

2012-01-01

Adios, Cuba

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ADIOS, CUBA

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by
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2012

DEDICATION

To my parents, Olga and Armando Arocha, who prevailed.

ADIOS, CUBA

by

ZITA AROCHA, M.A.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Creative Writing
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO
May 2012

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With sincere appreciation to:

My loving husband, David, and discriminating daughter, Miranda, for their unqualified encouragement. They always said I could.

My thesis advisor Lex Williford, readers Shelley Armitage and José de Pierola, the rest of the wonderful professors in the UTEP bilingual creative writing program, and Johnny Payne who provided the initial inspiration for a memoir.

Lama Tsultrim Allione, David Petit and my Tara Mandala sangha for providing the embracing space and support that brought this book to fruition

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PREFACE

Writing Adios, Cuba, was a journey into memory to understand a life and discover the most effective literary tools and techniques for telling it. The idea at the beginning of the project five years ago was straightforward: to tell the story of my family's immigration from Cuba to the United States in 1957, two years before the Communist revolution which thrust Cuba and us into the heart of the global Cold War between opposing ideologies. How to tell it began with several false starts early on, experimentations with language and form, struggles with how to integrate a past and present voice and to find an organic structure, a frame for the memoir. The process included a walk down the Buddhist path, and a return trip to my homeland in 2006.

The result of the journey is this book, a hybrid: part narrative, journalism, diary, travelogue, personal and national history and spiritual autobiography. The weaving of genres, like a silk thread running through an antique Spanish tapestry, presented the best approach to tell the story of a woman at midlife excavating and resurrecting imperfect memories of herself as a five year old who lost her homeland and grandfather at the same time.

Remembering what happened—including details of an early assault—and comprehending the meaning of loss of family and country became integral to the process of writing the book, as did finding answers to larger philosophical questions: What does it mean to be an exile from your past? Is exile a temporary or permanent condition?

In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Czech writer Milan Kundera writes: “The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.” Remembering my family’s history seemed the best way to honor the past, to regain a sense of agency and, after a life spent in exile from my native land, to be at home in the world. Perhaps writing it down would help recapture my lost past.

As I embarked on the book project my training as a journalist kept getting in the way of telling the story. I filled early chapters with dates, facts and lengthy historic and sociological explanations—in other words, analysis rather than narrative dry as a cow’s skull in the Arizona desert. I was *telling* instead of *showing* what happened. My prose sank like an ocean liner with a huge hole in its prow. I next tried to write chapters about the people in the inner circle of my life—Mom, Dad, my grandfather, my aunt Carmen—

thinking this approach would give me more literary freedom to describe and use dialogue to tell the story through their lenses. The prose was livelier and the characters touching and funny, but the narrative was no more than isolated vignettes, film clips on the cutting room floor. The people-centered chapters refused to tell the whole story of a family's immigration, to place it in historical context, and to show how I fit into the narrative arc as the protagonist. Then I traveled to Tara Mandala, a Buddhist retreat center in the San Juan Mountains of Southern Colorado. I needed solitude and time to rethink the book and the writing process.

Packing notes, books, old photographs, Cuban music from the 1950's and audio interviews with relatives into my Toyota Camry, I headed for a month-long retreat in a rustic cabin on a mountainside. Once there I kept a diary of my thoughts and experiences as I struggled with organizing and making sense of the one-hundred plus pages I'd already produced. What was the main point, the central theme, of my story? What did I want to say by recounting my immigrant life? I knew I didn't want to produce another misery memoir, in which authors describe in detail how they overcame drug addition, child abuse or incest.

