est la biblioteque?

"La biblioteque est ici. Vas tu a la bibilioteque?" I kept up the conversation easily, and every class was a lively exchange because I learned all the phrases instantly. But when there was a substitute, anything could happen. It was a great opportunity to let off steam, so I became the ringleader in rudeness and incited my classmates to uproarious laughter and loud, wild chatter. One substitute teacher, with blond hair so long it hit the backs of her knees, sat at her desk with her face in her hands. I threw crumpled paper balls into the air and across the room.

"Please, stop," she begged.

"Shut up," I yelled, contemptuously.

Then I orchestrated a book throwing session. On the count of three, everyone slammed his or her book on the floor.

AFTER SCHOOL

One afternoon, Gloria, Ibis and I took the bus to downtown Miami, the hub of shopping in those days: Burdines, Richards, Sears, Florsheim Shoes, the Seybold Building, rows and rows of fabric stores packed to the ceiling with bolts of linen, satin and silk. At McCrory's, a five and dime store, where my mother was scheduled to work as a cashier the following week, we walked up and down the cosmetics and hair product aisles.

I stared at the rows of shampoos, conditioners, hair coloring. I was obsessed with pumping up my dull, brown hair into voluminous locks, so I bought hair treatments every chance I had. But my hair stayed limp, unlike the stereotypical "Hispanic" hair, which was thick and lustrous. No matter how many oil treatments I applied, no matter how

much beer I mixed in with my Dippity Doo gel when I set it on huge Campbell soup cans to give it thickness, my hair remained flat.

"I bet you won't put anything in your purse and walk out with it," Ibis whispered.

"Ceci, don't you dare," Gloria cautioned.

"Bet you I will." I placed two L'Oreal oil treatments for dried and damaged hair into my shoulder bag. "OK, let's go home." We rushed out the door and headed toward the bus stop, but before we had gone several steps a plainclothes detective flashed his identification card at us.

"Follow me," he said sternly.

Ibis and Gloria burst into tears, but I engaged him in an angry exchange of words.

"Who do you think you are for stopping us?" I demanded.

"Young lady," he said quietly, "You're lucky you're under 16 because if not I'd put you in jail."

"Well, I don't care," I shouted. "You are nobody!"

I noticed that he was old, and his hands were trembling.

"Come with me. Up the escalator and to the right."

"Please, Ceci," Gloria begged. "Don't say anything." Ibis wrung her hands.

We marched into an office where two security guards were sitting at a table doing crossword puzzles. "Call their mothers. They were shoplifting," the detective told them and looked relieved that he was leaving.

Ibis' mother was the first to arrive. She took Ibis by the hand silently, cursing under her breath, and they walked out. Ibis burst into fresh tears, begging forgiveness. Gloria's parents arrived next. Her mother wailed loudly and called upon God to forgive

her daughter. Her father narrowed his eyes at me. Gloria hung her head, and wiped her eyes. Neither one of my friends said I was the culprit.

My mother did not get there for hours. She had just bought an old Dodge Dart and drove very slowly, never taking any of the expressways that were beginning to crisscross Miami. I spent the time conversing with the guards and telling them my life's story. We were good friends by the time my mother arrived.

"Cecilita," she whispered when she entered the security office.

"Don't worry," I smiled. "Everything is OK."

My mother, in times of trouble, just let it be.

THANKSGIVING

It was cold that day, and the Cuban community had not yet begun following the Pilgrim's footsteps. But I never could pass up an occasion to celebrate, so I gathered my adopted family—Ibis, Gloria, Sylvia, Cari-- and we cooked the famous Thanksgiving meal at my house. Amidst screams of hilarity, Ibis opened a tin of meat called Spam--given out in huge quantities to Cuban refugees seeking asylum at the Freedom Tower in downtown Miami—Sylvia whipped up some mashed potatoes from a box, Gloria threw a package of green beans into a pot of boiling water, Cari set the table and I ran to the corner *bodega* for a small *flan.* So on this day, just another day off for most Cubans, we ate a hearty dinner. Afterwards, my mother went back to bed, and my friends and I boarded the bus for a carnival at the Central Shopping Center on Northwest Thirty-Seventh Avenue and Seventh Street.

The shopping center stretched out for three or four blocks, containing a variety of small clothes and shoe stores, Zayre's department store, Federal Discount Drugs, cheap

counter restaurants, and a Winn Dixie. The carnival had taken over the entire shopping center parking lot and was packed with kids like ourselves. There were food booths, shoot-a-duck booths, throw-a-ring-around-a-teddy-bear booths, smash-a-badger booths. But we were interested mainly in the rides, and we rode them until midnight: tilt a world, Ferris wheel, bumper cars. The sensation of freedom, the thrill of flying--our bodies tossed in the air and from side to side—fulfilled the core of our neediness. We needed family, but we made up for the lack by taking pleasure in the wildness of physical sensation.

THE RETURN OF MY FATHER

There was something different about my father when he picked me up at home that day. He had just returned from Beaumont, Texas, and was driving a strange car with what looked like an upside down peace sign on the grill. I jumped in the automobile, settling into the soft leather seats, sliding my hand over the smooth wood grained panels and inhaling the new car smell. He was wearing a tie and a white shirt. The jacket of his dark blue suit was draped over the back seat.

"Let's go to El Baturro for lunch," he said. He looked at my clothes and frowned. I was wearing brown crepe "elephant pants," hip-hugging bell-bottoms with extremely wide legs, and had tied a silky brown scarf with beige polka dots round my head. I had bought this attire with my saved-up birthday money.

"You look like a hippie," he said, wrinkling his nose and accelerating.

"These are the most fashionable clothes in Miami," I said and fiddled with the radio knobs. The Beatles started rocking from the side speakers, making the car shake ever so slightly. "I adore the Beatles!"

“Don’t you like classical music?” my father lunged for the volume.

“It’s boring. It all sounds the same,” I kept my fingers glued to the knob, shimmying in my seat.

He had no time to answer since right then he turned into El Baturro, a classic Spanish restaurant a few blocks from my house on Northwest Seventh Street. I ordered *caldo gallego*, a white bean soup made with collard greens and pork, and my father chose the *cocido madrilène*, a stew of ham, sausage, pork, cabbage and potatoes.

“Cecilita, I now have more money. I’m going to give you $30 a month for your personal expenses.” The $300 he gave my mother each month barely covered the mortgage, utilities, bus fare and food. With the additional money, I could buy clothes, makeup and eat at McDonald’s or Morro Castle every once in a while. I merely nodded at the good news. I was ravenous. My mother had stopped cooking altogether, and I was in the habit of eating scraps at my friends’ houses or fixing a quick meal with whatever was in the refrigerator.

“I rented an apartment on Biscayne Boulevard,” he continued, “I have a beautiful view of the bay, and there’s a tennis court. I’ll be starting my own practice here in Miami now. I saw an office in Hialeah that I like and I’ll have hospital privileges at Palm Springs Hospital. And…….,” he looked up from his plate bowl and held the spoon up in midair.

“Uh, huh,” I said, ladling the soup into my mouth with quick strokes.

“I got married.”

The words pounded my eardrums like small explosions. I felt a strange lifting sensation, as if I were floating to the top row of a stadium and watching a game from up

above. I kept eating on a reflex, but noticed that the soup now tasted like unsweetened oatmeal. My father waited without eating. I put down my spoon.

"I don't want to see her." I thought back to the day that I called our family friend, David, from the corner pay phone crying about my father's mistress.

"He will never marry Beba," he had assured me. He had been wrong.

I turned toward my father, "I want to go home now."

My father did not protest. He flagged down the waiter and, while he paid the check for the uneaten food, I got up and walked outside to the car.

"And…Cecilita," he paused. "Your mother told me about the shoplifting. Please don't tell Beba if you do decide to talk to her."

I looked out the window of the car as we drove back home and saw my mother walking north on Twenty-Seventh Avenue. My father saw her, too. She was wearing a snug two-piece suit in a woven cotton material and mid-size black pumps. Her hips swung rhythmically from side to side. I wondered if my mother was ever conscious of the power of her beauty. But seeing my mother walking home alone, lugging a plastic bag filled with groceries, while I sat in my father's new fancy car leisurely cruising along made me aware of something much more appalling. I understood then that there were people in the world who exploited another's physical or psychological weaknesses for their own benefit. My father was one of the exploiters, and I realized I had to learn how to battle him.

That moment in the car was pivotal in my development. It was the beginning of a life-long anger against injustice and ruthless authority. I grieved for my mother's mental and material decline, yet the vibrant presence of my father didn't allow me to completely

identify with her since I felt an inner strength that matched his. I saw that my father had escaped into another world, but he wasn't yet callous enough to abandon me altogether as he began his rise step by step into the land of the wealthy Cuban elite. From that day on, it was official that my mother and I would remain on the fringes of his community. We were the have-nots, and he made sure we stayed with that group by only sharing an infinitesimal portion of his wealth. My father's lack of sensitivity toward me and my mother—who unquestionably played a huge role in launching his medical career back in La Habana--gave me the foundation for a politics of rebellion.

"She doesn't look bad," he said softly, watching my mother until he had to turn left onto Ninth Street. He pulled into the driveway and turned off the ignition. "You have to be very careful, Cecilita," he lowered his voice as if he were taking me into his confidence. "There are drugs out there, and alcohol. Don't ever get in a car with a boy who has been drinking. If he is speeding, just lean over and turn the car off. It's very dangerous here in America for teenagers. I'm back in Miami now, so you won't be so alone. I can help you more now. You can spend time at my house." It came off as a prepared speech from a man who knows his duty but wants to keep his distance. This was a new man. Decidedly, he was no longer my *papiton*, the adored father who had told me "you are all I have."

"I don't want to go to your house," I said. My father nodded. I walked inside the living room, and a punch of pain streaked through my lower abdomen. In the bathroom, I saw blood on the toilet paper. I slipped into the belt that held the Kotex with safety pins, one in the back and one in the front.

"I just had my period two weeks ago," I told Ibis on the phone.

"You can get it again in the same month if you receive a big shock," she explained.

Life wasn't any easier for anyone else in the Cuban *barrio*. While my father lived in the comfortable cocoon of a bay view condominium—away from the madding crowd--my mother and I fully participated in the tumultuous immigrant life of newly arrived Cubans trying to reconcile exile politics with personal, family tragedies. It was a two-tier system. As doctors, pharmacists, engineers, professors and lawyers revalidated licenses and dusted off academic credentials, they moved a little farther away—they moved to Coral Gables, to Coconut Grove, to the Roads—and they left behind the factory and service workers with whom they used to live. These workers, who held up the infrastructure of Little Havana, remained my neighbors. I was an anomaly: a doctor's daughter living with the sons and daughters of car mechanics, restaurant cooks, and housemaids. My status conferred upon me a little halo in the eyes of my friends, but that was about all it offered as I struggled to survive just as they did. The real lesson for me was an intense awareness of class dynamics.

IBIS

Ibis lived in a wooden shack on Northwest Thirty-Fourth Avenue and Third Street, a mile away from my home. The house was raised on concrete blocks. An open space underneath acted as a wrestling ring where cats and rats matched strength all night, their cries terrorizing neighbors. Inside, wrinkled linoleum covered the rotting hard wood floors. In the kitchen, grease from years of frying formed a thin film over the walls. Nearly always, the gas stove held a pot of rice, a pot of *picadillo* and a Cuban expresso

maker filled with black sweet cold coffee. Always hungry, I ladled spoonfuls of *picadillo* from the pot into my mouth when no one was looking.

The front room was made over into a large bedroom for Ibis's mother and her boyfriend: a king-sized bed held tangled sheets and a crumpled bedspread against an ornate cream-colored headboard. A side table held rows of perfume bottles and creams. Food smells mingled with cigarette smoke and the odor of mold.

Ibis's room was in the back, barely fitting a twin bed and a chest of drawers. The door had no knob, just a gaping hole in its place. On her narrow bed, we spent hours playing Parcheesi or cards, or comparing notes on the boys at school, Ibis always smoking.

"My mother," Ibis said, "can do a lot better than that man Lepido. Did I tell you she ensnared my father, who was a wealthy landowner, when she went to clean his house? He was engaged to a society girl but my mother convinced him to marry her instead."

Ibis was chubby and her hair was kinky, a "gift" from an African ancestor she said. Despite her weight, she took great pains with her looks. She meticulously ironed her hair to make it straight and smooth. Every day, she carefully painted the rims of her eyes with a black pencil. She owned both a long hair and a short hair wig to change her "look" each time we went to a party.

Just then her mother Graciela walked in. She was short and slim, with a sensual raw energy in her eyes. She had been cleaning houses all day but still seemed fresh and vibrant. "Today, they asked me if Ibis is my sister," she announced, going over to kiss boyfriend Lepido, a swarthy, broad-shouldered construction worker who was sprawled on

a ripped up couch pushed up against a wall. "That's how young I look!" Lepido pulled her on his lap and licked her mouth and face with a huge red tongue. Graciela screeched and bounced off into the bathroom. "I'm going to take a bath first, in the tub."

"Unfortunately," Ibis lowered her voice, "when Fidel came in my father refused to leave his mother in Cuba and so my mother, brother and I had to come to the United States without him. My mother says she doesn't care who she's with because she's angry at my father. She says she can't be without a man."

I stretched out lazily on Ibis' bed, and my hand slipped under her pillow. I felt two sharp objects. I pulled out a pair of scissors and a knife.

"What's this doing here?"

"Shshsh…lower your voice," Ibis nervously looked through the hole in the door, and grabbed the scissors and knife. She slid them under the mattress and tucked the bedspread carefully around the area.

"It's to fight Lepido," she whispered. "He comes in my room when my mother isn't here." I looked through the hole and my eyes halted with shock against Lepido's mocking gaze. He spread his legs wide and stared at me steadily while popping off the top of a beer bottle. My face stiffened.

"Let's go to my house," I said loudly. "My mother is waiting for me."

But before we could tumble to our feet, Ibis's brother pushed open the front door. Miguel, two years older than Ibis, lived with an aunt because their mother couldn't afford to pay for the upkeep of two children.

"*Papi se murio*," he cried, "he had a heart attack!" A good student and member of the school band, Miguel had a part time job and a car and helped his mother with

money whenever he could. Graciela predicted that he would be the only one to leave the Cuban ghetto. His announcement about their father's death brought Graciela leaping out of the tub wrapped in a towel. She started screaming. Ibis, wailing, threw herself into her pillow and kicked her legs on the bed. Lepido continued to drink his beer.

SYLVIA

Sylvia lived on the top half of a duplex on Northwest Twenty-Ninth Avenue and Seventeenth Street with her parents, who were factory workers, and her elderly grandmother. Her brother lived with an uncle because there wasn't a lot of space. Sylvia shared a bedroom with her grandmother, but, while her grandmother rarely stayed in the room, Silvia refused to leave her bed. Sylvia and her brother were part of the Peter Pan Airlift that had brought to the United States 14,000 Cuban girls and boys in 1962 under a program brokered by Monsigneur Bryon Walsh of the Catholic Archdiocese.

"I stayed in a girl's orphanage in Homestead for two years waiting for my parents to arrive from Cuba," Sylvia said. "There I learned how to fight with a switchblade. The black girls hated me. They jumped on me and beat me. But I fought back." Her brother, Rubencito, had gone directly to his uncle's house and escaped that devastating experience. Now Sylvia lay in bed reading one book after another from the Doubleday Book of the Month Club. Her favorite author was Mickey Spillane because she wanted to be a police officer.

"Let's eat," I said one Saturday afternoon.

"*Abuela,* can you make tuna sandwiches?" Sylvia called out to her grandmother, an elegant, tall woman with blue eyes and a deprecating manner.

"*Como no*, Silvita," her grandmother exclaimed in a tone full of love. The old woman opened a can of tuna and mixed it with mayonnaise and strips of lettuce.

"I hate my grandmother," Sylvia said out of earshot. "I hate my father, my mother and my brother. My father is a wimp. He does everything my mother tells him. My mother only loves my brother. My brother gets everything he wants. And my grandmother is so nosy. She is so irritating."

I lay at the foot of the bed. At my friend's houses, I either was laying down since I was tired from staying up all night or I was eating since there was never any food at home.

"I hate my family so much. I stay in this room so I won't have to talk to any of them. I wish my grandmother would leave."

"Let's have a party," I said, changing the subject. "I'm going to buy a new tent dress at Three Sisters. Then we can make deviled ham sandwiches and big pitchers of Kool Aid."

"Yes, that's a great idea," she said not too enthusiastically. "Really, all I want to do is read in bed, but I'll go to the party."

That night at home, I started the party list and figured out how much two loaves of sliced bread and several cans of deviled ham would cost. The next day I went back over to Silvia's house with list in hand. Her mother answered the door. Her eyes were red from crying.

"*Que paso*," I said.

"Sylvita's grandmother is dead."

"But I was here yesterday and…."

“They had a fight, and Sylvita went out to the balcony. Her grandmother followed her, and she lost her balance or maybe Sylvita pushed her. I don’t know. She fell down the stairs. Sylvita is at her uncle’s house, and her father and brother are making funeral arrangements.”

I looked down the steep stairs and thought I saw some spots of blood on the sidewalk below. I shivered. The next day I asked Sylvia what had happened.

“She just fell,” she answered.

GLORIA

Gloria’s parents weren’t Cuban exiles fleeing Fidel. They were Cuban immigrants running from poverty in the late forties and wanting to live a better life in the United States. They spoke perfect English and their four daughters were born in Miami. Pepe, Gloria’s father, was a maintenance worker for National Airlines and able to save enough to buy a small house in Little Havana where prices were low. Their house had terrazzo flooring and brand new kitchen cabinets. The living room sported a comfortable wrap around couch and a bar area.

It was New Year’s Eve, and my mother and I were invited to their party. We walked the few blocks to Northwest Thirteenth Street and were met with a spread of roast ham, *congri* and delectable pastries. Salsa music blared from the record player. It was the first time that I was exposed to that wild Afro-Cuban beat that made my feet fly and my hips sway hypnotically. Music at home was the Beatles, classical or Lawrence Welk. But Gloria, dark-skinned with hair as thick as porcupine quills, already knew all the moves and we danced--sometimes falling over in hysterical laughter-- with her male cousins while the grownups sat on the couch.

Katy, Gloria's mother, a stout, outgoing woman, sat in a corner with her sister who placed her face in her hands and wept. Katy patted her shoulder trying to get her interested in the merry-making but to no avail.

"She's pregnant," Gloria whispered about her aunt. "Her boyfriend left her. He says he doesn't want anything to do with the baby."

I stared at Gloria's aunt in horror. But the music of El Gran Combo wiped all thought from my head: the trumpets, maracas, and congo drums were irresistible. That summer, the expressway was expanded to cut through our neighborhood and connect east and west all the way to Miami International Airport. Gloria's house was in the way, so the government exercised its right to eminent domain and demolished it, giving Pepe a check for a new one. The family moved to a smaller house on Northwest Thirty-Fifth Avenue and Tenth Street.

"The money wasn't enough," Pepe growled, working even more hours at the airport. "I had just put in new kitchen cabinets and new bathrooms." A few months later, a fresh tragedy thrust the family into depression. One of Gloria's cousins died in battle in Viet Nam.

