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Trying to Save the Family: A Memoir

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TRYING TO SAVE THE FAMILY: A MEMOIR

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in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Roberto J. Manzano

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To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Roberto J. Manzano, and entitled Trying to Save the Family: A Memoir, 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.

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Vernon Guy Dickson

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Julie Marie Wade

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Lynne M. Barrett, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 5, 2019

The thesis of Roberto J. Manzano is approved.

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Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

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Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2019

DEDICATION

To my parents, who came to this country with only their skills and their desire to be free. Through good times and bad, I could always count on their unwavering love and generous support. This thesis, in part, is a tribute to their determination, courage, hard work, and resilience.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

TRYING TO SAVE THE FAMILY: A MEMOIR

by

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Florida International University, 2019

Miami, Florida

Professor Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

TRYING TO SAVE THE FAMILY: A MEMOIR uses incomplete and contradictory versions of single incidents and views of character that echo across time and place to assemble a narrative portrait of three generations. It looks at a family's simultaneity of experience in Havana, leaving versus staying, and in Miami, adjusting versus failing to. The narrator employs interviews, photos, and family documents to investigate and interpret a complex inheritance. Like Joan Didion's Miami, this memoir focuses on history's patterns and repetitions. It starts in the fifties and ends in the present, as the narrator searches his family's past to understand himself.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER PAGE

29. An Ambiguous and Lingering Farewell: Searching for Mom

I'd like to believe I've willed every detail
of my life, but I'm a consequence, a drop
of rain, a seed fallen by chance, here

in the middle of a story I don't know,
having to finish it and call it my own.
—Richard Blanco, "Of Consequence, Inconsequently," *Looking for the Gulf Motel*

I

I don't remember living with Abuelo Juan at the Cedars apartment. I don't recall ratting him out after he left the window open while he smoked his Marlboros. I don't remember that time he visited our house in April 1978 when I was six years old.

I only remember visiting him with my mother at the Hialeah convalescent home in the early 1980s. Back then, neither of us could imagine the pitiless inheritance and repetition that awaited us, how she would go from the visitor to the visited, and I would go from the boy visiting his grandfather at a nursing home to the man visiting his mother at a group home.

When I think of the Hialeah nursing home, I remember Saturday afternoons and riding in my mother's Monte Carlo on our way to visit Juan. My mother brought him the same items from Burger King: A kids' cheeseburger, fries, a vanilla shake, and an apple pie. He devoured all of it. I only recently realized that all of these foods were mushy for a reason: Juan had lost his teeth, and I don't remember seeing him wearing dentures.

She also brought him Fig Newtons. To this day I can't eat one of those soft cookies without thinking of him.

To my eyes, my grandfather was an old man with all white hair and hairy arms who smiled a lot and spoke gibberish. This was the only Juan knew. I had no idea about who he had been or what had been lost. My mother did. She had known the former accountant, the father who patiently tutored her when she struggled with Algebra class at Las Dominicas in Havana. Thanks to his help, she earned the highest score in her class on an Algebra test, the crowning achievement of her academic life.

When I recently discovered an undated photo of Juan at the Hialeah nursing home, probably taken by staff in the early eighties, I sensed that for the first time I saw a pathos in Juan and viewed him through my mother's eyes. I don't know why my mom kept it, as it is among the most harrowing of our family photos—a snapshot of a scene of desolation. Juan sits in a tall wheelchair in the dining room. Restraints are visible from behind the wheelchair, though they aren't being used. He wears a blue shirt and black pants and a large white bib that goes on like a tank top. The former accountant has been eclipsed by an old man who doesn't realize that he's being photographed, who's pointing at something or someone. Across from Juan, a man is asleep, sprawled on the long dining room table, his head on his arms, tranquil in his miserable repose.

How could Juan, fifty in March 1952, back on Campanario Street, a sly smile on his face, with news of Batista's coup, envisage that three decades later he would cede to that elderly and disoriented man in a wheelchair in a Hialeah nursing home?

I suppose that my mother at times felt irrationally guilty and traitorous about her father living in that convalescent home, as I do now about my mother living at a group home. If, in 1976, placing Juan in a convalescent home symbolized his utter lack of independence and powerlessness, then four decades later my mom's move to a group

home captured hers. To feel better, I told myself that dementia placed her in a home, not me. I was merely the middle-man who signed the paperwork.