A book about Buddhism, *Luminous Emptiness: Understanding the Tibetan Book of the Dead*, by Francesca Fremantle, provided clues to how I wanted to write about exile. In her book she discusses the Buddhist idea of the *bardo*, an in-between state, a hiatus, a gap between death and rebirth, and a foreign concept to my Western religious upbringing. According to Fremantle: the bardo

. . . can act as a boundary that divides and separates, marking the end of one thing and the beginning of another; but it can also be a link between the two—it can serve as a bridge or a meeting place that brings together and unites. It is a crossing, a stepping-stone, and a transition. It is a highlight or peak point of experience and at the same time a situation of extreme tension caught between two opposites. It is an open space filled with an atmosphere of suspension and uncertainty, neither this nor that. In such a state, one may feel confused and frightened, or one may feel surprisingly liberated and open to new possibilities where anything might happen (54).

Reading about the six stages of the bardo--three while one is alive and three after one dies--I began to see how this condition related to life as an immigrant in America and as a writer struggling with narrative structure. After leaving the homeland, I saw the condition of exile was being like being in the bardo, a transient, unfinished state. This state of bardo is how I've felt during my life, I realized. Cuba too, it seemed to me, is at a crossroads, stuck in a post post-Communist transition waiting for the next stage of history. Several Cuban and non-Cuban writers have described the possibilities of a post-Castro Cuba. The bardo then became an apt and potent metaphor for my book, more hopeful--because there is a new life after transition--than the vision of other writers who describe exile as a hyphenated condition, a state of homelessness, an indeterminate space where the exile lives in the present as if he or she were *still there*, holding on to a sentimental nostalgia for a remembered, idealized past.

Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas, who died of AIDS in New York, for example, views the life of exile as a permanent disembodied state. In his memoir, *Before Night Falls*, he writes:

An exile has no place anywhere, because there is no place, because the place where we started to dream, where we discovered the natural world around us, read our first book, loved for the first time, is always the world of our dreams. In exile one is nothing but a ghost, the shadow of someone who never achieves full reality. I ceased to exist when I went into exile; I started to run away from myself (301).

For my taste, his description is too despairing.

Almost as nihilistic is Marilen Loyola's description of how three Cuban exile writers--Arenas, Severo Sarduy and Zoe Valdés--treat the meaning of exile through their fictional characters. In her essay, "In Search of Cuba: Remembering and Returning in the Writings of Three Cuban Novelists in Exile," she argues that in Severo's novel *Cocuyo*, Valdés' *Café Nostalgia*, and Arenas' *Viaje a La Habana*, "it is the return from exile to the 'center' and not the initial banishment, that ironically places the exiles at risk of losing their sense of origin and identity" (330).

The three main characters in these novels, writes Loyola, "are drawn into a sort of metaphorical death, entering a state of 'non-being' that

replaces what origin and homeland they knew to be Cuban, with a kind of nothingness--finally finding a 'home' within themselves or elsewhere, but never finding Cuba" (330).

Gustavo Perez Firmat, another Cuban living abroad, in his book *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way*, calls Cuban exiles like me born in Cuba and raised and educated in the U.S. the 1.5 generation. "One-and-a-halfers are translation artists. Tradition-bound but translation-bent, they are sufficiently immersed in each culture to give both ends of the hyphen their due" (5). Unlike Arena's pessimistic view of exile, Perez Firmat writes that the Cuban immigrant moves from denial to acceptance of his condition, at first imagining he is still in Cuba, then feeling destitute as if he were "nowhere," but finally reaching an acceptance of the foreign place--"here we are." Ultimately, Perez Firmat writes, exiles are "equilibrists" with "the freedom to mix and match pieces from each culture" (7).

In *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, the Indian writer Salman Rushdie, who lives in England, writes that the exile writer who reflects on the homeland is not "capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost" (10). Thus, he creates "imaginary homelands, Indias of the

mind.” As I wrote *Adios, Cuba*, I too felt I was producing a book “of memory and about memory,” my Cuba “of the mind.”

Reading Edward Said’s *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, helped place my family history in historical context. We are part of a larger 20th century phenomenon: “the age of the refugee, the displaced person, mass migration” (174). Exile, according to Said, a Palestinian professor and writer who lives in New York, “is irremediably secular and unbearably historical; that it is produced by human beings for other human beings; and that, like death but without ultimate mercy, it has torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family and geography” (176). After the 1959 revolution, more than one million Cubans fled the island, most to the U.S., but also to nearly every country in the globe, creating a Diaspora that has spawned at least a dozen essays and books, including several about the “Peter Pan” children flown alone out of Cuba and placed in orphanages and foster homes by the Miami Catholic Archdiocese. My parents, sister and I are part of the millions of worldwide dispossessed. For better or for worse, this is our place in modern history.