CARI

Cari lived with her brother and parents in a duplex nestled against the side of the Miami River and in the shadow of the Twenty-Second Avenue bridge. It was neatly painted and the curtains at the front window were a heavy, shiny material that kept the living room dark. Her parents were both hairdressers. Her mother, Aurora, a woman with bleached hair cut in short layers around her face, black-lined eyes, and long silver nails, was in love with her sister's husband. This was too much for Cari's father, Gerino,

who, as an *espiritista*, persistently tried to get answers from those speaking to him from beyond the grave.

Gerino decorated a back room with ceramic statues of Indians and all the Afro-Cuban saints such as Obatala, Chango, Elegua. He placed plates of food before them as offerings. Cigars, incense, glasses of water, and palm fronds were in neat rows on the floor. From the living room, I could hear him summon the spirits and plead for help in winning back his wife's love.

"*Ooooobaaataaalaaa,*" he sang in agony.

Just the other day Aurora had tried to throw herself out of the moving car as we were driving home from a bowling alley. She shoved open the car door and struggled to sling her legs over the side. "*Quiero morirme,*" she shouted she wanted to die, but Gerino grabbed her arm and pulled with all his strength. We were on a ramp of the newly constructed expressway linking Little Havana with Westchester, a booming suburb shoving its strips of malls ever more west, with bowling alleys and tire stores in a vulgar mish mash of commercialism gone awry. Cari and I gripped each other's hands. Gerino slowed down, reached over and slammed down the lock.

"*Por favor*, Aurora," he pleaded. "Why can't you love me? I am your husband!" Gerino dropped me at home and drove off, all crying.

La Nina, Aurora's sister, knew of the passion Aurora felt for her husband Pipo. It didn't seem to bother her. It wasn't clear if Pipo returned Aurora's feeling, but La Nina was always in a buoyant mood, ripping out off-color jokes as she washed hair and swept the floor in the beauty salon where Aurora and Gerino worked.

"*Mamita, le dije a Maria,*" she said she told her friend, "button up your blouse so maybe you won't have so many men screaming obscenities at you!" Pipo, lithe and sunburned, with black greasy hair and a smirk that bespoke of a fun-filled past, ran errands for the business and took charge of the supplies.

Maria Antonia, La Nina's daughter, worked as the cashier at the salon. She had stubborn strips of acne forming a scarred mask on her face. Her manner was bold, and she walked with an uncoordinated gait. She challenged everyone with her gaze. She wasn't pretty and blonde like Cari, but she had what her cousin wanted, a tall pale young man with a round face named Esteban.

When Esteban drove up to the Little Havana duplex, where La Nina, Pipo and Maria Antonia lived in the back unit, Cari hid behind the curtains watching her cousin saunter out to meet him. "Why doesn't he notice me?" Cari cried into the curtain. "Why can't he love me? I'm going to tell my father to make him love me."

"Let's leave," I said. "Let's find new boys of our own. Esteban is no good." Cari, a year older than me, had her restricted license, but she drove her mother's car anyway. We left the lovebirds on the front patio.

JAIME

Jaime was short. He was five feet three, maybe, about two inches shorter than me. Before a party, I searched the shoe racks for dressy flats to match my dress. During the year I spent with him, I collected quite an array of low-heeled shoes: silver and gold slippers with bright jewels along the straps, a slick black patent leather pair with a neat bow in the front, striped pink and white sling-backs. By now, I had discarded my ugly

brown saddle shoes and no one could make me wear them. With my flats and a bit of slouching, I disguised the height disparity between us.

Jaime was handsome. In one photograph of him in my scrapbook, the caption reads: “My muscle bound companion.” His thick hair rested sensuously across his forehead. His wide, long lashed eyes shone when he spoke. He was well-mannered, well-dressed, intelligent, always polite, yet expressive, warm, affectionate, respectful, funny. He wanted to be an architect, and he proudly showed me large sheets of plans that he had created on his drafting table at school. He was an athlete, playing football and baseball with the school and travel teams. And he loved me.

I wish now that I had had just one brief look at the future to be able to appreciate him. I tortured him with temper tantrums, silent treatments, telephone hang-ups, sneaking out to parties and with other boys. One afternoon at school, angered over something, I threw down my books on the hall floor and screamed at him. He picked each one up and carried them to my next class like he always did. Another time, I threw his watch on the ground and stomped on it. Then I jumped on my bike and rode off with my friend Ibis. I caught a glimpse of my mother, who witnessed the scene from the kitchen window, twisting her lips into an odd smile, as if she were pleased. Maybe she felt I was avenging her pain from my father by inflicting suffering on men.

“No man will ever love you like Jaime,” my friends said.

They were right.

I met Jaime at one of our neighborhood parties just before I turned 14. His brother Maximo, a classmate, had brought his older brother along and Jaime, who was in the ninth grade, whispered to him: “I met the girl who will be my wife.” He wanted me with

the definitive feeling of a knife slicing bread. As he winked at me, I noted a sad slant in his gaze, something incomprehensible and deep. From that day on, Jaime wrote me long letters and poems expressing a type of love I could not understand. It's amazing how two people meeting for the first time have two different experiences of that moment. For Valentine's Day, Jaime sculpted a ceramic heart, painted it red and drew our initials on it as a gift. He begged his mother to name his new-born sister Cecilia. He brought me piles of jewelry from his father's toy store, Los Reyes Magos, where the entire family worked. One gift was a set of yellow crystal earrings and necklace I still keep in a box along with the now shattered ceramic heart.

"*Dios mio*," my mother remarked. "He sure seems serious about you." But her tone was sarcastic, guarded and suspicious.

Jaime even gave me his grandmother's amethyst ring. In a rage over some insignificant matter, I threw the ring down on the sidewalk in front of my house. Jaime started looking for it on his hands and knees and I want to say now that I, quickly repentant, helped him find it. But I can't. Instead, I must confess, I went back inside my house, got dressed in party clothes, tied a thin leather strip around my neck, and sneaked out the back door with my friend Gloria. We ran to the corner and jumped on the bus to a disco that had just opened in Little Havana. There I met Antonio. After hours of dancing with him in the shadows of throbbing purple lights to Jimi Hendrix and Black Sabbath with a disco ball gyrating above us, Gloria and I hitched a ride back home and Antonio drove off with friends. Jaime was waiting for me, sitting on the front porch.

"Who were you with?" Jaime shouted when we walked up. He grabbed my purse, went through it, and found a scrap of paper with Antonio's phone number.

"What is this?" My mother struggled out of bed and walked unsteadily to the porch. Gloria, who was staying over, asked her for some sheets to make up the couch. I grabbed the paper from Jaime's hand, crumpled it up and then walked into the living room. Jaime followed and fell to the floor in a fit, thrashing from side to side. I kneeled next to him and shook him by the shoulders, calling his name. Gloria ran for a glass of water and sprinkled it into his face. But Jaime did not respond. His eyes floated back in his head. He moaned and trembled until the sun came up. Finally, he got up and drove off in his car without saying a word.

When he was gone, I called my father, "Papi, my boyfriend Jaime fainted last night."

"That's an epileptic seizure."

"Really!"

"You have to break up with him. All you have to do is give him the cold shoulder…dale *frio, frio, frio*. He'll get the message and leave you on his own."

GOING STEADY

When I'm feeling blue, all I have to do is take a look at you and then I'm not so blue.…The music streamed out of the car radio, flooding the quiet neighborhood street. Jaime, driving his father's 1962 silver blue Corsair, honked the horn. I ran out the door and hugged him desperately.

"I have never felt so loved," he whispered into my tangled hair.

I climbed up on the hood of his car and ordered him to drive me around. I leaned back on the windshield and spread my arms as if I were ready to fly. Jaime pressed on the

accelerator, gathering speed at short intervals and then slowing down so I could feel the wind push me back onto the glass. We laughed with abandon.

"Marry me," he said once I was in the passenger seat. It was all so uncomplicated. No talk about future career plans, money in the bank, compatibility.

"OK." It was early in the morning and we were skipping school, our bathing suits underneath our clothes. Jaime drove to downtown Miami and parked on a side street. The steps up to the Jesu Church were steep. We slipped inside, and the smell of crushed roses filled the still, dank air. The lights were dim. No one was there. Jaime led me toward the front, and we kneeled inside one of the front pews. He took my hand and turned to face the cross.

"Here in front of God we are joined together as man and wife," he whispered. "We are married now. No one can separate us."

I stared at the crucifix. Ceramic blood poured out of Jesus's side. I looked up at the stained glass windows reaching up to the ceiling. I watched the flickering candles in red glass holders. The wood of the pew was smooth on my bare thighs. I gripped Jaime's hand and squirmed on the hard bench.

"Let's go to the beach now," I said.

Outside, our spirits soared, and I promptly forgot the stuffy church. Jaime drove to Tahiti Beach, a hidden enclave across a bridge adjacent to Dinner Key Marina in Coconut Grove. Developers had excavated this section of real estate and were planning on building a luxury condominium called Grove Isle. He parked under a tree where the car couldn't be spotted from the road. We took out towels and spread them on the sand. Jaime brought out a basket filled with meat and guava *pasteles* wrapped in paper napkins.

The day was sunny. In this small stretch of island, the water was brown and filled with jagged seashells that cut your feet if you weren't careful. We walked out to the deep part. Jaime dove in and out between my legs. I wasn't a good swimmer, so I inched over to the shore. Then we lay down on the towels in a maze of trees closely planted together, sheltering us from sight. We were soon lost under the leaves, locked in an embrace.

It wasn't all about sex at age 13. The usual explanations applied: loneliness, neglectful parents, need for attention. How comforting it felt for Jaime to stay with me after school until my mother arrived from work late in the evening. It was even more comforting for him to stay overnight. I bought a pack of condoms at the corner drugstore, turning my eyes away from the cashier's surprised face, and taped it underneath my vanity table for when needed. Everybody at Citrus Grove was talking about condoms since sex was on almost all teenage minds. Once, Ibis and I sat in the back of the bus reading *Candy* and *Fanny Hill*, two pornographic novels detailing sexual escapades. I felt a strange pleasurable sensation as we read the exciting passages aloud, the bus going back and forth over our route, our stop forgotten and the bus driver oblivious. The sex act was becoming much clearer.

Each night, Jaime came over a few minutes after my mother closed her bedroom door. I switched the lights on and off as a signal that the coast was clear. Jaime walked stealthily through the back yard, opened the screen door, tip-toed through a small courtyard, slid opened glass doors, made his way through a back room and up a few steps into my bedroom.

As a precaution against intrusion, I installed a chain on the door that led to the closet which connected to my mother's room. At the time, I was writing passionate love stories based on our secret trysts. When he arrived, we necked and petted but did not go all the way.

Jaime now was coming over several nights a week. He nursed me through debilitating menstrual cramps, handing me tablets of Midol with a glass of water and plugging in the hot pad. When I had the flu, he eased my congestion with Vicks Vapor Rub, covering the ointment with tissues on my chest and back to keep in the warmth. How wonderful it felt to be loved.

My mother never suspected, but his parents did. Once, they knocked on the door at midnight. My mother struggled awake.

"*No esta aqui*." She told them Jaime was not there.

"*Ay, Dios Mio*, Jesus, help me," his mother cried out. "I know my son is here." Jaime pulled on his clothes, sprinted to the back room, climbed out the window, tore through the yard and drove off in the borrowed car he had parked a block away. When I opened the bedroom door to the demanding knocks of his mother, there was no one inside but me.

OPEN HOUSE

My desire for companionship and affection conflicted with my urge to be free. I took every opportunity to go to parties and dances without Jaime. One evening, my friends and I attended an "Open House" at the Polish-American Club tucked in a corner on the south side of the Northwest Twenty-Second Avenue bridge. These open houses were run by competing "fraternities," enterprising precursors to gangs that later delved

into criminal activity in Little Havana. The “fraternities” rented space in a dance hall, hired a band, charged admission at the door and sold soft drinks inside.

This one was organized by the Utes, a group of high school boys from the area. The leader, Alberto San Pedro, who, years later, was convicted of drug smuggling, bribery and racketeering, stood at the door. I handed him my money, and he looked at me with slightly crossed eyes.

Gloria poked me. “He’s no good,” she whispered.

I winked at him and skipped inside. The loud, throbbing music pushed the dancers into a frenzy of sweating, pounding bodies: all sorts of frustrations and desires were playing out on the dance floor. My friends and I were sought after girls and we knew it. Dressed in the latest styles and smiling that smile that kept us just out of reach, we soon had a handful of boys asking us to dance. For several hours we jumped and swayed with everybody else.

Then, out of nowhere, chairs flew over our heads. Yells rose up all around us. Knives flashed in the semi-darkness. Two boys jumped on tables to get out of the way. Two other boys charged at each other, one wielding a broken Coca-Cola bottle. One boy swung a chain as thick as an arm around his head and smacked it against chairs, tables and then it caught another boy who dropped on the ground on the impact. Ibis, Gloria and I huddled together against a wall, our arms around each other.

“It’s the Crowns,” someone shouted. “They got in and are fighting the Utes!”

The battling boys overturned tables. The chaperones -- mothers, grandmothers, aunts, big sisters -- sitting in rows of chairs on both sides of the dance floor, ran around trying to find their female charges. Their screams pierced the air and some of them fought

their way with their puses into the melee of arms and legs. Neither my friends nor I ever had chaperones.

"Let's go to my aunt's house," Ibis said. "She lives nearby."

"Let's get out of here, but I'm going to Jaime's house," I said, "He lives two blocks away." We pushed our way to the door and heard the whine of police cars in the distance.

"*Te llamo manana*," I called to Gloria and Ibis, who were already on the way down the street, and started a brisk walk up over the bridge. It was about ten o'clock. I looked behind me and saw three or four patrol cars squeal to a halt at the Polish-American Club. Their lights made the dark street seem festive. A dozen police officers jumped out and rushed into the dance hall, some drawing guns. Over the bridge and two more blocks and I was at Jaime's apartment just a stone's throw from the Miami River. His mother opened the door, frowning.

"*Esta Jaime*?"

"*Esta acostado*," she said that he was in bed and eyed me with reproach. She did not open the door to let me in. I stood quietly on the porch.

Jaime's brother Maximo walked over.

"He's been tearing his hair out all night," he said. "He was so sick he couldn't even go with my father and me to dump the old car in the canal."

"What?"

"We had to dump the car in the canal," Maximo repeated slowly. "That's the only way we can get money to buy a new car. From the insurance. Get it? Jaime was tearing his hair out, crying that you had gone to a party, and then he fainted." Maximo opened

the door wider to let me in. He was angry, but I knew he liked me. At one party, when his brother was not there, he had squeezed me hard during a slow song.

"*Es tu culpa.*" His mother said it was my fault Jaime was not well, but she took a step back, her eyes following me as Maximo led me to his brother's room. Jaime lay on the bed, his face to the wall. I kneeled down and took his hand.

"Don't go out on me anymore," he whispered, gripping my arm.

"I'm too young to be tied down," I answered gently. "I want to live life."

"Don't you want a husband and a house?"

"No."

I already had big plans for my future. I wanted to be a writer.

ALL THE WAY

Groovin' on a Sunday afternoon….

One day at school, right before lunch, we walked out of school: Gloria and her boyfriend El Chino, Ibis and her boyfriend Heri, Jaime and I. No one stopped us. We walked past the football field and the basket ball courts and then north on Northwest Twenty-Second Avenue to Seventh Street. We turned left and walked seven blocks to my house on Twenty-Ninth Avenue. I put on a 45 rpm record and switched the lever to repeat. We danced, laughed and drank strawberry Kool-Aid. I skipped to the kitchen to make lunch. My mother wasn't expected back until 8 that night so we had plenty of time. Ibis set the table with a satiny white tablecloth my mother had brought from La Habana, and Gloria arranged the silverware. I filled a large pot with water and, once it boiled, threw in a box of thin spaghetti. I drained the pasta in a colander and put it back into the pot. I opened two cans of spaghetti sauce, poured them into the pot and stirred it

energetically. Then I sprinkled the concoction with grated cheese from a bottle. I sliced open a loaf of soft doughy Cuban bread and trickled olive oil up and down on both halves. I shook a thin layer of salt on the bread.

"*Pan como en Cuba.*" I called out that it was a special Cuban recipe.

El Chino, Heri and Jaime were already seated around the table. Ibis carried in the bread. I carried in the pot of spaghetti, and Gloria brought in six plastic tumblers and another pitcher of Kool-Aid.. We enjoyed this simple meal as if it were a seven course repast in a Tuscany villa. Jaime turned on the radio.

We've got a groovy kind of love…

Each couple started to drift into different parts of the house. Ibis and Heri took my bedroom. Gloria and El Chino slumped into the couch in the living room. Jaime and I went into my mother's room. That afternoon, under the cool sheets, there was no stopping us. Jaime strained upwards, and I shifted my hips to the side. One more thrust, and something gave way. In less than a second I jumped up and ran to the bathroom.

"I want to marry you," Jaime called after me.

There were several drops of blood on my hand. The condoms were still neatly taped under the table. I had forgotten them. But I had known enough to stop in time. Did I feel remorse or fear? No. I thought of Lena, the heroine of *The River,* a novel I found crumpled up without a cover at the bottom of a book bin at a Salvation Army outlet. A pregnant Lena was ostracized by her family and, after giving birth, she drowned the baby in the river. The injustice of her story had shaken me up, and I swore that I would not make the same mistake. My father's voice sounded in my ears: "Remember that men are always out to take advantage of you." That idea supported the Cuban edict

that said a girl must withhold sex to make a boy fall in love with her. I discarded this philosophy. Didn't I have, as proof, the opposite reaction from my boyfriend Jaime? Instinctively, I knew the double standard was a ploy to empower men to discard women on a whim. Even without that sexual tug of war, my father had abandoned my mother, I reasoned. I decided men would not have any power over me, sexual or otherwise.

DIANA'S BAKERY

When it rained, the gutters on Northwest Seventh Street overflowed with brown water onto the sidewalks. But that didn't stop me from walking home from school. I liked to get wet in the rain. On the corner of Northwest Twenty-Second Avenue a big two story house where my classmate Estela lived —and reputedly where Fidel had stayed on one of his visits to the United States—always caught my eye. The walls were made of rough coral rock, dingy and gray. One night, Estela sneaked out through the window to meet her girl lover in the parking lot across the street. I looked up at the winding stairway and wondered how it felt to drop an entire floor down to the ground. As I continued to walk, I passed businesses lining both sides of the street: Morro Castle, Miami Dance Studios, La Vida Pharmacy, El Oso Blanco Super Mercado, 7th Street Liquor, El Baturro restaurant, and even a Burger King where junior high school boys threw ketchup and mustard at each other.

In a narrow, free-standing building a few blocks west, I noticed Diana's Bakery had just opened its doors. In the window, someone had artfully arranged rows of tantalizing cakes decorated with colorful meringue swirls. Despite my wet hair and clothes, I went inside and walked up to the cashier. Every Cuban pastry imaginable filled

long steel pans side by side inside the counter: *tocino del cielo, pudin de pan, flan, natilla,* and *capuchinos.*

The owner's son, a heavy-set boy not much older than me, had dropped out of Citrus Grove to follow in his father's footsteps as a baker. He looked tired. He told me he was up at 4 a.m., rolling dough into long delicious loaves of Cuban bread and baking them in ovens in the back. He decorated the cakes himself, and mixed milk, eggs and vanilla every morning for the *natilla* and *flan*.