But I was fooling myself: I did the deed, and I have to live with its consequences, no matter how unavoidable it was. I mean, what prepares you for placing in a home not only your mother, but your most trusted confidant, your best friend, the woman who said that you were the best thing that ever happened to her? Afterwards, I began to understand the pain that my mother felt after making her own agonizing, but necessary and irrevocable decisions—leaving Cuba, institutionalizing her father, divorcing her husband.

II

In September 1983, Juan had to be hospitalized at Palm Springs General Hospital in Hialeah. On September 4th, a Sunday, after my parents visited him and were in the parking lot and about to get in their car, a nurse rushed up to them. She said that Juan had taken a turn for the worse.

Juan was dying and my mother insisted on being with him, fending off my father, in his usual overprotective/controlling mode, who tried to keep her out of the hospital room. She was holding her father's hand when she saw him flat line. As when she was with her mother during her last moments in a Little Havana apartment nearly a decade earlier, my mother was with her father as he took his last breaths.

According to his death certificate, at 1:45 p.m., Juan died of an acute myocardial infarction, or a heart attack, due to coronary artery insufficiency and arteriosclerotic cardiovascular disease (which hardens and thickens the walls of the arteries). He was eighty-one. He died on the same day as my parents' nuptials twenty-three years earlier, tainting their wedding anniversary date from then on.

When I saw my parents later that afternoon, talking with Tía Armida in our living room, I asked my mother how Juan was. I knew that she had returned from visiting him at the hospital. I was surprised when she said, "Your grandfather died." She said this matter-of-factly, without any drama or anguish, without any euphemisms. I imagine that she felt that if I was eleven, I was old enough to know what death was. I figure that if she was saddened by his death, she was relieved too. If Freddy's burden had lifted with his mother's death in Havana in 1978, my mother's had with Juan's five years later. A dementia-related doubleness haunted Sylvia and Freddy, even if they were worlds apart.

Reflecting on Juan's death, I wondered, why did he keep his papers, and why did my mom keep them after he died? I suppose that Juan, while he was healthy enough to do so, kept them because they gave him a feeling of worth and control. Those papers were proof that despite having left everything behind, in Miami, even if only on a bureaucratic level, he was still a person, he existed, he counted.

His papers, which I assume my mother organized after he no longer could, gave me a better sense of the man, but they couldn't provide all of the answers to the mysteries related to his final thirteen years. Nor did they need to. I understood that I could only learn so much from the outside and that Juan's inner life remained elusive. Nevertheless, as a writer and my family's anthropologist, in his things I found value—patterns, echoes, repetitions, revealing details, and material for scenes that I could recreate.

If I was intuitively looking for answers in the past to understand the present better, I had collided instead with an emptiness, in which, as the late philosopher Alan Watts put it, "the past is just the wake of a shape in the water" left by a moving boat.

"The past is the result of the present," Watts said, in a counterintuitive insight that initially left me dumbfounded. "The present explains things."

Watts had a point. I thought of how the present shaped the contours of I how investigated the past in connection with Juan—what I looked for, what I overlooked, what I did and didn't emphasize, and how I interpreted events.

If my mother hadn't developed dementia, I would have looked at the past differently. Knowing about how that 1970 pension rejection letter affected him, I looked for evidence of Juan's agony in photos.

Then I found a photo of him at my cousin Vivi's tenth birthday party in April 1971—and he's *smiling*. Sure, it's a subdued smile, with no teeth showing, but by Juan's standards he's ecstatic. It's the only photo that I found of him smiling. That photo reminded me that he had his moments of joy and levity in Miami. It wasn't relentless gloom. Why he had a breakdown five years later, however, remains an enigma. The event remains sealed in a mystery that I can't unzip like his old leather pouch.

I think that after his death, after the loss of the house in La Víbora, and after the loss of the ruby ring, that pouch was the only tangible thing connected to her father that my mom had left, her only consolation. If it was her version of an urn filled with his ashes, how could she toss it in the garbage? Juan didn't leave her any monies either, but thanks to him she had been raised in a middle class home and had learned the fluent English that opened doors to better office jobs in the U.S.