When I left Tara Mandala after four weeks of solitude, I had a unifying theme-- the *bardo*--but still no overall framework for book, no clear idea of how to write about the past from a present tense perspective. The frame materialized during a meeting with my thesis advisor, Lex Williford. I was telling him my experiences during the month-long retreat and how, as I began to prepare to return home, I learned that David Petit, the husband of the founder of the retreat center had died in his sleep on the land. I said something like this to Lex: "It was uncanny that I was at my desk in the cabin writing about loss of my country and the death of my grandfather and suddenly someone dies close to me."

Lex's eyes opened wide and I remember him shouting: "Write it just like that." Bingo. The frame was the 30-day retreat and the diary I kept about the struggle to write the book. Tibetan Buddhists perform bardo rituals for up to 49 days after someone dies. The 30-day writing and meditation retreat was *my* bardo. Thus, I began to weave diary entries into the narrative of my life. The daily entries became present action reflections between the chapters of my childhood in Cuba and Tampa, early recollections of my parents, grandparents and other Cuban relatives, and

various trips I've taken to Cuba over the last 30 years. The challenge I faced was how to juxtapose key moments of experience and realization during the retreat—for example, learning of the death of David Petit—with dramatic moments from my past—the backyard conversation with my Aunt Zoraida in Guira when she told me to bury the past.

Along the way, I drew on the work of several memoirists and writers on the craft of writing memoir, among them Patricia Hampl, Sven Birkerts, Anne Lamott, and Julia Cameron.

Hampl's memoir *A Romantic Education*, which she says was difficult for booksellers to categorize—memoir, travelogue, essay—when it was published in 1981, provided guidance for writing about my past in a national and historic context. She begins her memoir as a five-year-old sitting in the vestibule of her grandmother's house in St. Paul, Minnesota. As she thumbs through a leather bound album of family photos of Prague, Czechoslovakia, her grandmother, who still speaks in her native language but rarely of the Old Country, approaches, sits down on the floor next to her and starts to cry over the photographs, evoking for the first time the strange, unknown Old World-past of her family. The book moves between memories of Hampl

growing up in St. Paul to trips she made as an adult to Prague, during the “Prague Spring,” the Communist Soviet occupation, and later after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Recollections of key moments and events in her life are interspersed with lyrical reflections in the present about her family, her history, and her ideology as well as the process of writing and recapturing a forgotten past. After describing her sobbing grandmother, for example, she begins this new section:

Looking repeatedly into the past, you do not necessarily become fascinated with your own life, but rather with the phenomenon of memory. The act of remembering becomes less autobiographical; it begins to feel tentative, aloof. It becomes blessedly impersonal (5).

The reverie on memory continues for two more pages: “But in the act of remembering, the personal environment expands, resonates beyond itself, beyond its ‘subject,’ into the endless and tragic recollection that is history” (4-5). In the next section, she moves to a time in her 20’s when she attended the University of Minnesota. In my memoir, I have tried, sometimes more successfully than others, to emulate her seamless

transitions between segments of telling what happened and segments in which I reflect on what it means within a larger context.

In this passage, she explains this technique with conviction in *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory*:

Memoir is the intersection of narration and reflection, of storytelling and essay writing. It can present its story *and* consider the meaning of the story. The first commandment of fiction—Show, Don't Tell—is not part of the memoirist's faith. Memoirists must show *and* tell (33).