"It's better than school," he said. "I hate to go to class."

"Do you have a job for me?" I had just turned fourteen and legally could work. "I need to save money to buy a car."

"One dollar and twenty five cents an hour," he said.

"Can I start this weekend?"

"Yes, but the job won't be here. We have a counter inside Zayre's."

"Ok, that's fine."

Zayre's department store was in the shopping center on Northwest Thirty Seventh Avenue and Seventh Street, the site of the Thanksgiving Day carnival. I filled out an application and some tax forms and, on Saturday, I started my first job. I served *pasteles de guayaba, churros, panatela de chocolate,* and *flan de coco* for ten hours on Saturday and Sunday and then four hours after school each day. But I only lasted two weeks. I hated the baker's son who watched every move I made with narrow beady eyes. He counted, over my shoulder, the change I gave out to customers. To thwart him, when he went to the bathroom, I sneaked pastries to the store clerks who walked by.

"I can't take this job any more," I told my friend Ibis. "Do you want it?"

"Sure."

I introduced Ibis as my cousin to the owner's son and told him that she had just arrived from Cuba and needed the job more than I did. He agreed to let her take my place. Ibis stayed for nine months. In that time, she collected an array of underclothes, toiletries, blouses, and cosmetics which she placed in boxes during her breaks and smuggled out to the parking lot where her mother was waiting in the car. Ibis overcharged customers, pocketed the extra money, and gave out free pastries to store clerks and friends alike.

THE SPIRITUALIST

The palm fronds trembled in his hands, but he clutched the green leaves firmly and began sweeping the room, body swaying, dressed in low slung black polyester pants and an almost transparent light blue shirt. He slapped the floor, the windows, the walls. The long green fronds were much taller than he was, and he struggled under their weight. He stumbled to a chair next to his daughter Cari, and slumped into it as if in a trance, eyes closed.

"What do you see?" Gerino Sanchez said, rolling his hands into fists. The color of his skin started to change, the pigment deepening into a toast-brown.

"I see an Indian," I whispered. Cari said nothing.

Gerardo nodded and took up a cigar. Still with eyes closed, he lit it and puffed smoke all around him.

"And now, what do you see? Look at Cari's hands. What do you see?"
His voice had lost tone. It was coming from a well. I looked at Cari's hands, large, strong and sunburned with prominent bones. The skin folded into wrinkles. The knuckles thickened, protruding like door knobs.

"I see an old woman," I gasped, frightened. "Look, look at her hands!"

"Si."

Why was I here? All I wanted was the warmth of family in my own cold world. I wanted attention and love.

"You're going to work like me some day," Gerino told me as Cari slumped back in the chair, her eyes closed, her hands shriveling up little by little. *"Ahora viene el espiritu."* He warned the spirit was coming. Gerino rolled his eyes back into his head and began speaking a rasping language, unintelligible. He jumped up and jerked his body as if he were going to regurgitate. He shook all over, extending his arms at his sides as he took on the spirit of the dead Indian. He threw himself on the floor, thrashing around until he almost hit his head against the wall, all the while jabbering in indecipherable words.

Cari's father was an expert in summoning spirits. He was *un espiritista*, a spiritualist who believes the dead are always with us and uses their supernatural knowledge to guide himself and others. He owned Tarot cards and *caracoles*, or shells, with which he divined the past and foretold the future. He lit up a new cigar each time he had a customer-- usually desperate over a relative's illness or a lover's disdain--who squeezed a wad of bills into his hand at the end of the session.

Coming down from his trance, Gerino took a moment to wipe his face clean of perspiration. Cari, too, had opened her eyes but she acted like she knew nothing of what had gone on. Gerino took out the shells from a velvet pouch and scattered them on the floor.

"Why did my father leave us?" I threw out into the air. "Does he love me? Is my mother sick? Does she love me?"

From the shells haphazard configuration on the floor, the spiritualist could gain an answer. We waited, but the shells were mute. Their position meant nothing to Cari's father. He cursed, picked up the *caracoles* and shoved them into the pouch, shrugging off the failure. But for me, the lack of answers was devastating. I saw my mother and father drawing farther and farther away from me, becoming figurines on a shelf. The vacuum they left continued to fuel feelings of rebellion, anger and an I-don't-care attitude.

Nevertheless, this experience made me feel the spirit world everywhere and at unexpected times. One evening, I came home from a stint as a Candy Striper at Jackson Memorial Hospital. My mother was still working. I put the lock in the key and just before I turned it, I heard doors slamming inside. I ran back out to the sidewalk, wringing my hands, walking up and down with nervous energy. My mother arrived after a few minutes.

"*Tengo miedo.*" I told her I was frightened.

"Of what? There's nobody here," she said, and made for the bedroom.

CARI'S *QUINCE*

Although the magical shells didn't speak for me, they delivered a stream of information for many friends and neighbors who enriched Gerino with handfuls of cash after their session. Soon, he had enough money to pay for an elaborate *quince* birthday party for his daughter.

That evening in February, 1968, the sparking lights from the rented dance hall on North River Drive next to a medley of warehouses and junk yards lit up the darkness of the usually abandoned strip of road running alongside the Miami River. Hundreds of revelers—women in long gowns and men with suits and ties-- made their way to elegant

tables covered with soft white cloths, elaborate flower centerpieces, napkins tied up with yellow ribbons, and match book covers bearing Cari's name and birth date in gold-ink calligraphy.

With the first methodical strains of Strauss's *Emperor's Waltz*, fourteen couples paraded out into the dance floor and solemnly circled the hall before launching into the lively and energetic sweeping dance of the Viennese courts of long ago. We girls wore yellow gowns with silver sequins scattered onto skirts that made wide circles around the ankles, our hair swept up into French twists carefully arranged on the backs of our heads, our feet bound into silver high heels. The boys wore black tuxedos with yellow carnations pinned to the lapels. They were neatly shaven with every hair in place. Because I was taller than Jaime, I was paired for the waltz with a basketball-tall boy with light brown hair and a face that had few expressions. Jaime was paired with a petite girl, Ondina, who fell in love with him that night. My mother, who watched from one of the tables, nodded her head to the music. She was dressed in her New Year's dress, with black lace sleeves and tiny black beads on the neckline.

Then a pause, as the couples lined up on two sides, seven on each, to form a circle as Gerino led his daughter to the middle and took up the dance in stride with the music. A burst of clapping erupted from the guests at the tables. Gerino and Cari were the fifteenth couple in the traditional Cuban ritual.

"Ohhhh, ahhh," the guests exclaimed.

Cari's white gown was the most exquisite I had ever seen. A layer of lace covered a white shiny satin dress, with pearls sewn in patterns on the bodice and sprinkled on the wide skirt. Her blonde hair shimmered. Her make up highlighted each feature. On top of

her head, Cari wore a rhinestone-encrusted tiara reflecting the light from strategically placed chandeliers lined up across the ceiling. Cari's father trembled as they waltzed, and, on the count of ten, the fourteen couples, which had been swaying in place while father and daughter took center stage, joined the dancers with one accord as the music reached a high, wild extravagant burst. We danced with care—not freely as we would have had it been a rock song—always cognizant of the instructions we had received during the many practices in the empty hall in the months leading up to this night. We had to make sure we kept the right distances and started off each time on the same foot. Finally, Esteban emerged from the shadows and took over from Cari's father. He was on loan from Maria Antonia who was dancing in the circle with one of our schoolmates. Cari smiled brightly, but tensely, into Esteban's face. He was enjoying being the center of attention.

After the waltzing was over, I skipped to the table where my mother sat by herself with strangers. Quickly, she handed me flat silver sandals. I pushed off the high heels and slipped the sandals on before Jaime could join me. I hated to be taller than he. Ondina watched us from a corner, wiping tears off her face. Jaime took my hand, and we walked over to the buffet table to fill our plates with mountains of *lechon* and *moros*. The trumpet, flutes and conga drums of the Cuban band on the stage kept up a steady beat until four o'clock in the morning.

MY GRANDPARENTS

Eight years after he had vigorously waved from the parapet of Miami International Airport as my mother and I walked toward him on the tarmac, my father repeated this action as his parents Rafael Fernandez and Amalia Rivas descended from

the plane bringing them from La Habana. Eight years had made my grandparents unrecognizable. They walked slowly through customs and down a long hallway leading to where we were standing. My grandmother wore a faded print dress in a grayish silky material. She was very thin, unlike the robust woman I remembered, and hunched over from a virulent case of osteoporosis. Her hair was wrapped behind her head in a gray bun. Her prominent Spanish nose looked huge in her emaciated face. My grandfather, his trousers held up by a belt too big for him and sporting a white worn out short sleeved shirt, slicked back his few remaining strands of hair, wispy and white. His hands were shaking. His eyes were bulging. Their hands were bony with joints deformed from arthritis. They looked at me, their eyes round and flooded with tears.

"*Hijo*!" my grandfather exclaimed and hugged his son.

"Mama," my father mumbled, turning to his mother.

Then he stepped aside. I was a full grown woman and no longer the six-year-old my grandparents remembered. The letters we had written back and forth had not prepared us for the physical changes. But now the stored up sorrow from so many painful events in the last years finally found an outlet when I bent down to hug my almost diminutive grandmother. My crying seemed to have no end. My grandfather patted us both on the back.

My father and his wife, Beba, stepped to one side, watching emotionlessly. I straightened up, and my father took the opportunity to introduce his wife. He had insisted that she come along despite my outraged protestations, and I had not spoken to either one of them on the ride to the airport. And now here she was Beba, an intruder, once a mistress and now the wife, standing proudly with her wide hips, wide nose and thick lips

brightly glossed with red. Her eyebrows neatly painted as black half moons above darting dark eyes.

"*Un placer*." My grandmother said it was a pleasure to meet her as she shook hands with Beba, but the pursed lips and flaring nostrils told another story. My grandfather repeated the same words in a cold tone when it was his turn to shake hands. I saw that my grandparents were my allies in the struggle for my father's affection; furthermore, they offered the love and attention that so far had eluded me from my parents. As we walked to pick up the luggage, my grandmother leaned up to my ear. She made sure that Beba was out of earshot. "*Y tu mama? Como esta*?" She asked about my mother. I shrugged.

In the car, my father returned to his boisterous self. "After almost nine years of Castro, things are really bad," my father rolled into his favorite subject. That year, 1968, the government destroyed the last vestiges of private enterprise during a "revolutionary offensive" that closed 50,000 small businesses such as garages, pawn shops, music schools, laundries and even street fruit sellers. In a speech commemorating the establishment of the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, actually neighborhood spy teams, Castro denounced long hair and fancy clothes and, soon after, the regime instituted mass shavings of long-haired men and sent mini-skirted girls and women to forced labor camps in the countryside. But while my father agreed with the hair and skirt policies, he was adamant about the seizure of private property, the cause of all of Cuba's troubles he thought.

"The embargo has to squeeze the communists out of power," he declared. In those days, no one admitted that the embargo the United States had placed on Cuba

contributed to the island's lack of food, medicine and clothes. "There is nothing in Cuba," he said. "My parents received absolutely no care there. The doctors in Cuba are butchers. They have nothing and know nothing." My grandparents had undergone several surgeries in Cuba, including a radical mastectomy for my grandmother.

The conversation stopped when my father drove into a luxurious pink and white building east of Biscayne Boulevard that towered over the bay. Plants artfully arranged filled the marble lobby and a fresh, cushiony carpet covered the hallway floors. My father swung open the front door, and the view from the bay rose up to greet us, spanning the entire length of a glass wall adjoining a balcony. My grandparents were silent as they looked around at the brand-new furniture and the fancy chandelier. But I could not take my eyes off the aquamarine water of Biscayne Bay. The contrast between my simple house and this apartment registered in my brain as a form of injustice.

My father busied himself with the luggage-- my grandparents were to have the back room--and Beba set the table. I finally turned my back on the bay and sat on the couch between my grandparents. I gripped their hands. Their physical presence cast a net of protection over me as my father, a gourmet cook, carved the tenderloin roast, and spooned the béchamel sauce over the slices with an air of serving guests, not family.

At the table, my grandmother, also a gourmet cook, turned her nose up at the blood red meat. I reached over to help myself to *croquetas de bacalao,* codfish croquettes. "Cecilita, please wait for the plate to be passed," my father said. I reached over again, in my own world.

"Your father just told you not to do that," Beba snapped.

We ate our first meal together without saying one more word.

LOST MONEY

"*Papi,*" I said into the phone.

"*Dime,* Cecilita," my father sounded impatient. "I'm very busy. I have a woman with her legs open on the examining table! What is it?"

"The money didn't come this month."

"I sent it right on time."

"We didn't get it. Could you look into your checkbook? Maybe you forgot. Or maybe it was lost in the mail."

"I did not forget. And nothing gets lost in the American postal service. You just want an extra check so you can keep the money for yourself."

"No, that's…..

The phone went dead with that awful indescribable sound like a disoriented space alien trying to communicate. He never sent the money.

GOOD-BY, JAIME

Before the year was over, I was bored with Jaime. I sneaked out to parties and *quinces* without him. I drank wine. One night, the smell of alcohol on my breath spurred my mother into action.

"You have shadows under your eyes," she yelled with uncharacteristic passion, as she beat me with her open hand. "What have you been doing?"

I cowered against the wall.

"Shadows mean you have had sex!" she screamed, pushing me to the floor.

The next day, feeling depressed, but feeling nothing for Jaime, I called him.

“My father’s toy store burned down,” he said in anguish. “We have to start all over again after everything we’ve gone through in this country.” The news made me pause for a minute, but I couldn’t let pity sway me from what I had to do.

“I don’t want to be your girlfriend any more,” I said and hung up. I took the phone off its cradle. I didn’t care if he fainted, went mad or jumped off a bridge. He survived the blow.

OVY

I was just getting over the flu and had not washed my hair in two weeks. But neither the flu nor greasy hair kept me from an open house or a party. I sprinkled a powdery concoction on my scalp, designed to absorb the grease. My mother and I, who always had colds, kept a good supply on hand of this product, extremely popular in Little Havana where mothers admonished their daughters not to bathe or wash their hair while menstruating.

So, with hair dry as hay, I donned flamboyant party clothes of elephant pants and a shiny satiny blouse that crissed-crossed in the back and set out with Gloria, Ibis, Cari and Sylvia to the Polish American Club. We milled around watching the crowds, boldly looking over any newcomer for boyfriend potential.

After Jaime, there had been Carlos, Alfredo, and Mario in quick succession. They paid me visits at home and sat on the couch, since that’s what boys were supposed to do, lapping up a few kisses and hugs on the porch. I kept these boys at arm’s length, seeing in their dull eyes that the traditional Cuban values had taken over their power of independent thinking. Any girl who went over the top with necking was quickly labeled *una puta*, a whore, and exchanged for one who held out all the way to the altar.

“He’s crazy to marry her so he can be with her in bed alone,” I heard one of the chaperones say as I passed by. “She never gave in during their five years of courtship!” She said this proudly: the bride was the paradigm of virtue. But I knew that the art of catching a husband somehow eluded me, and that boys as dull as the ones who had recently come to my door were best left for other girls.

Tonight, looking around the room, I saw that most of the boys fell into the “boring” category. They lined up along the walls, in the back, some up front near the band, checking us out with bland expressions. I let my gaze fall on a tall blond stranger dressed in a dark blue Nehru collared shirt. His light blue eyes settled on me as he danced with a move that I found interesting. I stared back, intensely. He had a serious look, but his smile was easy going. I was alone; my friends had scattered dancing in different corners. The song ended, and the smiling stranger walked the girl back to the chaperone.

“My name is Ovy,” he said when he came back. “I go to Miami Springs High School. I live in Hialeah.” Hialeah, northwest of Little Havana, was a blue collar city known for its factories. It was another world out there, and this boy, Ovy, took on an exotic glow. He seemed different, in the margins of the Cuban taboo proponents, outside the goodie-goodie club of Little Havana.

He asked for my phone number, and committed it to memory. Then he turned to some friends and said, “Jose, remember these three numbers: 685. Watusi, remember these four numbers: 2367. That way I have back up and I won’t forget.”

I laughed and moved away to join my friends.

“He didn’t write my number down,” I said to Ibis. “He’ll probably never call.”

Already the cough syrup was running out of strength, and I felt feverish and weak. On the way home, in the December wind, I couldn't stop coughing.

MODELING ASSIGNMENT

"I met this man in my neighborhood who says he's a modeling agent!" Ibis exclaimed. "I'm too fat but I got his phone number so you can call him and set up an interview. I told him about you. It will be perfect for you."

I dialed the number slowly, driven by thoughts of money and glamour. He answered in an even tone devoid of emotion and gave me his address for an "appointment" at 2 p.m. Saturday. His house was near Ibis's, and I decided to take the bus rather than go by bike. I wore a mini skirt and a sweater top. I knocked on the door. He answered. The house was empty and very quiet, smelling of smoke and sweet, ripe fruit.

"I'm…."

"I know. Follow me," he said after giving my hand a fast shake. He walked with one leg dragging behind him. When he placed his weight on his good leg, he leaned all the way to the right, swiveled his hip around and pushed the dead leg up to the level of the other one. He wore black pants with a belt and a white shirt, sleeves rolled up to his elbow, open at the neck. He reached a recliner chair and slumped down into it, drawing up the leg rest, so he was sitting back in a relaxed position.

"I was hurt in a shoot out against Fidel," he said, noticing the question in my eyes. "But I did a lot of damage to them too. I had a machine gun. They put my brother up against the *paredon* and killed him right before my eyes." He glanced at the immobile leg awkwardly stretched out in front of him. I didn't respond.

“Ok, I know you don’t care about Fidel,” he said. “So let’s get down to why you’re here. You’re here because you want to know if you have what it takes to be a famous model. These young girls of today, they all want that.” He laughed.

I nodded slightly. My heart was beating. I felt uneasy.

“I have a modeling agency. I pick the models with talent, who have that certain something, and then I send them out to the magazines here in Little Havana so they can be photographed for advertisements. Let’s start. Walk up and down in front of me. Show off your figure.”

I walked stiffly a few times, back and forth, keeping my eyes on his face, unsmiling.

“Come on, is that all you can do? You can do better than that.”

I didn’t answer.

“Ok, sit down over there on that chair and raise your skirt as far as it goes up on your thigh.” An alarm was now ringing in my head, but I controlled the fear and sat in the chair. “Higher, higher,” he commanded. I crossed my legs and moved ever so slightly to give a view of my upper thigh.

He jerked in his recliner, trying to get the foot rest to go down so he could get up. But the recliner was stuck. He pushed harder, making a tremendous racket. The recliner trembled and shook but refused to budge. Finally, he slammed down the foot rest. He made his arms move like paddles in a canoe as he struggled up. His dead leg was not cooperating so he turned around, balancing on the good leg, and grasped it with both hands. Then he twisted toward me.

I jumped up from the chair and ran out of the house all the way to Ibis's house some blocks away. I pounded on her door, breathing hard. She opened it. Her face contorted when she saw mine. We fell into each other's arms and cried. I was filled with shame, and she with guilt.

"I'm so sorry," she said.

MY *QUINCE*

I didn't wear the mandatory satin and lace gown and rhinestone crown. I wore instead a wine-colored, crushed velvet skirt and vest over a pink crepe blouse a local seamstress had sewn together from a Simplicity pattern I bought at McCrory's downtown. I did not spend the requisite hours at a beauty parlor for a stiffly teased and sprayed French twist with ringlets bouncing on both sides of my face. I arranged my own hair in loose waves past my shoulders and down my back, fluffy and voluminous from a day of being set with beer on Campbell soup cans. My party did not take place in an echoing dance hall with a winding buffet table encircling fifteen waltzing couples that make up the "court" of the *quinceanera.* The setting for this momentous birthday party was my dining room where I served trays of tiny sandwiches filled with a mixture of canned deviled ham and cream cheese and a potato salad my grandmother had made and my father delivered, and where a dozen of my friends sang "Happy Birthday" just before I blew out the candles on a cake from nearby La Gran Via Bakery that I had carried home myself.

"It's a waste of money," my father had said when I asked if he was going to pay for my *quince* on the scale of my friend Cari's.

And so my *quince* party, the traditional debut that marks a girl's passage into womanhood, was a cheap affair. To make up for this inexpensive gathering, I asked my father to buy me a set of garnet earrings and necklace. Garnets are my birthstone. To my surprise, he agreed. But the set was not the antiques I had coveted in a downtown jewelry store window. He had a new ensemble made by a patient who was a jeweler: 18 carat gold, garnets and emeralds. The earrings were in the shape of a T and the pendant on the chain swirled around to resemble the head of a bull with two intertwining horns. I did not like the pattern. He even bought me a matching bracelet. My father believed he was purchasing superior jewelry—"why buy something old when you can get something new," he had said-- and maybe there was some affection mixed in with that emotion when he asked the jeweler for an original design. To me it was just one more example of never giving me what I wanted.

Neither my father nor my grandparents attended my party. He thought it was better to stay away from my mother now that he was remarried, and that it would be a betrayal to Beba if he dropped off my grandparents at my house. The Cuban code frowns on any interaction between once-married couples and their respective families. My grandmother was sad, but as was customary for me during a painful moment, I buried it away and launched into the happiness of the present.

"Have fun," my grandmother said on the phone with tears in her voice.

And I did. At my simple *quince* on a cool January evening in 1969, after the sandwiches and cake and the opening of presents, my friends and I piled into several automobiles driven by boys already 16 and 17 and sped off to The Penthouse on the Seventy-Ninth Street Causeway in North Bay Village. It was a trendy supper club for the

25 and older crowd, and I don't quite know how we managed to get in. The Penthouse was lit up with red lights, and the waitresses were tame imitations of Playboy bunnies. The club was on the top floor of a building that looked out over the bay, and the lights from far off boats winked in the darkness. Downstairs, right next to The Place for Steak, a well-known hangout for Italian *mafioso* types who struck illegal deals nightly, police cars flashed their lights in the parking lot and handcuffed some shady characters.

"What kind of place is this?" several of my friends' mothers, including my own, who went along as chaperones, asked themselves. We squeezed into a mirrored elevator and rode to the top floor, smoke and loud music greeting us when we emerged. The chaperones sat at a table in the back, and my friends and I crowded into booths next to the dance floor where couples shared space with a three-piece band playing Frank Sinatra songs. I had invited Ovy, whom I had met the month before, and he was there, too, not wearing a suit, just a long-sleeved shirt with an open collar, leaning against a wall and talking to a scantily clad waitress. I didn't dance with him, but I flirted from afar.

My date was Miguel, best friend Ibis's older brother. He wore a dark brown suit and tie and smelled of Brut cologne. We wrapped our arms around each other and only left the dance floor to eat a delicious dinner of steak and vegetables served on steaming platters. Silverware and glass goblets sparkled next to white napkins on carefully pressed tablecloths.

At the close of the evening, Miguel reached back for his wallet and found it wasn't there. "Don't worry, I have money," I said. "I just got my allowance this month from my father." I whipped out some cash and paid the bill.

On the way out, I made a quick stop by the bathroom. I was amazed at the marble lined walls and the sweet aroma. After I washed my hands, an attendant handed me a cloth towel with one hand and stretched out the other for a tip.

AT THE LAUNDRY

My father's allowance of $30 a month wasn't enough for me to save for a car, pay for food at McDonald's and buy clothes and makeup. So my mother, who was now working as a clerk in a dry cleaning store in Allapattah, a predominantly Puerto Rican and Dominican neighborhood, talked to the manager and he agreed I could work there on the weekends.

I took in clothes, stapled tags on the collars and dumped them into a huge canvas bin. On Saturdays, I arrived at work fully made up and dressed to go to a party after the shift was over at 9 p.m.

"Wow, you are beautiful." A young man with a camera around his neck stared at me shamelessly. He was a blond *gringo*, clearly not from the area.

"Thank you." I filled out an order sheet and stapled tags on his clothes as he continued to stare. My mother was in the back, so I was alone at the counter.

"I am a fashion photographer," he said. "Maybe I can take you to the beach and take pictures of you in your bathing suit. I can sell the photos and you too can make money. When are you off?"

"I don't think so," I said abruptly, remembering the encounter with the so-called modeling agent.

"How can you pass this up?" he insisted. His eyes were ocean blue with black streaks, his hair curly on his neck, his smile open and warm. I shook my head.

CARI AND BEN

We sped off toward the port of Miami, radio blaring, Cari at the wheel of her parents' slick new blue car, windows down, the breeze tousling our hair. *He ain't heavy, he's my brother*. We shouted this line to pedestrians at street corners, laughing at their surprise. We headed downtown, east on West Flagler street, over the bridge, past Richards, Burdines, Florsheim Shoes, McCrory's. On Biscayne Boulevard, we turned right and sped by the massive marble structure of the Dade County Library, on whose steps the homeless camped out each night. The amphitheater loomed out like half an egg shell. To the left, the Freedom Tower stretched up to the sky in its 1920s splendor, glowing in the sun, the bay sparkling on the other side. Fishing boats lined up on the port, selling their fresh catch next to sailboats offering midnight expeditions out at sea.

A huge Navy ship anchored in the harbor rocked in the sun. Cari parked and we joined the line for a tour. We broke loose from the group and skipped in out of portholes and up and down steep steel stairs, causing a stir with the officers on board. We leaned over the railing as far as we could without flipping over into the water.

"Be careful with that." The blondest man with the bluest eyes, dressed in a white officer's suit decorated with a row of medals and wearing a cap casting a shade over his face, looked at Cari and smiled widely. Cari was blonde herself, a beautiful mixture of gold and silver streaks expertly created by her mother in the salon. Her hazel eyes slanted in pleasure. "My name is Ben," he said. "Ben Clarke."

Right behind him stood a tall, thin, olive skinned, very serious looking officer. "My name is Scott," he said and took my hand. "May I have the honor of knowing your

name?" I turned to him in surprise and then back to Cari, who was already engaged in conversation with Ben. These men were at least twenty but showed a keen interest in our teenage chatter. All four of us strolled up and down the decks and kept up a quick exchange of words and laughter for at least an hour. We left with a double date for the next day, planning to meet back at the ship before we went to lunch.

The next day was Sunday. The phone rang in Cari's bedroom while we were teasing our hair and applying makeup.

"It's for you," she handed me the phone.

"Hello, it's Scott," his gruff voice sounded weak.

"Hi."

"I won't be able to join you today," he said haltingly. "I'm in…I'm in the psychiatric ward of the VA hospital. I had a relapse."

"Oh…I'm very sorry." I wasn't disappointed.

"Yeah. Me too. Maybe another time."

I hung up and relayed the news to Cari.

"But you still have to go with me," she begged. "My mother won't let me out of the house if you don't go. I can't tell her I'm going to meet Ben by myself. You have to come as the chaperone."

WEDDING BELLS

I walked down the aisle on the arm of one of Cari's relatives, my bridesmaid dress a light blue gown strangely resembling the yellow one I had worn to waltz at her *quince.* Maria Antonia, the maid of honor, wore a darker blue gown, and walked behind me on

Esteban's arm. Ben was in his heavily decorated Navy suit, standing with handsome face glowing at the altar.

It wasn't a shotgun wedding: Cari wasn't pregnant. But at sixteen, Cari didn't see a future for herself other than being a wife. Esteban, the one she loved, preferred her cousin, and Cari had no interest in school. Her wedding was an escape from a life going nowhere, but it was also a trap that promised a respite it couldn't deliver. I felt sad I was losing one of my best friends and also a little frightened about Cari's sudden decision to leave her family and run off with a total stranger.

The organ struck the chords of *Here Comes the Bride*, and Cari—who had dropped out of school a month ago right after ninth grade-- appeared on her father's arm for the walk down to meet Ben. Her wedding dress was even more spectacular than her *quince* birthday gown. Strips of pearls were sewn in wild patterns on the bodice that plunged to a point below her hips. The satiny material fell in a cascade down to the floor and kept right on flowing into a long train that defied the imagination. The veil was sprinkled with pearls and caught up above Cari's head like a royal crown. In a matter of months, Cari's mother had planned a wedding that outshone her daughter's fabulous *quince*.

As Gerino handed her over to Ben, and in just a heartbeat's time, Cari glanced at Esteban and then back to Ben. I held my breath, thinking she might turn around and walk out. But the lengthy vows were exchanged, and I danced from one foot to another with impatience, unable to keep my attention focused on the words.

From the church, the wedding party drove in limousines to the reception hall where a huge buffet had been set up. The tables were decorated with candles, flowers and

“Cari and Ben” napkins and matchbooks. Everything was done according to tradition, including the throwing of the bouquet and the garter belt and extensive photography sessions.

“Are you happy,” I said as I hugged Cari good by.

“Yes, there’s nothing here for me.”

I watched her run to the car with Ben—both under the rain of rice----for the drive to Virginia Beach where they planned to live in a trailer park while he worked on a tugboat. Later at home, I looked at the map and wondered what life up north was like. I was certain she still loved Esteban, who was now officially dating Maria Antonia.

As the center was dropping out in America in 1967, 1968, and 1969 with teenagers throughout the nation running from middle class parents to live on the street or in communes, those of us in Little Havana were doing just the opposite. We clung to our parents, chasing elusive love from a distant father, a psychotic mother, or demanding attention from an indifferent lover. Some of us, like Cari, married to still the pain.

CHAPTERFOUR

MIAMI HIGH

The principal looked at me and then at my mother, who had made an appointment to ask for help with her daughter. My mother accused my new boyfriend Ovy of being the cause of all my problems.

"She never sleeps," she said, "because of him. That's why she gets in trouble."

"Young lady," the principal said. "If you don't calm down and continue to let your boyfriend keep you up at night and you can't make it to school in the morning, you will not graduate." Neither my mother nor I could explain why I had gotten into a slapping match with another girl in gym class and into a screaming contest with the math teacher. I stared out the window.

"If anything like that happens again," the principal warned, "you will be suspended."

"I cannot control her," she said. "She is too strong."

When we walked out of the office, she stopped me in the hall. "Please, Cecilita..." My mother's eyes drooped, defeated.

I turned away and went off to my boring biology class where teacher O'Hearn had put me in the back with my friend Jill so our chatting could disturb others as little as possible. It was my first year at Miami High. I loved the 1928 building that stood in ornate splendor on West Flagler Street, just east of Northwest Twenty-Seventh Avenue, and, when my mother dropped me off for the first day of tenth grade, I paused to stare at the Spanish tile roof, the arched entrance way, the beauty of the architecture. Then I noticed the cheap, muck-colored plywood covering its graceful bay windows. Thick black graffiti swirled in wide swaths on walls and doors, basketball gym and band room.

A barbed wire fence separated the parking area from narrow streets surrounding the school. Beyond the lot, stuffy pizza joints and small cramped Cuban café counters huddled together to make an apron of hangouts for those who found classes too grueling.

The bell rang. “Gloria. Ibis,” I yelled, the visit with the principal forgotten. We waved wildly, separated by a wall of students chattering and shoving. I felt small in the wide, long, locker-lined hallways. The ceilings rose high above my head and the shiny floors were slippery. When you looked down the hall, the shine offered a mirage of a trembling pool of water in the distance.

The shouting back and forth between students was a mingled Spanish-English blur. They were dressed in mini-skirts, boots, hip hugging bell bottom jeans, tie-dyed T-shirts, and wore long hair, both girls and boys. Four thousand students slammed their lockers open and shut, desperately searching for books. The school was so crowded with the recent waves of Cuban refugees that it had instituted double sessions. I had the first, from 7 a.m. to noon. My mother, who managed to scrape together a down payment for a dilapidated Dodge Dart with cracked dashboard and holes in the floor, drove me to school every day in silence, the radio blaring “*Is that all there is*?” Then she drove to her job at a new laundry on Northwest Thirty-Sixth Street near the airport where she stapled tickets on clothes until sometimes 7 p.m.

A group of students shoved past wearing black arm bands in protest of the Viet Nam war. Later that week, I understood the war’s impact. On my way to the bathroom with a pass, I heard screams. I stood transfixed as a hysterically wailing girl burst out of a classroom, clamored down the steps and burst out the front door, jumping into a waiting

car which honked its way wildly out of the barbed wire parking lot. Two of her friends stood at the door crying. The teacher put her arms around them.

"It's terrible, terrible," one said. "He was so young. He was blown to pieces!"

That first year, screaming from grieving girlfriends echoed in the stairwells at regular intervals, signaling death on the battle field. Many Cubans supported the war because it was being fought against communism. They were against draft burning, long hair, and sexual freedom. But the counterculture pressed in on us despite the conservative values of our parents. Nowhere was it better exemplified than in the musical *Hair* that opened that year at the Coconut Grove Playhouse, the trendy, red-velvety theater on Main Highway. One Saturday night, dressed up in our granny dresses, the curious and daring mother of one of my friends took us to see the controversial "hippie" play. It featured the song, *Aquarius*, which was my astrological sign.

This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius, the audience sang and clapped, shouting "*Let the sun shine innnn!"* It was liberating to sway to the music in the dark theater surrounded by strangers. There were no Cubans except us. In the last scene, when the cast appeared in the nude, my friend's mother swiftly whipped out a pair of binoculars and zoomed in on the actors. Without a word, she passed the binoculars to her daughter who after a few minutes handed them to me.

IN CLASS

Only the English classes held my attention. While the teacher lectured, I raced wildly through the text book, reading way ahead of the class but somehow managing to know what the discussion entailed. I wrote a passionate essay on the lyrics of singers James Taylor and Carole King, dissected the Beatle's *Hey Jude* and *Yellow Submarine*

and wrote a treatise on the good life which I entitled *Nirvana*, where no one had to get married to live together. I devoured *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Canterbury Tales*, but shied away from the *Catcher in the Rye* and *Siddhartha*, turned off by the protagonists' alienation.

Like most teenagers, I felt different from everyone else. But at Miami High there was no question that I did not fit in with the Cuban students who docilely went on dates with chaperones, planned weddings right after high school, studied intensely and joined the Student Government Association, the National Honor Society, and the Glee Club. I made a halfhearted effort to fit in to this world since I was placed in the honor and AP English classes and rubbed shoulders with many of the Cuban cream of the crop. But after trying out for the Flagettes, cheerleaders with flags, and the Yearbook, I promptly lost interest in favor of spending more time with my boyfriend.

Ovy, only one year older than me, came over every day in his 1954 Buick. He gave me his ring, and I wore it on a chain around my neck. We went to drive-in movies -- Jack Nicholson in *Five Easy Pieces*, Ryan O'Neal in *Love Story* -- and porn flicks on Twenty-First Street on Miami Beach. We went to discos and open houses. On the weekends I went with him to deliver catered meals for a restaurant during the day and then to sell encyclopedias at night.

I focused on the present with little thought of the future. The Cuban elite at Miami High, on the other hand, were being groomed for the Ivy League by teachers who sponsored the student clubs and knew how to get them scholarships. I walked by the open door of these meetings and looked in longingly. If only I could belong! I was envious. But I turned away, thinking "they're stupid." The fact that my father was a wealthy

surgeon helped me as much as if he had been an illiterate farm worker. I lived the life of the blue-collar working class, struggled alone with all the immigrant turmoil in a huge urban high school and did homework when I could. I rarely saw my mother, who was always working, never complaining. On her days off, she lay in bed as usual, unable to think her way out of a life of manual labor, low wages, loneliness and confusion. I saw my father once a month when he came to pick me up with his wife to eat dinner at a fancy restaurant. He sat aloof in the driver's seat of his Mercedes, or Jaguar, and talked about the suits he had ordered from a Hong Kong tailor who traveled each year to Miami. In this way, I lead a triple life: my own rebellious teenaged life, the sad and impoverished life of my mother, and the dazzling affluent life of an egotistical surgeon.

AT WORK

The bell rang at noon for the end of the first session, and, in a matter of minutes, I boarded a city bus to an office job just a few miles away. Family friend David Roe, an executive now at the American Land Corporation, had helped me secure a place filing documents for his firm. There I met Hilda, a clerk in charge of the filing cabinets, a single mother working to pay college tuition for her daughter. She hobbled along on a wooden cane, legs shackled in a brace due to the childhood disease of polio.

"I knew your father in Cuba," she said. "He was a fine doctor. But he could be trouble!"

I met Ena, a twenty-two year-old secretary who let me borrow her driver's license so I could get into the new discos springing up all over: The Cheetah, Heaven, The World, The Place, Mix II, with their sparkling disco balls, white smoke, black lights, and

throbbing music. Once, on our lunch hour, we cruised the streets of Little Havana to see if her husband's car was parked outside any of the houses.

"He's unfaithful to me," Ena said. "Somewhere around here, he has a girlfriend." Every day, Ena wore a different wig. She had glamorous wigs in different hair styles, long and short, and of all colors: blonde, brunette, redhead. "That way I keep my husband on his toes," she laughed, smoothing down the hair at the nape of her neck. Unfortunately, the wigs were not enough to keep her husband from straying. After our drive, Ena cried disconsolately for at least thirty minutes before we went back into the office.

By 5 p.m., I had a dull pain in my shoulders and back from continuously bending over the file cabinets. But I kept my goal in mind: a green and white 1964 Rambler that Ovy and his father had chosen at a used car lot. I needed $300 to drive it home.

"*Papi*, I need help with paying for a car," I had begged without success.

"It's not that I don't trust you driving," he said. "I don't trust everybody else." On the same day that I turned 16, I skipped class and crossed the street to the Florida Highway Patrol building. I made 100 percent on the written test and passed the driving test, expertly maneuvering the car in the parallel parking segment. By now I had no doubt that if I wanted something, I needed to get it for myself.

ELLEN

Withering weeds poked out from the parched soil all over the front yard. Ellen and I side-stepped broken clay pots and dodged brittle branches from craggy trees as we made our way to the wide double doors of a house set back at least 100 yards from the street. Ellen had long blonde hair to her waist. She was new in school. She told me she

ran away from her parents and had just moved in to this commune on Miller Road in Coral Gables.

Inside, a spacious living room welcomed us with mattresses shoved up against the walls, huge pillows and blankets covering the floor. Black lights were on almost every lamp, and psychedelic posters glowed from the walls. Flowered curtains served as doors to rows of small bedrooms. Heavy incense hung in the air, forming masses of clouds in the dim light, colliding with the sharp odor of marijuana. Jimmie Hendrix and Janis Joplin howled nonstop from an eight track cassette player on the floor.