Hampl's detailed descriptions of her trips to Prague also provided inspiration and examples for my writing about my own trips to Communist Cuba. My counterpart to her fractious relationship with the poet Jaromil—"I won't say how I met him, and his name isn't Jaromil"—is my encounter with maestro "R" in Guira de Melena, who lost his job and was kicked out of the Communist party for giving me an interview. Hampl unintentionally offends Jaromil by writing about his ridiculous-looking red shoes and I accidentally destroy a man's life by talking to him in the privacy of a relative's home.

Writing about this afterward has helped me realize we were both victims in an ideological war that transcends borders.

Other memoirs that provided inspiration were Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*, a daily diary of his expedition to the Himalayas to find and study blue sheep, and Michael Ondaatje's memoir *Running in the Family*. Ondaatje's book starts with "the bright bone of a dream" as he is about to return for the first time to Sri Lanka where he was born. He weaves into the narrative two trips to Sri Lanka, stories about parents, reflections, poetry, diary and photographs. Ondaatje, author of the luscious and evocative novel *The English Patient*, which I've read several times and always find fresh, taught me to loosen up my writing, to experiment with letters, poems, meditations and dreams.

Another book, *The Art of Time in Memoir*, on the craft of memoir by Sven Birkerts, helped me kick the annoying habit of chronological story telling--this happened, then this, then this, etc. Reading Birkerts helped me think about my past not as a series of disconnected events moving through time--and not necessarily the ones we consider "important" like a first day in college or a wedding day-- but as key moments suffused with emotional

and often unconscious reverberations. These peak moments, Birkerts continues, add up to the meaning of a life:

So much of the substance of memoir is not what exactly happened? But rather, what is the expressive truth of the past, the truth of feeling that answers to the effect of events and relationships in life? (141).

My “expressive truth” resides in these carefully selected moments: my mother standing poised in her high heels on the airplane stairs in Miami holding a bag of oranges from home; a 10-year-old’s sweaty hands on the daily walk to school; a child’s visit to a Cuban babalao to exorcise the demon of anxiety. Birkerts also freed me from the compulsion to write as a journalist about events exactly as they happened and instead to “use the vantage point of the present to gain access to what might be called the hidden narrative of the past (8).

Through him I came to understand and incorporate into my work the idea that,

...memoir, unlike reportage, serves the spirit of the past, not the letter. Indeed no one who reads memoir believes--how

could they?--that exchanges happened exactly as set down, or that key events have not been inflected to achieve the necessary effect. The question is only how much is tolerable, at what point does the modified recollection turn into fiction (142).

It's OK to fudge a little sometimes or to exaggerate the facts within reason to capture the "spirit of the past." This technique hit home when I tried to verify my memories against those of my parents and relatives and discovered that theirs were incomplete, different--my mom says she carried tamales on the airplane--or altogether missing. Often my memories were more robust than those of my Cuban relatives, which made me wonder whether the painful separation of exile hadn't heightened my obsession to remember. Or, as Said writes: "Much of the exile's life is taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule" (181). Reading Birkerts also made me recognize that I was writing a "trauma-based narrative that was crisis centered." The trauma, the crisis, was not just leaving the land of my birth at a young age, but being assaulted by someone--probably a family member--when I was four-and-a-half and

slept in a bedroom of my grandparents' house the night my grandfather died. Writing about this traumatic event--it appears several times in the narrative--and accepting that I will probably never know the identity of my assailant seemed important. Birkerts says memoirists who write about trauma do so with the goal of "comprehension and exorcism" (142). Without even knowing it, I too was writing a memoir as a "testament," to achieve "some understanding or acceptance" of the trauma. "The writing," Birkerts writes, "is in every case propelled by the need to find closure in the self, to make pattern from contingency, and to enact the drama of claiming a self from the chaos of possibility" (187).

The writing itself progressed in fits and spurts, a laborious process that took more than five years during which I enrolled in one creative writing class at time--and during this time the creative writing program at my school lost a chair and gained another and most of the other students who started the program with me graduated and moved on. Alongside the writing, I juggled a family and, a teaching job; launched a web site and wrote grants and reports; made frequent trips to Florida to check on my parents, who are in their 80's; and went to a few writing conferences such

as the Taos Writer's Conference and *A Room of One's Own*. During this time, my daughter graduated from college and began her own MFA degree. My husband nearly lost his sight and needed three eye surgeries that kept him face down and in bed for weeks so that his retinas would reattach. And our dog Tortie died.