Ellen disappeared. A man walked up to me. He was wearing hip hugging bellbottom jeans held up with a wide leather belt and a buckle in the shape of a peace sign. His scrubby T-shirt hung limply on his thin frame.

"You want a drag?" He handed me a joint. The smoke seared my lungs and made me dizzy; I coughed several times. I wanted to shed the cloak of Cuban-ness heavy on my shoulders, step past the barriers and experience…what? Anything but boredom. The man, much older than me, motioned to one of the small rooms. My heart was beating, and I felt short of breath. We sat on a sheet-less, sagging mattress in silence. He reached for a water pipe. I put it to my lips and blew smoke out, not inhaling, struggling to clear my head from the effect of the joint. Soon, we were rolling around, one on top of the other.

Ellen entered the room and threw herself on the mattress, too. For a while, no one knew whose arms or legs were flailing into the air in what seemed more like a wrestling match than intercourse. My heart and soul retreated, but my body continued to function as the nameless man straddled me and I reached out to Ellen who was on her knees right next to my head. As my hips gyrated, my mouth locked with hers. Another woman

announced her presence by rapping on the walls with a wooden ladle. We jumped apart as she began to pour out lemonade into paper cups from a plastic pitcher and line them up on the floor. She waved her hands in the air and placed a tab of LSD under her tongue. We rapidly pulled on our clothes, and I watched her run out to the common room and gallop around, boomeranging against the walls with a yell.

"Wow, she's on a bad trip," Ellen exclaimed. "But we gotta go. We got school tomorrow." The man walked off, taking the pipe.

I followed Ellen to her station wagon, dented on all sides and with one door caved in. I was still dizzy. She handed me a Hershey's chocolate bar, and I ate it ravenously. She was digging into a bag of chips.

"See you tomorrow," I said as she dropped me off at home and screeched away.

Ovy was in the living room and ran out when he heard the car door slam.

"Where were you," he shouted.

"I was just visiting…..

"You smell of smoke! Tell me where you were! Tell me the address. I'm going to find out what you were doing!" He grabbed me by the shoulders, his eyes bulging. I shook him off.

"Here," I made my way to the kitchen and picked up the telephone book. My heart was contracting. I threw the heavy volume in his direction. "Find it yourself."

SOUTH BEACH

Halfway out on the pier, I climbed up on the wall and stood looking down into the turbulent water. In a fit of fury, the water churned up white froth and slammed into jagged rocks rising from the bottom of the sea like crooked teeth. The rocks were

scattered in clumps along the pier to the end where fishermen hauled in sharks at night. Someone said the beasts had been sighted near the shore that day. The wind was whipping my hair around. Several of my friends had already jumped and were swimming desperately against the current to the shore. I wasn't a good swimmer. I hated salt water in my eyes. Lightning ripped through the air and drops of rain mingled with the water below. Thunder rumbled in the sky. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and jumped into the frothy mess.

My feet banged on the sand at the bottom of the sea, and I pushed up with my legs as hard as I could. A trickle of salt water made it down my throat. I spit out hard and plunged in swimming toward the shore with all my strength, eyes burning. Almost there, a powerful current intercepted and dragged me forcefully back out to sea. I kicked my legs and fought for air, screaming "Help" each time I bobbed up above the waves. A man splashing nearby began a series of quick strokes towards me. But before he reached me, I felt sand under my feet. A wave thrust me up and out onto the shore. Sand and shells cut into my skin. I spit out a mouthful of water. The stranger stared at me as I stretched out on my back, gasping for air, gazing at the mottled clouds above me that marched undisturbed across the heavens.

DANCE

South Beach was a high school hang out, but we shared the space with retired Holocaust survivors. At the entrance of the pier on First Street, a barbed wire fence enclosed an under-the-stars dance hall. My mother and I were staying in a dilapidated hotel a block away, waiting for the termite tenting of our house to be done. One night, in an unusual together moment, we walked over to the pier. My mother's inner light was on.

She hugged me, responded to me with affection, with focus. She commented gaily on her surroundings. These moments of sanity were the same ones that sparked my anger when insanity set in. How could she be one way one day and completely different the next? We stood at the edge of the dance floor, listening and holding hands. Polkas, ballroom music of the thirties and forties rolled over the darkness all the way to the end where men were struggling to hoist sharks out of the water.

We heard elderly couples, widows and widowers who had moved here from northeastern states to spend the rest of their lives in the sun, tell stories of lost family in Dachau and life in the snow. They told how they built and lost business enterprises. Men pumping accordions and women in bright dresses serenaded each other across the spaces, many dancing around and around the pavilion as if it were the first and last time. I held tightly to my mother, willing her to stay with me longer before I lost her again.

JETTIES

On the south side of our beach, another pier jutted out to sea. This one was a rough walkway of sand with sharp jagged rock formations rolling into the water on both sides. We called them The Jetties. The water was deep enough here for ships to cruise around the end and dock at the Port of Miami nearby. Jumping from the jetties was twice as dangerous as jumping from the pier. The depth of the black water and the stronger currents were forces to be seriously considered. I knew my limits, just as I knew when to stop inhaling pot, and that day I refused to jump, watching while a least half a dozen kids dove in and struggled out bleeding, cut by the razor-sharp rocks.

Back then, no tall buildings cluttered the skyline. Everything was open space, sea, sand and sun. Behind us, to the north, a vast parking lot was filled to brimming with the

cars of fans attending dog races at the track, losing and winning thousands in less than a minute. I was with Ibis and Miguel, her brother. We lay on towels spread out on the hard-packed sand. In the distance, my math friend Rene, wearing snorkeling gear, loomed out from the mist of the jetties. He held a spear and walked over to a clump of rocks to unload his cargo, a dozen wriggling fish that he dropped into a bucket.

Suddenly Ovy appeared. I got up and leaned on my elbow.

"*Oye, tu,*" he said to Miguel. "Listen, you. Follow me."

Miguel jumped to his feel and valiantly walked with Ovy behind a mound of sand. Grunts and punches were audible. Ibis and I ran to where Miguel lay sprawled, holding his swollen jaw. Ovy strode off. The screams of volleyball players a few feet up the beach mingled with the shouts of the dog track fans.

THE PILL

The cramps began at dawn. My uterus contracted and expanded with the force of a sledgehammer. I writhed in pain, screaming to my mother to call my father and vomiting into a pail by the bed. My mother didn't know Ovy was in my room, holding my hand. He had climbed in through the window the night before, and we had slept together. When my father arrived, Ovy stepped into the closet, his back against the wall, wedged between a row of dresses and blouses, not breathing. My mother stood at the door, looking worried.

"Are you pregnant, Cecilita?" my father asked, noticing the pail. In crisis situations in my life, while my hair was disheveled, my body sweaty, my voice on the verge of a scream, and my mind dispersed into a thousand thoughts, my father always spoke in a low, soft voice. He always wore a suit, hair slicked in place, trailing cologne,

shoes shining. He never displayed emotion. My father was in control – “no one upsets me unless I allow it,” he once said -- and his disapproval of me jumped out from his eyes every time I was in need…even if it wasn’t my fault.

“Pregnant?” I sat up, dizzy, faint, nauseous, confused, the cramps tearing through my abdomen. “No. Just pain. Lots of pain. It’s my period.”

He sighed and pulled out a round, plastic box. “This will stop the cramps,” he said. “Start on the Sunday after your period and take one every day for 21 days. Then stop for 7 days and start again. I have more in my office. For now, take Midol every three hours.”

I slumped back on the bed, clutching the box of birth control pills. My father swept out of the room, ruffling the stale air in my bedroom. Ovy stirred in the closet, slowly opened the door, and peeked out.

AIDA

Ovy’s mother looked like Marilyn Monroe with wavy blond hair and thick black lines painted around her eyes. She was an energetic, outspoken woman who operated a small sewing factory in her living room, sunup to sundown. She set up several sewing machines and had half a dozen women piece together long gowns and short dresses for a nearby factory outlet who sold the merchandise in bulk to retail outlets springing up throughout South Florida. At night, with the machines pushed out of the way, the house became a gathering place for *santeria* devotees. In the back room, a quiet place of worship, saints in full regalia presided over plates of fresh fruit, glasses filled with water, cigars, incense, candles and colorful beads.

That Friday night, standing on the threshold of the front door, I couldn't recognize the screams drifting out of the windows. I listened for a moment with Ovy standing behind me, also motionless. I opened the door a crack and peeked in, stopping short at the terrifying scene.

Standing with legs astride a huge steel washing pan, Aida was dissecting a wriggling animal. The sound registered in my brain as the bleating of a lamb. I saw the creature lose strength, tremble slightly and succumb to the cruelty of the knife. Aida's chanting reached a crescendo and tapered off into dull mono syllables. The lamb's thick blood streamed into the pan and ran through Aida's fingers as she cut up the animal into neat pieces. A circle of strangers stood about moaning and swaying with eyes closed. I turned and pushed past Ovy, running down the street into the darkness. Ovy ran after me.

"Stop, it's Ok," he shouted, breathless. "Stop!"

I kept running, but he overtook me.

"It's for dinner," Ovy blurted out above the rhythm of our steps. "My mother is going to cook the lamb now! Don't be afraid."

I stopped running, panting for breath. "How could she do it?!"

"Calm down. Let's go back. It's not a big deal."

"Take me home."

I stood on the sidewalk, not moving.

"Come on. It will be all right."

I walked back with Ovy, reluctantly. Inside the house, Aida already was in the kitchen with her friends, stirring pots on the stove.

SWITCHBLADE

The phone rang at 3 a.m.

“I’ve been stabbed,” Ovy whispered. “Right outside my house. I’m bleeding.” His words shot me into wakefulness. I struggled into clothes and pounded on my mother’s door.

“Please, drive me to Ovy’s house,” I begged. “He’s hurt.”

My mother cowered in her bed, eyes wide, and shook her head.

“I’m leaving then.” I dialed the number for Yellow Cab and climbed in when the driver screeched to a stop by the front door.

“142 East 16th Street in Hialeah,” I said, counting out a few dollars. In less than 20 minutes I was there. I jumped from the cab and stepped into a whirlwind that had just whipped up around me. The palm trees bent under the force of the wind. The sand spun into a fierce funnel, pierced by the light of a street lamp. Rocks shifted under my feet as I fought the wind and struggled up the stairs to burst open the door. Ovy lay on the couch.

“They jumped me,” he whispered, clutching his side. “I don’t know who.”

I ran to the kitchen. Aida’s words whirred in my ears. “Take care of Ovy while I’m gone,” she said before leaving for Acapulco with her boyfriend. I got a small towel from a drawer and moistened it with water from the sink. I rushed back to Ovy and mopped his forehead. I noticed he had placed a bandage on the wound, but blood had leaked out from the sides. I held him, and his head rested between my shoulder and the pillow. We dozed off, but, in what seemed like moments, an insistent pounding shook the door. Before I could get up to open it, my father turned the knob and strode in. My mother had called him to bring me back home.

"Cecilita, what is this comportment of yours? What are you doing here?"

It was such an unlikely situation for my father, dressed in a suit, hair neatly combed, that aristocrat with tastes for opera, classical music, zarzuelas, El Greco and Goya, with gold leaf etched furniture spilling out of his living room, to be standing in the home of a lower middle class Hialeah seamstress with her gang-fight-wounded son stretched out moaning on the couch. I thought it was obvious what I was doing there and didn't answer.

"And you, young man," my father continued, ignoring me. "You have no right to call my daughter in the middle of the night."

Ovy moaned something that sounded like "*Si*."

My father looked at the bleeding on Ovy's side and made a clicking noise with his tongue, making no attempt to examine the wound.

"This is the type of boy you have chosen?"

"You don't love me," I said, staring steadily into my father's eyes. "I don't know why you have come here to pick me up."

MY GRANDPARENTS

After vacating his luxurious condominium by Biscayne Bay, my father moved my grandparents with him and his wife into a house he bought in the Roads section of Miami, near Coral Way, adjacent to a curling highway that led to a bridge connecting the mainland with the island of Key Biscayne. He and Beba furnished the house in Spanish and French regency style with splashes of gold leaf everywhere. It was garish, pretentious stuff. Heavy satin drapes framed picture windows. Soft carpeting stretched from wall to wall.

In stark contrast to the rest of the opulence, my grandparents' room was simply furnished: two plain square wooden night tables, twin beds covered in white and blue spreads, and a rocking chair. The room had a sliding glass door that opened into a small inner courtyard. I visited my grandparents on Saturday morning when my father was at the office. Most of the time, I lay on the couch without speaking, depleted of energy, eyes closed, so, so depressed.

"Why don't you do homework?" my grandmother asked. "Why don't you study?"

"I don't want to."

"You just don't like to study. That's what's wrong with you. Don't throw your life away. Your father brought you here for a better future."

My grandfather sat silently in one of the overstuffed Louis XV chairs, holding his sweater close to keep warm in the chilly air conditioned air. His irises were ringed with green, fading green. There was an air of disconsolate sadness about him.

"I hate my father," I said. "He's a bad man. He does nothing for me."

I should have been grateful for the yearly gifts he brought back from his European vacations: the red leather coat from Spain, the woven wool purse from Greece, the fine silk fabric from France, the malachite cross from Morocco that I later pawned. But I wasn't. It was chilling to hear my father rattle off the prices of each item, reminding me of his beneficence even months later.

"Is that what your mother says?" my grandmother fired back.

"No, it's what I say."

"You can't let him affect you. You have to make something of yourself."

I stood up and went to the dining room. I grabbed a long white-tapered, wax-smooth candle from its silver holder and smashed it to the floor. I swept up the second candle and did the same. I walked out of the house and took the bus home.

DEATH

My father drove me to the hospital. My grandfather was in a bed surrounded by tubes. His bulbous eyes wildly swung around the room before he focused on me. He moved forward, opened his mouth to speak, gasped and gulped down air. His body was tense, straining forward. I approached the bed, my tears falling on the sheet. I held his hand, and he looked at me; the spark in his eyes told me he recognized me, maybe that he loved me. In a silent grasping of hands, we communicated the sadness and regrets of our separation and the tragedy of our broken family. We both knew that everything was different, that my father was different.

"Cecilita, you just can't cry there by the bed," Beba exclaimed. "You're upsetting him." She led me away as my sobs erupted. He died that night. My father paid for an elaborate funeral, and a procession that included a slick black limousine. The mass was at San Juan Bosco Catholic Church, a cavernous edifice with adobe walls on Northwest First Street in Little Havana. I will never forget the smell of the incense of death, scattered by the priest as he walked up the aisle…blessing us. The burial was at Memorial Cemetery on Flagler and Fifty First Avenue. I had lost an ally. Now, only my grandmother was left.

I continued to visit her on Saturdays, but she now sat on her rocking chair in the simple little room, not saying much, her legendary fire and energy squelched.

"I can't do anything in this house," she complained, the old spark of defiance busting through her apathetic stare. "They won't let me cook. They won't let me clean. They never speak to me. But you. Don't let them get away with anything. Fight back."

Once, my father was home when I arrived. He motioned to me not to go into my grandmother's room. "She is a pest," he said. After a while, I never went into her room, and she didn't come out to the living room. Why didn't I insist on going in to see her? There was so much silence and secrecy hanging in the air in her room, and I was afraid of her cutting remarks. In another year, my father put my grandmother in a nursing home. "I can't deal with her anymore," he told me. "I asked your mother if she would take in your grandmother, but she refused," my father told me.

"Why would my mother take her in?" I thought back to my mother's stories about the power struggle between the two.

"I was going to pay her, but she laughed in my face!"

That same night, her first in the nursing home, my grandmother gave up trying to live. I did not have a chance to see her one last time. My father arranged for a small funeral, no procession this time and no mass, symbolic of the resentment he felt for his mother from the time he was a child. "My father was such a good man…but my mother, she was domineering and mean," he said at the cemetery. "Do you know she would wake me up in the mornings by throwing a pail of cold water on my face?"

Even on the day he laid her to rest, my father's never-resolved anger found expression. Family slights are so powerful that nothing can ever right the wrongs. As for me, my feelings of solitude intensified. I had lost my last family ally and the small buffer against the appalling coldness of my father.

DOG FIGHTS, HORSE RACES, AND JAI-ALAI

Ovy introduced me to a variety of new worlds. His father had several pit bulls in his back yard that he bred for fighting out in the undeveloped southernmost parts of Dade County. Although I never went to a fight, I saw the dogs with missing ears and gashes on their sides. Others lay dead in their pens from internal bleeding.

Ovy, Sr. took his son to the horse races while his mother took Ovy to Jai-Alai. Ovy was a quick learner. Soon he was able to turn his hard-earned money from delivering food and selling encyclopedias into a steady gambling income. One night at Jai-Alai, he explained to me what a trifecta was and why he was betting $200 on a particular player. He won $400. I didn't like the atmosphere. Men with sunken eyes leaned against columns counting wads of bills. Old women pulling grocery carts with hair tied up in colorful scarves pushed their way to the cashier and piled up their nickels and dimes on the counter. On the top floor, men with large gold watches lounged in a luxurious bar and restaurant. Ovy was excited, digging in his pocket for more bills.

"Please stop," I said.

"No, baby. I'm just warming up."

Later that night he took me to The Office, a new disco for an older crowd near the airport on Northwest Forty-Second Avenue. We sat in a velvet booth in the smoky dark disco, and Ovy ordered Kaluah with cream from a phone strapped to the wall. We could also use the phone to call up people in different booths, but we didn't know anyone there. Ovy was no drinker and neither was I, but stirring our drinks made us feel older.

"My father wants me to sell some tape decks," he said. "He got them hot from a dealer. We're going to make a lot of money soon."

"But that's dangerous," I said. "You could get caught."

"I won't."

Little by little, Ovy slipped into the maneuverings of the underground market, trying to figure out his place in the world.

BETRAYAL

I see a red door and I want it painted black.

I slipped my Rambler up to my friend Gloria's house on Northwest Thirty-Fifth Avenue and leaned on the horn. "Come with me," I said, when Gloria appeared in the doorway. "I'm going to find him. He's at her house."

"But you don't know where she lives." Gloria was always the calm, cautious one of our high school group.

"It doesn't matter. I will know when I get to the right house."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing. Just stand there in case we have to fight."

Gloria jumped into the passenger's seat, and I sped off in the general direction of where a total stranger had said the girl lived. The stranger had approached me one night while I was dancing at The Place and told me that Ovy was out on a date that very moment.

"You should know what is going on," she said.

I leaned over on the dance floor and recounted the information to a surprised Gloria, who was rocking next to me with her boyfriend, Chino. Then, I walked over to the bar and asked the bartender for a pen to write down the address on a napkin. The next weekend Ovy said he had to go out with his father, and I put my plan in gear.

"That's the house," I told Gloria, consulting the blur of writing on the napkin. "Just give me emotional support."

I knocked, and a woman who I knew was the girl's mother opened the door.

"Hola, senora. I am Ovy's girlfriend. Can I wait for him here?"

"Ay, Dios Mio, we never knew he had a girlfriend," the mother exclaimed. "He never said he had a girlfriend."

"*Bueno*, I've been his girlfriend for the last three years."

Gloria and I stood at the door.