I read Julia Cameron and Anne Lamott for inspiration. I tried following Cameron's advice in *The Right to Write: An Invitation and Initiation into the Writing Life* to take up the habit of writing "Morning Pages": "while. . . not intended to be art, they are often a seed for art" (50). I'd start scribbling in my sun room at 6 in the morning for a few days in a row, then give it up, only to return to the practice a week or two later.

I especially took this advice from Lamott's book *Bird by Bird* to heart:

Yet somehow in the face of all this, you clear a space for the writing voice, hacking away at others with machetes, and you begin to compose sentences. You begin to string words together like beads to tell a story. You are desperate to communicate, to edify or entertain, to preserve moments of grace or joy or transcendence, to make real or

imagined events come alive. But you cannot will this to happen. It is a matter of faith and hard work. So you might as well just go ahead and get started (7).

I also began walking the Buddhist path to practice letting go of attachment and awakening compassion. I began a daily meditation practice on Prajaparamita, called Mother of the Buddhas, and learned to play the Tibetan Chod drum. I am now versed in P'howa, the Buddhist practice of transferring consciousness at the time of death, and I have read *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, twice. The memoir incorporates some of these ideas.

Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* reflects that,

...a work of genius is almost always a feat of prodigious difficulty. Everything is against the likelihood that it will come from the writer's mind whole and entire. Generally material circumstances are against it. Dogs will bark; people will interrupt; money must be made; health will break down.

Furthermore, accentuating all these difficulties and making them harder to bear is the world's notorious indifference. It does not

ask people to write poems and novels and histories; it does not need them (51-52).

Like Woolf, I found a room of my own for writing--a simple one-room cabin without any plumbing that faced a meadow at Tara Mandala. The real work of conceptualizing the memoir and writing it started there two summers ago.

This imperfect draft isn't yet a product of genius--I know there will be revisions--but I must send it out now into the world. This act of completion begs a question: How do you end a memoir, when you are still living a life? Maybe you never do.

I

Bardo of Birth

Now when the bardo of birth is dawning upon me,
I will abandon laziness for which life has no time,
enter the undistracted path of study, reflection and meditation,
making projections and mind the path, and realize the three
 kayas;
now that I have once attained a human body,
there is no time on the path for the mind to wander.

--The Tibetan Book of the Dead

PROLOGUE

Pagosa Springs, Colorado
July, 2010

I arrive at this wilderness cabin midway in life to finish a book about Cuba and prepare for my father's dying. I carry them like corpses: the book five years now, the fear of my dad dying for decades since his first stroke at age 50. Perhaps coming to this scary, isolated place now--I am almost 60--means I am almost ready to release the book or the fear of dying, or both. Veremos, we'll see.

Dad turns 87 soon and hangs on thanks to the thin trickle of still flowing to his brain from constricting carotid arteries--10 percent doctors say. He's determined to outlive his nemesis Fidel Castro, two years his junior and in failing health like he is. "Pienso llegar a cien," my dad chortles as if reaching 100 and outliving "ese hijo de puta"--meaning Fidel--would be a sign that history has absolved him.

Papi spends days at home in Tampa now in a brown suede butaca, a recliner my husband David and I gave him as a gift. A metal walker rests

near his feet like a neglected scooter. He grabs for it when a physical urge arises, or he wants to go outside for some peace and tranquilidad, two qualities in short supply these days. What he wants is to get away from my excitable mother, who despite the arthritis in her back, *loves* to clean the beige tile floors, the Formica cabinets, even the dust behind the fridge, and barks orders all day like a Batista-era sergeant.