"Come inside and sit in the living room."

"Thank you." We walked in and sat on a blue velvet coach upholstered with thick transparent plastic to preserve its newness. I looked up on the wall. There was a portrait of the girl. Marilyn was her name.

"That's when Marilyn was fifteen," her mother looked at the studio photograph. It was at least three feet by two feet. Marilyn, wearing the obligatory white dress of a *quince* debutante, had a golden tan, green eyes that showed just a hint of a sparkle, and black hair thick and wavy. Just a shadow of a mustache was visible over her upper lip.

"She met him at Zayre's where she works on Northwest Seventh Street."

"Oh."

"They went to the movies tonight."

"Mhm."

Gloria reached over to hold my hand. Her palms were sweaty. My mind stopped having thoughts. I was in tune to every sound from the street drifting through the open window. An hour passed. Marilyn's mother kept up a light conversation with Gloria. I

said nothing. Another hour passed. It was close to midnight. Then, we heard the sound of car tires squashing gravel in the driveway. I got up slowly. Gloria jumped up and began wringing her hands. Marilyn's mother followed me outside. Marilyn's father came out from a back bedroom.

Ovy turned off the ignition, walked around to the passenger seat and opened the door for Marilyn. He did not see me yet, holding the door while Marilyn climbed out. I stepped out of the shadows. He turned toward me. I grabbed him by the neck. I squeezed hard. He made an awkward lurching movement and tripped, toppling onto the ground on his back. My hand had become entangled on a *santeria* necklace of white beads that his mother had given to him to ward off evil. I yanked with all my strength,and the beads spilled over Ovy's shoulders and chest like flakes of snow.

"Do you know that he is my boyfriend," I asked, not looking at Marilyn, but watching Ovy struggle up from the ground and stare aghast at the scattered beads, some of which he trampled on his way up. I felt, not saw, the quiet of Marilyn's parents, the shock in Gloria's face, the fear in Ovy's eyes, the anger in Marilyn's pursed mouth. The mustache quivered.

"He told me you had broken up." She leaned against the car, looking away into the emptiness of the sleeping neighborhood. Ovy stood before both of us, anger now raging from his eyes.

"Well, who are you going to choose?" I asked.

He moved in closer to Marilyn, remorseless. I had harbored some wild hope that he would publicly denounce Marilyn and walk off with me.

"At least everyone now knows what a piece of shit you are," my voice was emotionless. I did not shed a tear. I knew well the technique of suspending emotion. I marched off the battle field to my car, holding my head as high as I could. Gloria tripped slightly behind me but regained her balance. This was one of many incidents where Helen Gurley Brown's advice came to my rescue. She had written numerous articles in *Cosmopolitan Magazine* about how to handle betrayal. I had taken her advice.

"I can't believe it, Ceci," Gloria said, as I carefully backed up and drove away.

"That is how you should handle Chino," I answered. "You can't let him get away with going out on you all the time. You have to be strong. Feel pride in yourself. Show him your world doesn't revolve around him. Rely on yourself to improve your own life." These words were almost verbatim from Brown's latest article.

ROBERT

At the Di Lido Hotel on Miami Beach, *El Gran Combo* and *Los Jovenes del Juez* jammed with frenzy on New Year's Eve, 1971. The most popular *danzones*, *guarachas* and *guaguancos* filled the salon. Bongos, trumpets, saxophones and flutes yelped with unrivaled passion. Wine bottles clustered in the center of every table. A buffet of *lechon* and *moros* drew the sweating dancers on short breaks. Then I looked across the crowded room.

"Who is he?" I gripped Ibis's arm. He was tall, dark, curly hair in a neat, soft, longish Afro. Olive skin. Huge light brown eyes framed by long lashes. Wide shoulders. "Let's meet him," I said.

"He's with someone else," Ibis said. "He goes to The Place a lot. Let's wait for when he's alone."

I thought of Robert every night until the following Saturday at The Place when we saw him again. He was with two friends, one also named Robert -- on whom Ibis had her eye -- and another named Aurelio. Ibis, new friend Rosie and I went up to them and started a conversation. Soon, we were all laughing and making plans for next weekend. After that, Robert -- who was five years older than me and in college -- left his girlfriend, and we started to date. We went to the beach, movies, discos, malls. I met his parents, factory workers struggling to make ends meet in a small Hialeah apartment, and learned that Robert had been one of the Peter Pan kids spirited out of Cuba in an emergency airlift sponsored by the Catholic Church. "I didn't want Fidel to take him into the military," his mother told me. But despite my new boyfriend and the fun we were having, I hadn't forgotten Ovy. I walked around with the pain, missing him terribly, mourning the end of my first love.

My mother was driving me to school these days. It was my senior year and the Rambler was now gone. The car broke down slowly: first the brakes, then the transmission. I put a For Sale sign on it and a recently arrived Cuban refugee bought it for $250 after lasciviously eying my mother, who stood nervously watching the transaction. I was dependent on my friends and my mother's Dodge Dart with the gaping holes in the floor. One morning the song *Is that all there is?* blared from the radio as she dropped me off. It struck me that life didn't have much to offer. I was not in love with Robert, at least not yet. I didn't have a lot to look forward to since my grades were abysmal. And all I did was work part-time and go on fun binges every weekend. I stayed seated in the car, immobilized by the hopelessness of my situation. The task of walking the few short yards into Miami High was overwhelming, and I put my face in my hands. My mother watched

me without speaking, fidgeting nervously, not knowing how to bridge the gap that made communication impossible. But then the music changed. I took comfort from the next song: *If you can't be with the one you love, love the one you're with.* It offered good advice, and I stumbled out of the car and ran up the steps to class.

EIGHTEEN

They called it a head shop, one of many tucked away on Miracle Mile in Coral Gables. Blouses and bell bottoms hung on racks against the wall. Soft sandals piled up on the floor. A counter to the left showcased a line-up of water pipes, the dangling hoses wrapped around the base, colorful and menacing. In a counter to the right, on display shelves, were rows of cigarette rolling papers and little metal contraptions used to hold marijuana "roaches" without burning your fingers. A sprinkle of sawdust covered the floor. A long horizontal light bulb emitted a glare of blue, making the psychedelic posters on the walls light up in hot pink, red, green, blue, purple and black.

Incense smoke aggressively filled every corner. It always had a strange effect on me, like that of being high. I strolled, dizzy, to a rack, and my hand lingered on a silky yellow blouse with cut outs of stars and moons in blues, pinks and greens sewed in wild disarray across the front. The sleeves puffed up at the shoulder and ran smoothly down to the elbow. I took it by the hanger, chose a pair of hip hugger jeans that were folded on a table, and bought myself a birthday outfit.

Next door, in a small jewelry store, no more than a counter, also filled with choking incense smoke, I ran my fingers across the smoothness of crystal and buffed stones. I chose a hand bracelet to go with the outfit. A chain fit over my middle finger, holding in place a huge yellow stone over the top part of my hand, and then wrapped

around my wrist. I was going to be 18, and for the first time in three years Ovy, now my ex-boyfriend, was not going to be at my party.

That Saturday in January 1972, my friends packed into the living room and shook their bodies to the music from a stack of 45s on a tube-like contraption on my stereo. I pressed the automatic button to keep the songs coming one after the other. My mother worked in the kitchen, smearing ham paste on white bread for sandwiches. She had gone to the beauty salon, and her hair was teased into a bouffant.

My birthday cake stood on the dining table with its five or six layers covered with white and pink icing, waiting for the candles to be lit. Gloria, Ibis, Rosie, Sylvia, Maria, Gladys, and Evelyn gathered around the table singing "Happy birthday to you!!!" I blew out the candles and passed them all around. The phone rang, and I skipped into my mother's room to answer it.

"Cecilia." It was Ovy's mother.

"*Hola,* Aida. How are you?"

"Happy birthday!"

"Thank you."

"I'm calling you because Ovy is very depressed. He wants to go back with you. He doesn't love that other girl."

"I don't care about him anymore."

"Wouldn't you like to go to Disney World? I'll pay for the trip for you and him so you can get away and fix your problems. You're both very young and have made a lot of mistakes."

"I don't think I want to go."

“He’s sorry, very sorry. Remember that you went out with a lot of boys too when you were with him. You hurt him too.”

“What he did was very different. He had a chance to leave her, but didn’t. I don’t want to see him again.”

“He’s a good boy. He made a mistake. He has his whole life before him.”

“I have my whole life before me too.”

VOLVO

The Dodge Dart refused to crank up one morning.

“I don’t have any more money to fix it,” my mother said, sadly. She called a local garage, and someone came to tow the car away for free. I was stranded unless I took the bus. Then, my luck turned: my father offered to sell me his 1968 Volvo. He asked me for $500.

“After three years, cars aren’t any good any more,” he said. “I was going to trade it in but I thought you might want to buy it.”

“Buy it? I don’t have the money,” I said in frustration. “And I need a car to get to school and work. My Rambler broke down and my mother’s Dodge Dart broke down.”

“Start saving now,” he answered. “You can drive it while you are saving the money.”

“It’s unfair,” I said.

My father stood uncertainly next to the Volvo. I opened the door and sat down in the driver’s seat. The keys were in the ignition. I placed my hands on the steering wheel. I reached over and turned on the car. I drove away.

The Volvo shone white in the sunlight as I took a curb at high speed and straightened out. It seemed as if I were driving through butter. The seats were red cloth and soft. The trim inside was black leather and gleaming. What luxury! It was only four cylinders, but for me it was a high-powered Rolls Royce.

I drove straight to Ibis's apartment. In her dilated pupils, I saw the power of money as she gazed at my new car. I never paid my father the $500, and I don't remember if there was a transfer of papers.

NAME GAME

Shirley Shirley Bo Birley Banana Nana Mo Mirley…

One afternoon, gyrating fans pushing the hot air around in the living room, my mother and I lounged lethargically on the couch. I was reading; she was staring off into space and talking to the air.

"I just became a citizen," my mother said, abruptly.

"Am I a citizen?" I put the book down. "I'm 18, and I want to vote."

"No, you have to apply on your own."

The law extended citizenship to children under 18 when the parents applied. I knew this because my friends' parents, although poor, spoke often of including their children in the applications.

I ran to the phone and called my father at the office.

"Are you a citizen?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Did you submit my name?"

"No. Why?"

I was amazed that neither of my parents had thought of me during a milestone in immigrant life. Neither of them considered that, with a simple stroke of the pen, they could have improved my legal status in a country that they had decided to bring me to without my permission. Now, their action meant I was still a resident, marginalized politically. But in my family, the citizenship process was also a game of naming.

My father's name was Rafael Fernandez Rivas. When he first came to the United States, he used only my grandfather's surname: Fernandez. Then he realized Fernandez was everybody else's last name, too.

"Too many Fernandezs at the hospital," he told me. "I'm going to change my name to Rivas. From now on, I will be Dr. Rivas. So that means you too are a Rivas."

Rivas was my grandmother's maiden name. It was also the name of an ancestor, an important man from the royal court of Spain, whose statue stood at the *Parque del Buen Retiro* in Madrid. My father told the story of this ancestor with pride. When he applied for citizenship, my father dropped the Fernandez and legally became Rivas which, to him, had something of a regal ring.

My mother's name was Cecilia Vargas Castellanos. In Cuba, a woman did not change her name to that of her husband's. But when my mother applied for citizenship in this country, she too claimed her name was Rivas.

"His name will help me here in the United States," she said. "Your father is well known. People will remember I was married to a doctor. They will help me more."

If we follow the rules, my name is Cecilia Fernandez Vargas: one surname from my father, and one from my mother. My name was not Cecilia Rivas as my father had ordained it to be.

Days after the momentous citizenship conversations with both my parents, I went to the Federal Courthouse on Flagler Street in downtown Miami -- hot, grimy sidewalks and cold sterile building -- filled out the papers and attended a quick swearing in ceremony in a dingy office. In those days, the huge ceremonies at Bay Front Park or at the Orange Bowl had not gained a foothold. I put down my name simply as Cecilia Fernandez, the name my mother used to register me in school that first year of exile.

"My name is Cecilia Fernandez," I told my father, soon after I came home from the courthouse. "I applied for citizenship and that is my legal name. Don't send me any more cards or letters or make any more checks to Cecilia Rivas. That is not me."

"Oh."

I could hear surprise in my father's voice, but who knew what went on in his mind? I had taken the power of naming out of his hands, and I had staked out my own identity. He could have felt anger, maybe even hurt. Or he could have felt relief. If my father was unsure that he wanted me, particularly after he realized he had sired a monstrous teen who talked back, did as she pleased, and was love sick for a gambling, blond, blue-eyed boy who sold stolen merchandise, my rejection of his choice of names could have liberated him. With different last names, my father and I were one more step removed. I was now freer to prove that I, indeed, was worthy of being my own person. By the same token, he was freer to shed his guilt.

THE PLACE

I want to make it with you.

As I got closer to graduation during my last semester in high school, I lost more and more interest in school. I was now going to The Place four nights out of the week. It

was the hottest disco in Miami, a huge, glowing, building on Northwest Twenty-Seventh Avenue and 119th Street, with a red canopy hanging over the doorway and vibrating from loud music inside. Freshly groomed, smartly dressed couples were going in and sweat-wet, rumpled couples were going out, laughing, shoving, arms around each other, staggering. I leaned on a car waiting for Robert. It was midnight, the hour when all parties started. Ibis and I had just arrived after a two hour nap and another two hours applying makeup and choosing the right outfits. Ibis popped two Quaaludes into her mouth. She was dating Robert's friend Robert, who was not there yet. Rosie walked around with Aurelio; both had taken Quaaludes. Someone came up to me with a joint.

"Try this. It's angel dust."

I took a drag and in less than ten seconds, the floor began to move. I took a step forward and floated straight up. I took another step and continued to bounce up and down in the air. Each step took me in the opposite direction of where I wanted to go. I heard Carol King's music from a car radio: *I felt the earth move under my feet*. I hung on to the door handle of a car. I looked to my right and saw, in another car, Gloria dropping acid. She had broken up with Chino and was on the prowl for another boyfriend.

Finally Robert and Robert arrived. We danced; we sweated; we shouted above the music to be heard. No one mentioned the angel dust, or the 'ludes, or the acid. On the dance floor, bodies collided like ping pong balls in a box. Robert and I sat in a booth, and he ordered an amaretto for me and a Long Island Ice Tea for him. I took a small sip. I never liked alcohol, or drugs either. The drink was surprisingly strong; it burned my throat. I felt dizzy again and hungry, coming down from the high of the angel dust. By now it was close to 5 a.m. Ibis had disappeared with Robert to his apartment a few blocks

north of The Place. Rosie was necking in the car with Aurelio. Gloria was plastered to some new guy on the other side of the dance floor.

"Let's go eat," I said.

Word spread that we were going to Sambo's. Ibis suddenly appeared. A car caravan started off south on Twenty-Seventh Avenue to Flagler Street. At Sambo's, we ordered pancakes, ham and eggs, hot and cold chocolate. Everybody from The Place was now trickling slowly into the restaurant, filling up booths and tables. Hellos everywhere and hand waving. We squeezed into one large booth and ate hungrily, filling up with new energy for the rest of the morning.

"Let's go the beach," Ibis said.

We paid the bill and caravanned again, this time east to Miami Beach. We crossed the bridge and turned north on Collins Avenue to the Eden Roc Hotel, the hang out for older kids. It was already 8 o'clock on Sunday morning.

The beach was just getting full with all-night party revelers. No one had slept. The early morning sun caressed our faces, and a light breeze promised a sprinkle of rain. Gentle waves were beginning to come alive off shore; the sand felt warm on our bare toes. We leaned against the rock wall separating the parking lot from the sand. Everybody was wired. Amphetamines made a round or two. I was afraid of pills, so my high was natural now. I was running on adrenalin. We laughed, talked, shouted, raced back and forth from the wall to the shore and through the waves, then up and down the beach until two in the afternoon.

Rosie and Aurelio went their own way, and so did Gloria and the new guy. The two Roberts, Ibis and I drove back to Miami to Morro Castle on Northwest Seventh

Street. We ordered *pan con lechon* sandwiches and *mamey* milk shakes. We drove leisurely to Ibis's apartment on the second floor of an old Little Havana building. The carpets gave off a musty smell that made me sneeze, and the wood floors in the hallways creaked. The door lock was rusted. Inside, Robert and I dove into one of the twin beds, exhausted. Ibis and her Robert jumped into the other. And there we stayed until Monday morning. I decided not to go to school that day.

ATTENDANCE

The weeks before graduation from high school were unbearable. All of my friends had dropped out. I had nothing in common with any one in school. The classes were boring. The assemblies in the auditorium were unruly gatherings where, invariably, several boys were escorted out for throwing paper balls and whistling. Nothing in school drew my attention now, and I had no plans for the future except for the nebulous dream of becoming a writer. My life consisted of my new boyfriend Robert and the discos. I had sore throats almost every month – too tired and sick to ever make my first period class – and struggled through my afternoon job like a zombie. One day, I was called to the attendance office.

"You have 21 absences," the guidance counselor flipped the pages in my file. "You are in danger of not graduating."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Start coming to school."

I shrugged, and walked out. In the hallway, I ran into Rene. He was a member of the Student Government and the National Honor Society. "Rene," I said. The bell rang

and walls of students were moving on to the next class. “I may not be able to graduate. I’ve been absent too many days.”

“I’ll take care of it,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll go in your file and change all the absences.”

I stood in the midst of the chaos, students shoving and jumping inside classrooms with boisterous goodbyes to retreating friends.

“Isn’t that illegal?”

“No one will find out.”

PROM

My dress was white silk with a velvet gold and silver pattern, a luxurious fabric that my father brought from England. My friend Evelyn’s mother, a seamstress, constructed the dress from a drawing I made. Two slender straps of the soft fabric crissed-crossed in the front and in the back, attached to a long flowing skirt. Robert wore a satiny smooth black tux. We made a splendid couple.

But when we went to the Eden Roc Hotel for the dance, I felt I didn’t fit in. I was too old for my fellow students who were still going on dates with chaperones. Robert rolled his eyes at the sheepishly grinning seniors jumping around on the dance floor as if this were their first dance. We left soon after and met another couple at Les Violins Supper Club on Biscayne Boulevard. The supper club was internationally renowned and featured dancing waiters who, after serving us a succulent cut of filet mignon with a side of rice and black beans, donned colorful outfits and climbed on the stage for an intense flamenco performance. The castanets clattered above their heads, and their shoes--

outfitted with silver taps -- furiously pounded the floor. I had never been to Las Vegas, but a tourist at a table behind me kept sighing ecstatically, “It’s better than Vegas!” which made us all laugh.

By then, it was nearly 2 a.m. The stage cleared of the performance, and small band set up instruments and struck up romantic tunes. Revelers swarmed to the dance floor. But we left and drove to someone’s apartment, then to the beach, and then home at about four in the afternoon. School was the last thing on my mind.

CLASS OF ’72

Teresita Alvarez, Valedictorian, Radcliffe College; Hilarion Martinez, Salutatorian, Yale Univesity; Nino Lucio, Harvard University; Isodoro Zarco, University of Chicago; Emilia De Quesada, University of Virginia....

They strode across the stage with heads held high and eyes shining, one hand outstretched toward the principal, the other reaching for the diploma. They were Miami High’s top seniors who had brushed shoulders with me in elementary and junior high, who were in my honors and AP English classes, but had been so far removed from me in everything else that I marveled that I even knew them at all. That day, at our graduation ceremony in the Miami Beach Auditorium, they were unreachable, having been accepted to the Ivy League and other top universities, embarking on an academic career utterly closed to me.

It wasn’t until I saw these “goodie two-shoes” cross the stage that I felt the stirrings of regret. I realized then what I had thrown away. What if I had done my homework, studied for tests, joined clubs? What if my parents had expressed interest in my school work? Would I have been there in the front with these top students, a

scholarship to a top university securing my future? Instead, I was one of the last in my class, my GPA so low in those last months of the school year everyone thought I was going to fail. But I didn't. Here I was, one of 2,000 seniors, wearing a white cap and gown and crossing the stage to receive my diploma, trying not to feel the inevitable remorse.

I rearranged my features into a pleasant expression, but I could see the smirk on the teachers' faces as I reached for the certificate. They were glad to see the last of me. I turned and caught sight of my father and his wife in the audience, far away in the distance. I was one of the few students with divorced parents and, incredibly, I had won an extra ticket in a raffle so he could attend with his wife. He was so remote from where I stood, so unfathomable, so totally uninvolved with my life, a speck in the vast auditorium.

That day proved to be a turning point for me. I clearly saw the consequences of my lack of attention to school in the glowing faces of Teresita, Hilarion, Nino, and Emilia. I had caused this situation, preferring to fill my emptiness with fun and boyfriends, and now I was angry and depressed. My face was anything but glowing. I felt disappointment. I felt loneliness: my group of friends had disappeared. They had dropped out of school last year.

Ibis was in New York serving beer and wine in a neighborhood bar. Sylvia had gone to night school and then received her GED in between bouts of bed-bound depression. Gloria had married Chino and was living with him and his parents in Little Havana. Cari was still in Virginia with Ben, living in a trailer park, on her second child and having an affair with an unemployed neighbor. And I was treading water, waiting.

For what? I didn't know. Robert had broken up with me. And even if it didn't spur the searing pain of lost first love, the break up was hurtful since I had grown to love him.

"I'm so depressed," he told me. "I'm so confused." He said he was going to try to "find himself" while going to Miami Dade Community College, writing songs like Elton John and Paul Williams, and working at a shoe factory in Hialeah. I was alone without a boyfriend for the first time in six years.

Something finally had run out. Whatever it was, it was unequivocally over. There was a terrible abyss waiting to devour me. No. I had to rid myself of the emptiness, the sadness. I still wanted that adventurous life, and I was going to get it. After I walked across the stage, forcing myself to smile into the empty air in front of me, I joined my mother in the parking lot and we climbed into the shiny Volvo. My father and his wife waved good by from their Mercedes. I looked after them in surprise. They had not stopped to congratulate me.

"You have to do something," my mother said softly on the way home, "with your life. You have to study something so you can have a good job."

"I know. I want that too."

"Let me pay for a secretarial course for you. I saw it in a magazine. I'll find the money to give you so you can take that course." It was painful to see my mother's intense face as I drove us home. She seemed almost all there that afternoon, clearly aware of the bleak future ahead of me if I didn't make a move. Had she saved the money for the secretarial course? She hadn't had a penny to fix the Dodge Dart so she could drive to work rather than go on the bus!

"Mami, I don't want to be a secretary!"

"You need to study something so you can work in a big company," she said, "and so you don't have to depend on a man."

"I can't see myself as a secretary! There's got to be something else out there."

"But what are you going to do? Your father's child support ends now! I don't make a lot of money at the drycleaners!"

"Those students you saw up there on the stage, the first ones to go up," I said, "None of them are smarter than I am. I bet I could have gotten into Radcliffe, too, if I had wanted. I'm going to find a way to get an education and a good career. Wait and see. I'm smarter than you think."

PROPOSAL

Killing me softly with his song….

Days later, just after I had fortified myself with a new resolve to get a college education and launch an exciting career, Ovy proposed.

"I want to marry you," he said, looking into my eyes and clutching my hands.

We sat at our favorite restaurant, La Hacienda, a block from my house, eating steaks with mushroom sauce and yellow rice, like we had done so many times before.

"What happened to your girlfriend?" I sneered, taking back my hands.

"I told you I never loved her."

"I don't want to marry you," I answered. "I want to go away…to a university."

"You! Hm. I don't think you are college material. You couldn't even get past those math classes if it hadn't been for me."

"High school is over now. I have thought about it, and I want to be a writer."

"You're crazy!"

“I’m going to be a newspaper reporter.”

“Sure! I can just see you being a slave to that job. Reporters are on call night and day. Don’t you know that?”

“I’m going to save money and get my degree in journalism. I know I can do it.”

“Who put that stupid idea into your head all of a sudden?”

“I look around me and see people doing what they want. I see them having a wonderful life ahead of them. Teresita Alvarez. Nino Lucio. They have families who are normal. That’s why they appear to be so smart. If they can go away to college, so can I. I’m going to do it. Watch.”

“You have no idea how difficult it’s going to be to turn your life around. First of all, it’s going to take you a long time to save enough money to go away. Second of all, no college will take you. Your grades stink.”

“Listen, this is what I’m going to do: I’m going to take writing classes at the junior college, get straight As, then I’m going to write stories and put a portfolio together. I’m good at writing. Remember? I wrote a lot of your essays, right? Some journalism school out there will accept me. I know it.”

“Yeah, right. So that’s your dream, but what about us? It would be so much easier for you if you married me.”

“You were unfaithful to me, remember?”

“I made a mistake. I have loved only you ever since I met you.”

“That was so long ago. Things are different now…”

“I can make it up to you. Don’t you want to have a husband, a house, children? Every girl wants that.”

“Not me. I want to live an adventurous life.”

“We can set up a clothes factory with the help of my mother, make a lot of money right away, and then we can buy one of those new townhouses they’re building out in Kendall. Then maybe I can start playing Jai Alai professionally and you can go with me, traveling to different cities, while my mother runs the clothes factory. That will be adventurous. Don’t you think you might want to do something like that?”

“No. I don’t want to do any of that. Not at all.”

“I thought you loved me.”

Killing my life with his words…..

DOWNTOWN BOOK CENTER

The American Land Corporation where I worked had closed, and I scanned the classifieds closely every day. Finally, I found an ad for a job as a clerk in a bookstore.

“Do you like to read?” asked the owner, a short, dark skinned man with deep scars that cut across his face as testimony to youth’s hormones. He looked me up and down.

“Yes.”

“Then you have the job.”

The next day, I parked my father’s Volvo next to the Downtown Book Center. “Cecilia has entered society,” the owner’s son exclaimed when I walked in to the bookstore. “I saw you driving that Volvo. Hoo, hoo!”

He was an obese, pimply faced teenager about my age with greasy hair hanging in his eyes. But, being the owner’s son, he had an inflated sense of self. He shuffled his fat frame onto the swivel chair at the desk and swung around to stare at me.

“My father is not here today, so I am the boss,” he said. “You can start by filling up the shelves. The books are in the back.”

I walked to where he pointed and entered a small, cramped storage room. I breathed in the exhilarating smell of new books, passing my hand over the shiny new covers. I loaded up my left arm with books, and held the pile with my right. Then, I went up and down the narrow aisles, filling all the empty spaces on the shelves. The cashier was a young woman, about 22 years old. She had been working there for a few years while she went to college but now she was leaving to get married to a police officer.

“I can’t wait to leave this place,” she whispered.

I went back to the storage room and picked up a pile of magazines from Spain. I began to fill the racks with magazines, newspapers, and periodicals from every country in Latin America. We also had newspapers from France and Germany. The job proved so boring and the owner’s son such an irritant that I quit after a few weeks. I never forgot the smell of new books.

POTS AND PANS

My next job was as a sales associate of a company that sold pots and pans. I went to a training class for a week.

“Have you ever gone to the movies and the line was so long you wanted to go home?” asked the trainer.

Everyone groaned in agreement.

“Well, when you finish this course, you will have the confidence to walk right up to the start of the line and just waltz right in. You will have personal power. You will be

able to do things you never thought possible. You will be able to talk anyone into doing exactly what you want them to do. You will never take no for an answer because people will be saying yes to you all day."

"These pots," he pointed to a table where various gleaming pots and pots had been artistically arranged to show them off to advantage. "These pots are special. You don't need water to cook in them. They are indestructible. They will last a lifetime and then some. They are the ultimate pots. And you will be selling one set a day when you graduate from this course. You will be making ten percent commission. They cost $300. And you will keep $30 of that. In one week, you can earn $150 for just visiting people and talking to them about these pots."

I took a box of demo pots home. But after thinking about it for a day or so, I returned them.

MEDICAL ASSISTANT

My next job was as an assistant to an ear, nose and throat doctor. I gingerly held a small deep tray underneath a patient's ear, out of which invariably grew a bush of hair.

"Hold it steady," the doctor said. I closed my eyes and tried to balance the tray without moving it. He pushed the syringe into the patient's ear, and a stream of water washed out huge brownish yellow chunks of wax.

"Three, two one," the doctor counted and squeezed the syringe for the second time. Another wad of wax broke lose and erupted as if from a volcano. "I'm finished."

I carried the tray to a sink and disposed of the contents, turning on the faucet full force. The patient and the doctor walked out of the examining room, and I stayed behind to take off the paper covering the table and tidy up the instruments. I went to the front

desk and took up yet another file, walked to the door, opened it and called out, “Mr. Hirsch?”

I gave notice that Friday.

“You know you could be the perfect woman,” the doctor told me the day I left. “But your nose is just too big.” I had always hated it. It had a hump in the middle, just like my father’s. But its size hadn’t deterred boys. That week, Robert came back.

My hands shook when I saw him standing on my doorstep.

“I can’t live without you,” he said. “Can you forgive me? I was just so confused.”

We held each other for a few minutes.

“My parents are thinking about divorcing, and I am so worried” he said.

“I’m sorry. I know just how you feel.”

We walked back to the family room. Robert was everything Ovy was not. He was solid, dependable, serious, focused, and hard-working. He stayed clear of the law.

“But you left me,” I ventured, feeling the pain again.

“I didn’t have anything to offer you, just a factory job and no savings. I felt I was nothing. Then, I realized I loved you and had to be with you. I even thought we could get married in the future.”

I looked at him, my heart soaring, the plan developing. Looking back on that day, I realized that I was following a social construct that I used conveniently for my own ends. Why not? I loved him. Marrying Robert would make my departure from Little Havana a lot easier. I remembered an article in *Cosmopolitan* saying that women could ask men to marry them in a Leap Year. And this was a Leap Year.

"Let's get married now," I said. "I love you." It was a different type of love than I had experienced: less passionate, but more solid. It seemed to be the right kind for two people building new lives. And, of course, there was that unrelenting pressure from the Cuban culture. Why have a relationship with a boy if it wasn't going to lead to marriage? I heard chaperones ask their charges this question on dates all the time. I wanted to live a life of freedom. Then why did I want to be married? Could I be free and married at the same time? I didn't know the answers. But I knew I had to get on with my plan.

"Married now?"

"Two new beginnings. I want to go away to school. You can go away to school, too. There's nothing here in Miami right now for either of us. We can get married and work toward getting good educations and better lives."

"I don't want to work in a shoe factory all my life."

"Then it's settled." Our decision was more practical than romantic. But I was beginning to realize that few people had it all.

WHICH COLLEGE?

With the decision to marry out of the way, I turned my full attention to the college application process. While Robert worked at the shoe factory, I went to the library and found a book listing all the universities in the world. I looked at Oxford, Cambridge, the Sorbonne, but those were just dreams. I had to be realistic. A section in the book listed the universities with high-ranking journalism schools. I picked five randomly from all four corners of the United States, copied down the addresses, and used my old Olivetti typewriter to request catalogues. When the booklets arrived in the mail, I was taken aback by the price of the out-of-state tuition. It was an insurmountable figure. How could

I save all that money in the next few months? Even in one year? I thought of my mother's small savings for secretarial school. Then I reluctantly thought about my father. Maybe he would see the logic in my thinking. I decided to test the waters.

"Papi, I want to go away to a university!" I said on the phone. "There's nothing here that fits me. The University of Miami is too expensive, and Florida International University is just starting and doesn't offer a lot of choices."

After long minutes of silence, my father gathered his habitual energy into his voice. "Come over tonight," he said. "I'll sit down and help you decide something."

I eagerly packed up my catalogues and a few Career Outlook pamphlets. I also had booklets from Florida Atlantic University, Florida State University, and the University of Florida. The top graduating seniors at Miami High were already on their first semesters in schools all across the nation, and I was still drifting along. My friends were busy with their own lives. Sylvia was in bed getting over an abortion and pursuing an affair with a married police officer. Ibis was now back in Miami working full time for Florida Lumber and conducting Santeria rituals in the evenings. Gloria was working at a small restaurant close to home. Cari had come down from Virginia for a weekend to ask the magical *caracoles* what was going to happen to her marriage. Was this all there was to life for them?

I drove to my father's new home in Miami Lakes. It was a three-bedroom, ranch style house on a lake in a tree-lined subdivision. My father was lounging in an overstuffed maroon leather chair in the family room. Dark wood beams and wrought iron decorations gave it the look of a Spanish *taberna.*

"Here are some of the universities I have been looking at," I said, and sat on the floor, spreading the pamphlets in front of me.

"All the universities," my father's voice hit all the low tones, as if dragging his words through a muddy tunnel, "are the same. You can study right here in Miami. You can go to Miami Dade Junior College. It is the least expensive and just as good as anywhere else. All the out of town universities are dens of drugs and prostitution!" Spit sprayed out of his mouth. He was almost shouting by the end of his monologue. I sighed, not surprised. I had expected just such a tirade.

"I am telling you what is best for you," he continued, his tone taking an authoritative edge just like when he bashed Fidel and the evils of communism. "And it is Miami Dade Junior College. I gave you a car so you can get there. Tuition is cheap. And you're going to learn the same thing there as in any other university. And you will be a lot safer living at home. All colleges are the same, Cecilita. Believe me."

Why did I ever have the hope that he would see the benefits of spending some of his wealth on his daughter's education? I knew his negative response was all about money. But…maybe he needed more time to get used to the idea.

"No, Cecilita, you don't know what you are saying," my father kept going. "Why don't you study to be a pharmacist at Miami Dade. You could set up a pharmacy right next to my office, and I could send you my patients. Isn't that a good idea? Or how about being an antique dealer? That's a great job for a woman. You could travel to Europe and import very fine pieces. And many of my friends could buy them. Or you could be an interior designer. They have that program at Miami Dade, too. One of Beba's relatives just enrolled."

"Papi, I want to be a writer. I want to be a journalist."

There. I had said it out loud to my father. It made so much sense. I remembered when I dictated Christmas stories to my mother in elementary school, took a creative writing class in a school summer program, joined the staff of the junior high literary magazine, sketched out a novel in high school, tossed together words in blank verse just the other day. It seemed like a logical choice of careers: I would get paid to write.

"Cecilita, you must be confused," my father's voice went lower. "All the young people these days are confused. You don't know what you are saying. Don't you know that *periodistas* are crooks? They are all corrupt, just like lawyers! *Esta nina esta loca*! All your problems are based on your mother who has not known how to raise you."

MIAMI DADE JUNIOR COLLEGE

The line wound around one hallway and spilled into the next. I had been standing on my white platform sandals for at least an hour. I held a class registration form tightly in my hands. I had just received the scores from the CLEP test (College Level Equivalency Placement) which miraculously gave me credit for two English and two Social Studies classes. With that, I was already four classes ahead of the pack. My high scores on the test, designed to give college credit, proved I hadn't been totally brain dead during high school.

Finally, I got to the window. I handed in my forms and was officially registered for a humanities course with Professor Altschuler -- the famous hippy who lived in Coconut Grove -- a general math course, American History, a basic science, advanced French, and Journalism 101 taught by Lilian Kopenhaver. The plan was for me to carry a

full load in the fall, winter and summer terms, taking as many requirements as possible while working and saving money, so I could transfer to a university in a year and a half.

I walked a few steps and noticed a yellow flyer taped to the wall: “Student reporters! Get paid to cover news!” I hurried down the hall on my wobbly platform shoes, past a long corridor and a huge lake filled with ducks to the other side of the campus. *The Falcon Times* college newspaper office was packed with stacks of newspapers. Small desks holding typewriters, dictionaries, atlases, pens, pencils and paper filled up every available space. But there was no one at the desks. The advisor, Jose Garcia, a short, stocky man with bottle-thick glasses, came out of his cubicle when I stumbled in, the strap on the platform shoes digging into my ankle.

“I’d like to apply to be a reporter,” I said.

“Any experience?”

“I worked for my high school newspaper,” I lied, “and the year book.”

“Here,” he said, handing me a press release. “Just go cover this rock concert out on the football field right now. I have no reporters right now, so you’re it.”

I grabbed a slim pad from a desk and wobbled out to the sun-baked field to cover my first newspaper story. The rock singers were up on a makeshift stage in the middle of the field, and fans were stretched out on blankets and dancing to screeching guitars. The lead singer mounted his instrument and yelped like a dog, prancing from one end to the other of the stage with the guitar between his legs. I wandered around the field, with no idea what to focus on.

I felt exhilarated, breathless. I wanted to do a good job, but didn’t know where to begin. I scribbled in my pad some of the lyrics that I could make out from the screaming

singers, interviewed a few of the students -- writing as fast as I could to keep up with their words -- wrote down what they were wearing and took notes on the ambiance.

Purely by instinct, back at the *Falcon Times* office, I wrote an informational lead with the five Ws: who, what, when, where and why and added color and emotion by describing the field and the fans. I put in a few student quotes and ended with the date of the band's next concert.

The keys on the manual typewriter were stiff, and I had to bang down hard. I ripped out two double-spaced pages from the rubber roller and proudly handed them to Advisor Garcia, who pushed up his black, horn-rimmed glasses and, with a worried look, threw himself on a chair in the middle of the newsroom. He took a broad tipped charcoal pencil and began to make bold marks all over the page. When he finished, he threw the story into a box marked TAKE TO PRINTER.

"Should I come back tomorrow?" I asked as he retreated into his cubicle.

"Sure."

I went home that afternoon with a new certainty in my heart.

THE SUN-REPORTER

I steered the Volvo across the Venetian Causeway and turned left onto Purdy Avenue before the street veered off into Alton Road. The building rose up two stories into the sky, marked breathtakingly with the words *Miami Beach Sun Reporter*. Just a year ago, publisher Paul M. Bruun merged his small *Reporter*, which he started back in 1962, with the *Sun*, a paper that had covered the beach since the days of the Great Depression. *Falcon Times* Advisor Garcia had suggested I try to get a reporting job on

the newspaper which was expanding its coverage of the island. I took my portfolio of college stories and opened it for the editor. Was it disdain I saw in his face?

"We have no reporter openings at the moment," he said.

I closed my portfolio and sat there wondering what to do next.

"But there is a job in the proofreading and paste up department if you want it."

"When do I start?"

"Tomorrow at 3 pm."