Mostly, Dad stares at the reproduction antique grandfather clock in a corner of the wood-paneled dining room in Tampa where he has built a new life after exile from his previous one six decades ago. He seems to wait not so much for “el fin,” the end, but for completion of some major project like a brown recluse spider weaving the final strand of a resilient web. He knows there is no way to avoid crossing this, his last border. His first was a 90-minute flight from Guira de Melena to Tampa when he was a destitute guajiro in his 20’s with a wife and two small children back home. Sometime he hums snatches of guajiro ballads—he was a country poet in his youth and even performed on the radio in Havana—or listens on the radio to a Spanish-speaking preacher or baseball—which he claims doesn’t interest him. His inertia drives Mom, 83, a little nutty. She insists he take his walker

outside to the garage, or come watch a telenovela with her in the TV room. She wants him to do *algo*, something, anything, beside sit hour after hour staring at the *jodido reloj*, the cursed clock that runs two hours late but still chimes the hour. I offer to have it fixed. "What's the use?" Dad shrugs as his still calloused right hand does a tiny pirouette near his face. I ask Mom, politely, to leave Dad to his time-capsule reveries.

When I visit them, he recounts stories of his youth: the time he walked a police beat in the dangerous pre revolutionary streets of Havana; when he chauffeured Benito Remedios, a wealthy hacienda owner and small time politician known as the Pineapple King. Benito's frequent fits of anger – one time he shot up his black Buick when it stalled on a muddy road to Havana -- provided artistic fodder for the local guajiros, who wove Benito's escapades into the stanzas of their punto guajiro as they sipped café cubano at the counter of the bodega near the town plaza.

Dad says Benito preened about his luxuriant plantation looking like el gato con botas, Puss in Boots, in narrow-waist pants that flared at the thighs and that he tucked into his laced-to-the knees brown leather boots.

“Benito era del carajo,” Dad cackles recalling when a policeman shot his unpredictable boss over a parking ticket point blank in the center of the forehead. Through chance, fate, or some kind of weird karma, another driver, a middle-aged guajiro named Abelardo, was at the wheel of the ’48 or ’49 green Buick. His memory is weak and dad grins when he gets to this part in the story. Papi was asked to drive Benito’s son to another farm that day. With each retelling Dad embellishes the story: Benito in the back seat kicking hard at the leather-upholstered front seat and yelling at him to drive faster; Benito waving his pistol at some poor fool or berating some starving guajiro for having the audacity to beg him for money. Sometimes Dad changes a detail or two of Benito’s encounter with death: the location of the incident, the height—tall or short—or hair color—brown or blonde—of the irate policeman.

“Lo mataron por bruto,” Dad sighs and stares at the popcorn ceiling explaining that Benito’s temper caused his death. He’s sure of it. Had *he* been behind the wheel that day, instead of dim-witted Abelardo, he would have shredded the offending parking ticket, just as he had half a dozen others before.

Leaving Cuba was a death. But first came the death of my grandfather, Simon. As abuelo lay dying of tuberculosis or emphysema—I've asked, but no one is sure which, only that it was a "pulmon picado," a colorful expression that evokes an image of a lung snipped all over the place by a pair of scissors—my parents made plans to leave the country, paying off debts to the bodeguero and the butcher, buying airplane tickets on credit from a Chinaman in San Antonio de los Baños and securing visas at the U.S. Embassy in Havana.

On the morning of the day he died, Simon demanded to see me. I was his favorite of eight grandchildren. Mom ushered me into the dank bedroom next to the galley kitchen and I remember stopping suddenly at the foot of his bed like a chorro of water frozen in a downspout. I trembled when I saw his shrunken limbs floating like aimless driftwood in the ocean of bed sheets. He stared at me with watery blue eyes and pursed lips. Who is this sallowskinned stranger who resembled my grandfather? I remember his chest heaved like a small boat in a squall, and I heard whistling like a boiling kettle. I turned to the window to look for the source but realized the wheezing came from deep inside this stranger's windpipe.

A leaden pressure on my shoulders prevents me from running from the pale hand that claws toward me on rumpled sheet like a jellyfish under water. I jerk my hand away--an involuntary movement-- but someone in the room--my mother? my Tia Zoraida?-- seizes my teacup-size palm and pushes it into his thick-veined broad one.