Anyone who stands next to a printing press and breathes in the smell of ink and newsprint for the first time is bound to be hooked: I will never forget the odor of raw moist wood pulp mixed with something bitter and dry. The sound of printing whirred like the buzzing of bees, churning out pages of news, obituaries, theater reviews, and four-color advertisements. That first day, I paused as I walked past the newsroom; it was run mostly by white-haired men sitting in a circle at the city desk. A few energetic twenty-somethings rushed out at regular intervals to cover society news, the police beat and city hall meetings. I ran into one young reporter in the hall.

"I know you!" she said.

"Weren't you in the *Falcon Times* the other day?"

"Yes, but I graduated already from Miami Dade, and I just lucked out here," she brushed past me, heading for the door at a jog. "Going to City Hall."

Going to City Hall. I repeated the words several times as I walked to the proofreading and paste up department. Maybe one day I, too, would be rushing out on a story. *Going to City Hall*. I couldn't get her words out of my mind. I paused once more to look at the typewriters, desks piled with books and papers, tall shelves jammed with newspapers and

dictionaries and old encyclopedias. Editors at the editing desk passed copy back and forth, holding thick pencils in the air before slamming them down on the page before them to correct grammar, style, and sentence structure. My heart beat fast. This was what desire and passion felt like. But it was a desire that had to be squelched for the time being while I worked to obtain my goal. I sat at my paste-up desk, and a short curly haired man approached me with a long strip of proof copy.

"Hi, I'm Bill and I run this department." He gave me quick instructions and walked off. I took a wax pencil and a strip of copy and started reading. No mistakes. Then I took the perfect story to the galley room and brandished a short cutting knife like a surgeon's scalpel to make sure it fit into the news hole. With a gooey substance, I pasted the copy neatly in its place. I excised a line that didn't fit in the column and placed it, very neatly, at the top of a new column. It was the most fascinating work I had ever done.

I went back to my desk and tackled a fresh pile of copy in the in-box. Looking up, I saw a man who appeared to be Paul M. Bruun from the picture on the front page where he prominently displayed a daily editorial. It *was* Mr. Bruun! He passed by with two others waving his hands around animatedly. His face was lined and droopy, but his hair was carbon brick black with red glints glowing in the light. A small, chiseled mustache sat on his upper lip, as carefully shaped as my straight lines of copy in the galleys of the *Miami Beach Sun Reporter*.

At about 7 p.m., on my dinner break, I went out to my car to eat a sandwich and do homework for an hour. I had managed to talk the sociology professor at Miami Dade into my taking his class without actually attending, a precursor of distance learning. He

agreed I could do the assignments and take the tests in the morning. I opened the sociology book and read: "Women have been advancing steadily in the labor force of American society through education since World War II." I sat up straight in the front seat of my car. Education was, no doubt, the key. I was on the right path.

ONE STEP CLOSER

I sat at an electric typewriter at the Miami Dade Library and filled out college applications and wrote college essays. The keys of my manual Olivetti at home were refusing to bounce back quickly enough into the carriage. I had to unravel them with my fingers which came away smeared with ink, so I opted for long stretches in the library. I was almost finished.

I placed a large manila envelope in the typewriter and typed the address of one of the universities, then carefully slipped a neatly typed application and essay inside and licked it sealed. From a list, I checked off each school as I assembled the application packet: University of Maryland at College Park, Syracuse University, University of Southern California, University of California at Berkeley, and Northeastern University in Boston. I stacked the envelopes on top of each other and held them close to my heart.

"Soon," I said, "Robert and I will be starting a new life."

With the stack of envelopes under my arm, I skipped down the stairs and ran into Rene. I smiled, remembering that he had changed my attendance record at Miami High, allowing me to graduate. He had not gone away to college, and I was surprised to see him.

"I have to work to help my family," he said. "My parents need me. They are having a tough time paying all the bills."

"I thought you wanted to be a lawyer."

"Maybe someday." It was a dream deferred. But nothing was going to stand in my way. I was determined to live out my dream. Rene carried a pile of books under his arm. His eyes were red, as if he were coming down with a cold.

"What's wrong?" I said.

"It's my girlfriend," he said. "Kelly has leukemia."

THICK ENVELOPES

One by one, envelopes stuffed with papers and more applications arrived in my mailbox. I tore them open and yelled for joy each time I read an acceptance letter. Five times I yelled: all the universities to which I had applied accepted me for the winter term of 1974. I went through piles of information on enrollment, majors, courses, room and board, extracurricular activities. Maps of the campuses, of the cities and of the states were stapled to lists of restaurants and apartments and sights to see.

Which was the one farthest away from home? I looked at the globe of the world on my book shelf and measured the distances from each city to Miami. Berkeley beat out Los Angeles by a few miles. The University of California won.

"Mami," I went to my mother who was in the kitchen, "this is where I'm going to the university!" I pointed to Berkeley on the globe.

"*Ay, mi hija*," she exclaimed. "*Que bueno*. Do you have enough money?"

I nodded. I had saved enough for the out-of-state tuition of $700 a quarter for the first year. I figured that in the second year, as a resident of the state, the tuition would drop to $225 a quarter. Then I would apply for grants and scholarships. Details were scrambled in my head. The ideas were coming fast. I had turned my life around. Now I

was on the verge of going to a top university to study journalism. From there, it would be a few years more before I became a famous writer, maybe covering the world for newspapers or magazines. My plans were already starting to become reality. I couldn't wait to tell Robert the news. But my mother's face stopped me from rushing to the phone to call him.

She was pale with dark circles under her eyes. Her hair was flat and limp. A finger width of white stood out prominently next to her scalp, separating itself from the dark brown hair she colored in the bathroom. "But," I looked at my mother washing dishes, "I don't want you to be alone." I noted a slight tremor in her hand as she dried a bowl with a rag.

"You have to get an education," she said, passing her forearm across her brow to push back her hair. "I will be all right until you come back."

I paused, worried. She dried her hands and walked to her room, and, in an instant, I sprinted to mine and picked up the pink Princess phone. "Robert," I breathed ecstatically into the receiver. "They all accepted me, but I think Berkeley has the best journalism program. Do you think you'll like California?"

"It's the best place for the television industry," he said. "I'm thinking of becoming a producer. But…my mother is having a nervous breakdown about the divorce, and she doesn't want me to leave Miami."

"You told her already?"

"I said we were thinking of getting married and going to school in California. I had to tell her. My father left the house last night to live with his mistress."

ANNOUNCEMENT

It was not easy to tell our families we were getting married and leaving home at the same time. Both of us felt guilt about leaving our mothers.

"Mami, I'm getting married," I said one Saturday morning. Robert stood close behind me as we hovered at her bedroom door. My mother looked up from her corner of the bed.

"Ah, that's good," she said. "I want you to get married. Maybe now things will be better. I always thought it was better if you got married. But…what about school? What about Berkeley?"

"I'm still going. We're both going to California right after the wedding," I said.

"So good, so good," she mumbled, drawing up the sheet around her.

Robert left for the shoe factory, and I climbed into the Volvo to break the news to my father. "Papi, I'm getting married," I told my father as I threw myself on the floor to wrestle with Joaquin, his black German Shepherd. My father sat on his newly upholstered Louis XV chair with the gold leaf arm rests. He emitted a throat hiccup or a snort. He got up and sat down again.

"And," I continued, "right after the wedding, Robert and I are going to California. I'm going to the university in Berkeley and he's applying to the Ron Bailey School of Broadcasting in San Francisco."

"Well," he said. "Now there's no problem with you going away to college. You'll be safe. You'll have someone to go with."

"What? Was that the problem, or was it the money?"

Beba came in from the kitchen and interrupted the conversation. “Now we don’t have to worry about you,” she said. “You won’t be alone in a strange city. It’s much better for you to go with Robert.”

But Robert’s parents didn’t see it the same way.

“If you stay in Miami,” his mother said, “I’ll buy you a bedroom suite.”

“And I,” his father added, “will give you the down payment for a new townhouse in Hialeah. You know. The new ones they’re building over by the canal?”

It was an offer we refused. Mentally, I was already three thousand miles away.

WEDDING BUFFET

My father took control of my wedding buffet not only because he paid for it, but because he was a gourmet and epicurean, a sensualist, a hedonist whose taste buds only came alive when stimulated by the very best ingredients. He refused to eat anything but freshly made meals and scorned fast food with vehemence. Proper and aristocratic, with elegant manners, he was proud of his knowledge of fine cuisine.

Months before the November wedding date, he hired a Little Havana butcher who worked at the Sonesta Beach Hotel in Key Biscayne to help him plan a delectable menu, purchase the finest in meats, poultry and vegetables and concoct tantalizing dishes for a buffet extravaganza the likes of which his friends and family had not seen before. After all, my father was a member of an emerging Cuban upper-middle class, that after less than a decade of hard work, drove Mercedes Benzes and enjoyed yearly European vacations. My father liked to flaunt his possessions.

The butcher, Ernesto Moreira, a patient of my father’s, lived in a modest house on Southwest Seventeenth Avenue, close to Eighth Street in Little Havana. After long hours

at his office in Hialeah, my father spent several evenings a week poring over recipes in Moreira's cramped living room. Together, they examined the pages of a food encyclopedia and flipped through my grandmother's Cuban and Spanish handwritten recipes bound in notebooks.

"Doctor, I think this is too much food for the number of guests!" Moreira complained as my father made lists of dishes and crossed out others that did not meet his approval.

"No, it all has to be perfect, Ernesto. Remember it is also Thanksgiving Day. No margarine, only butter. No Mazola or Wesson, only pure olive oil."

"Will we have turkey?"

"Of course! Turkey, gravy, cranberry sauce, pork, *frijoles*, roast beef, mashed potatoes, salads. Everything!"

My father's attention on the food could make anyone think he doted on his daughter. Quite the contrary. He was a stingy man and not only with his money. He was not generous with his love, either. He hugged me only when his wife wasn't looking.

"Papi, take me to lunch," I begged once.

"I can't go if Beba doesn't go." And his wife never left his side.

Why couldn't I get him to love me? Why wasn't he ever there for me?

"Your father loves you," his friends and coworkers told me. "He just can't show it because his wife is jealous."

I remember pictures of him holding me close when I was only months old. But now I had grown into someone he didn't like. I wasn't quiet enough, respectful enough.

“Children are cute when they’re little,” he said to a friend once. “But when they grow up, they are nothing but trouble.” That was it. I was nothing but trouble. I stayed out late. I had a lot of boyfriends. I was headstrong. I didn’t like classical music or antiques.

Would he make me pay for my wedding?

“Don’t worry,” my stepmother said. “He’ll pay for it. He has a lot of friends who are going. He wants it to look nice.”

And so the finances for the wedding and the food planning were taken off my hands. I focused on getting a good price from the seamstress for my dress and the bridesmaids’ dresses, the flowers, the table decorations, the tablecloths. I jotted down the details on a pad and ran the event like a business. I wanted to show my father I wasn’t wasteful of his money, and I had a lot to do getting ready for my new life in the Bay Area. All was falling into place: Robert had just received his acceptance envelope from the school of broadcasting.

I looked at my wedding reception as a farewell party. I was leaving my old life behind: lazy beach outings, disco dancing, aimless wanderings through shopping centers, heated fights with my mother, the hurtful absence of my father. All would be gone as soon as the wedding was over. I couldn’t wait to escape to college and begin my life as a writer as far away from Miami as possible.

Finally, the day arrived. It was November 22, 1973, Thanksgiving Day and The Feast Day of Saint Cecilia. First, we celebrated with a traditional mass at The Church of the Little Flower in Coral Gables. Then, a limousine took us to the reception at the Sons of Lebanon Banquet Hall on Coral Way just a short drive away.

As the band struck up lively salsa music by Chirino, Ernesto Moreira and his wife Margarita beamed from the top of an undulating buffet table that curved around the far end of the hall. Ernesto wore a tall chef's hat and a white jacket and Margarita a blue floor length gown. Three servers also wearing white hats and jackets stood at attention along the length of the table. An open bar with cases of champagne stacked up on the floor beckoned from the other side of the hall.

"She's a *mulata*," a friend whispered to me about Beba as Robert and I walked toward the buffet; the beat of the music pounded against the walls. I nodded. "Your father isn't such a refined man as he'd have you think!"

I looked at the food spread out in opulent abundance. What if, I thought, my father's love was wrapped up in these carefully prepared dishes lined up side by side? What if this buffet was a symbolic gesture of love to me, a gastronomical manifestation of emotion?

There it was, all he had been planning for months: a gigantic turkey carved up in thick slices and assembled back to its original shape, chestnut and sausage stuffing, pureed cranberries with cinnamon and powdered sugar on top, a slab of roast beef oozing aromatic juices, crisp *lechon* in spicy garlic and onion *mojo*, prawns arranged in half moons, chicken salad with slices of apple and decorated with green peas and red peppers, dainty triangle sandwiches filled with chopped ham in a béchamel sauce, mounds of *moros*, mashed potatoes, asparagus spears, yucca steeped in garlic chunks, marinated tomatoes with chopped basil, butter lettuce in dizzying circles, moist white biscuits with tubs of *La Vaquita* butter, and, at the end, a white wedding cake. Tall Greek towers covered with icing held a second layer high above the first. In the center of the first layer

and under the second, a fountain of purple water rapidly gurgled, forming little waves at the base.

Ernesto and Margarita leaned over to hug me. My mother came up and the photographer aimed his camera at us. After the picture, she walked from table to table greeting the guests. Her hair was stylishly coiffed, and her gray sequined gown fit snugly over her slim figure. My father walked by in a tuxedo, his two-carat diamond ring sending out a spear of light from his left hand. His eyes met mine for an instant in an expressionless gaze before he turned away with his wife, who wore a shiny black gown splashed with brilliant red tulips. They moved as far away as they could from my mother to talk to a group at a table on the other side of the room.

LEAVING LITTLE HAVANA

Our two-day honeymoon at the Pier 66 Hotel in Ft. Lauderdale was a series of meals, walking by the beach and sitting out by the pool. We pored over maps and California travel books, our conversation nonstop about our upcoming trip. As soon as we went home, Robert and I packed suitcases and boxes. I took the Volvo for a tune up, and filled the tires with air. Robert rented a steel U-Haul storage container that strapped onto the roof. We heaved all our belongings into the storage compartment, the trunk and the back seat of the Volvo. I sent out my Olivetti typewriter for a cleaning and tucked it in its case just behind the driver's seat. Robert visited the Triple A offices and emerged with a clearly marked "triptik" that highlighted in yellow all the main roads and highways of our journey to California.

On the morning of our departure, a Monday in mid-December, the temperature dipped into the fifties and a cold front dimmed the sun. My mother and Robert's parents

stood around the car awkwardly. I hugged my mother, slim and fragile, for a long time. A sob pushed out of my throat, but I fought it back down. We rocked back and forth in each other's arms, all the unspoken anguish of our years together still wrapped around our hearts.

"I will call and write to you very often," I told her. She smiled, tearless, not totally present, her eyes swinging back and forth.

"I will write every day," she answered. "Call me soon."

Robert's mother, on the other hand, was weeping uncontrollably. His father shook my hand. I was wrapped in the cocoon of good fortune, unreachable, just as my Ivy League school mates had seemed to me on the stage on graduation day. Today, I was leaving Little Havana, my family, my culture, and walking away into an unknown, mysterious world in search of that elusive adventure I had always wanted. But this wasn't just any adventure. It was a journey to acquire education and transform myself into a writer. I couldn't say good-by to all that fast enough and begin the thirty-five hundred mile drive to California.

So after waves of the hand, Robert steered the Volvo north to get on the ramp for I-95. We were quiet for a long time on that long stretch of highway through Florida, each thinking private thoughts about our future with a mixture of excitement and pprehension. I stared out the window at the flat fields, many filled with grazing cows and orchards of oranges and grapefruit.

"I love you," I said, and Robert grasped my hand, securely, solidly. I thought of Ovy and wondered if he was playing Jai-Alai. I thought of Cari in Virginia, and Gloria, Sylvia and Ivis in their world of the neighborhood, predictable with its sameness,

comforting, a place that had sheltered me while I healed a broken heart. I thought of Cuba and the people I loved who were there still: my nanny Ana Maria out in the countryside of Matanzas, housekeeper Amparo in the black ghetto of La Habana, Tio Cesar and his son Cesarito in their villa by the sea. I thought of my step-grandmother, Elsie, teaching English in her small apartment in Vedado. Then I took out my writing pad. I wrote:

Querida Elsie,

Robert and I are on our way to California. I'm going to study journalism, and he's going to study broadcasting. Remember the dog Scamp in the newspaper comic strip and all the books and stories we read together? I think it was you who helped me decide to be a writer. Reading and writing are the only things I do well. So, that's what I thought I would do with my life. Write to me soon.

Te quiero, Cecilita.

I slipped the short letter into one of many envelopes I had tucked inside the pad for corresponding with my parents and friends. Tomorrow, I would mail it from a post office on the way.

That evening we reached Lakeland, and the cold set in with certainty. The meteorologists on the news had forecast a particularly cold winter that year, so we planned to avoid the snow by driving up through Florida, west across the Panhandle and through the southern portions of Louisiana, Texas, Colorado, and Arizona to Bakersfield, California where we would turn north to Berkeley. We could only drive from Monday through Friday. Every gas station in America was closed on the weekends because of the gasoline crisis.

On the fifth day, we drove along the edge of the Grand Canyon. We parked and stood gazing into its depths, a red-orange color I had never seen before. "How beautiful," I whispered. We were bundled up -- knit caps, turtlenecks, flannel shirts and heavy wool overcoats -- but still shivering, and despite the cold burning our exposed faces, we stayed transfixed by the sight. That night, in our cabin, the cold wind blowing in through the cracks, we saw a deer nonchalantly grazing a few feet away from the window. To a Cuban girl saturated by sea, sand and sun, these landscapes appeared as if they had popped out of books or movies.

The next day, December 24, was a Saturday. It was *Noche Buena*, and I thought of the roasted pork feasts everyone in Little Havana was enjoying. We couldn't drive anywhere, and everything was closed. It was a nondescript town with a rundown gas station next to a Motel Six where we had stopped. At the Seven-Eleven, we bought two cans of spaghetti and a box of plastic spoons. In the room, I ran hot water over the cans in the bathroom sink for five minutes. Then, I snapped off the lids and handed one of the cans to Robert. Our *Noche Buena* feast was one of the best.

On Monday, we started out with renewed vigor, making it all the way to California. It was siesta time in Bakersfield, and everything was quiet. Beer signs were everywhere. Mexican restaurants on every corner touted *tostadas*, *chile rellenos*, *menudo*. "This is why Cubans don't like Mexican food," Robert exclaimed after he bit into a hot pepper. I took a bite and regretted it. I wiped my tearing eyes and running nose. Back on the road, in the early afternoon, we slipped into Oakland. The greenery rose up on swollen hills on both sides of the highway. The air was dry, light and cool. I could see the Berkeley hills in the distance, coming closer.

In minutes, we cruised past the University of California, spilling out at the foot of Telegraph Avenue, flanked by hippies selling their wares of beaded jewelry, pipes and colorful blankets. Robert parked the Volvo on the sidewalk. We walked into Sproul Plaza, the scene of so many student demonstrations in the sixties. We walked past the Student Center, decorated with "Boycott Gallo" signs. I stared in awe at the Campanile. The Florida flatness was a distant memory. This, I thought, was where I belonged.