"It's all right," Zoraida says.

"No quiero," I say, shaking my head.

"He just wants to hold your hand," she says.

I fight the urge to fling the prehensile claw from mine and flee but I remain still as a fixed planet, eyes downcast, afraid to look.

He rasps something about a promise--when I was much older my mother told me he asked me to promise to return to Cuba to see him--and then an adult steers me from the room.

"Go outside and play," says a woman--my grandmother, I think.

I crouch instead, shoulder blades pressed against the wood-slat wall near the bedroom door, and observe a man with spectacles and a beak-like nose, carrying a tiny black leather bag, rush into the bedroom room. He

leaves five minutes later shaking his head and muttering, “no se puede hacer nada,” there’s nothing more to do.

From my perch outside the door, I hear loud wailing inside the bedroom and a voice saying that my father and uncle will shave my grandfather, sponge down his sweaty body and dress him in his khaki police uniform. The uniform, from the Batista era, is starched and has shiny brass buttons on the jacket front and shoulders. I remember my grandmother kept it hanging on a nail next to the back door even after Simon retired from the force after he suffered a head injury from a fall from a jeep as he pursued--his sergeant’s orders--a banana thief.

Over the next three days family, friends and neighbors from as far away as Havana and Pinar Del Rio streamed into the narrow living room to view the body now cradled in a pine casket on top of the dining table. On the wall above the table was a picture of abuelo posing in his police hat and uniform in front of an avocado tree in the back yard, his chin upraised and his back straight as a Royal Palm. When it was time for the men to carry his body to the town cemetery, my parents sent my sister and me to stay with neighbors, saying we were only niñas, too young to witness the graveside

ceremony. Odd considering that I had slept in a bedroom less than 20 feet from the casket on the night abuelo died.

Five weeks later, I blew kisses and waved to my grandmother Matilde and other weeping relatives through a plate-glass window at José Martí Airport. Mami and papi, my younger sister Olga and I were on our way to swampy Florida, as humid as Cuba but in the “Unai-des-stay,” as mom pronounces it. An Eastern Airlines flight to Miami, followed by a five-hour car ride to Tampa, our destination, and what might have been a perfectly adequate life--certainly a different life--receded from view like the tarmac after lift off.

With the exception of a harrowing tourist visit we made to the island during the 1959 Revolution when the Castro rebels closed the airport and trapped us there for a month despite our exit permits, two decades passed with barely any contact with our past; we kept in touch with relatives via postdated letters which took six weeks or longer to reach either shore. Or from time to time we received an alarming telegram informing us that a grandmother had died or a cousin was dying of cancer. The U.S. and Cuba engaged in a Cold War with strict travel restrictions, turning the Caribbean

Sea into a watery Iron Curtain. Later, when I was in my late 20s and working as a journalist, the U.S. and Cuba unlocked the padlock. Over the following 40 years I have visited the island five times--the first time in 1979 with my parents, twice in the 1980s during the "special period" of food and energy restrictions after the collapse of Cuba's benefactor, the Soviet Union, once in the 90s and most recently as a researcher (according to the U.S.) or a tourist (according to Cuba) in 2006 with my Costa Rican husband, David.

The separation forced upon me from age seven to twenty seven transformed my craving for home--by then just remote memories of guaguancos, gardenias y guarapo and indistinct impressions of familiar faces--into a void so fathomless that had I started digging the hole would have reached all the way to China. Losing these memories was a different sort of death, but just as painful as any real one.

**

I deliberately selected this isolated cabin in the San Juan Forest for a month-long retreat, a respite from daily living; my home in Las Cruces, NM;

my university job in El Paso, Texas. The one-room cabin, surrounded by a canopy of hundred-year-old ponderosa pine, blue spruce and aspens, is perched on the side of a mountain like an empty birdcage on a wrap-around porch. The downward sloping view empties out into a distant sea-green meadow that reminds me of the Caribbean ocean facing the malecón. Some sort of sagging log structure at the far edge of the meadow--despite my fear of snakes I am determined to hike there one afternoon to check it out and take photos--reminds me of the Buddhist teaching about a monkey trapped inside a cabin. The monkey, which represents our senses, is so busy peering out the six windows of the cabin that he never perceives reality.

My isolation, meditation, and writing should help me loosen the blindfold, at least provide a useful frame for the overdue book I anguish to finish--a book that feels now like a dead bird or a crippled child. The process of writing it feels like pushing a thick piece of elastic through a narrow waistband. I've managed to work the elastic half way through the band, but it's gotten stuck there and I've had to pull it back out and start over again. This has happened a few times.

To my friends this rustic cabin—with an outhouse, a tank of rainwater, a propane stove with a so-called working oven and no electricity other than two hours of sickly yellow light from a solar powered desk lamp plus the portable solar unit I bring with me—is a curious choice for an un-athletic Cuban who has never pitched a tent or taken a shit in the woods. Cubans do *not* go camping; do *not* exercise—Latinas appreciate curves—or engage in non-contact sports. In school I pretended to have stomachaches so I wouldn't have to go outside to play kick ball. Instead, I lounged away the Phys Ed hour on a wood bench in the locker room. As the rest of the girls glided past me to the outside field in their white tee shirts and blue shorts some of the Cuban and Italian girls shot me a complicit glance. They too had faked fevers and stomach pains to get out of the gym class, which followed lunch and lasted an hour. A healthy lifestyle for cubanos means café con leche in the morning. I started drinking coffee for breakfast at age six, and was acutely aware that my school friends had Cheerios and milk instead. A Cuban dinner means some sort of meat often in sauce—picadillo, carne con papas, ropa vieja—and, of course, the staple of the Cuban diet: rice with beans. The beans must be black, not the red ones preferred by other hoity-

toity Caribeños who believe frijoles negros are beneath them. I am proud to have started my daughter Miranda on a diet of black beans--my mother's recipe--and rice at age two. I have proof: a picture of her in a high chair in the kitchen of our Washington, DC townhouse. Her smiling mouth, cheeks, chin and fingers are smeared with beans black as squid ink.

Like most other Cubans, I look at vegetables as a garnish or a foreign object; I almost threw up in first grade when the teacher forced me to eat peas, which to me sounded like pee or piss, and smelled like it too.

Ensalada is an avocado with some sliced onion on top.

I tell friends that my book is personal and spiritual, that this spot is next best to an unobstructed view of the pristine and empty Havana bay. A month in Cuba would be expensive and impractical. No distractions here. No Netflix. No quick trips to Sam's Club for a case of Pellegrino, a salmon steak for dinner, a cheap tank of gas. They don't buy it, but I don't care.

Besides working on the book that I began five years ago for an MFA degree, like a houseguest that overstays, I practice Chod with my new double-sided Tibetan drum, meditate, do yoga and read. I bring a copy of *Walden*, the *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* that I purchased at the Tara

Mandala bookstore and a paperback King James Bible--an afterthought I requested from the young woman who drove me to the cabin. I bought the bible in honor of my father's born-again faith, mine too from childhood to young adulthood until I could no longer keep up the pretence of being a devout Christian. The Tibetan book should provide an alternative take on death, a subject that possesses me like a Santeria curse.

I am curious about bardo, a condition or state that occurs after you die. It is a different take on death than the Christian one I'm used to. I've been skeptical about heaven and hell since a nice elderly couple, my Sunday school teachers at West Tampa Christian Church when I was nine, explained that when babies die they go to hell if their parents have not accepted Jesus as their personal savior. When I demanded proof, they said the bible says so. "The bible is wrong," I barked back. My words must have shocked the gentle geriatric pair because I rarely said a word in class. My faith plummeted after that lesson.

I've come prepared: assorted bed linens and clothing, a plastic folding table and chair for writing, a portable solar collector for the battery in my MacBook computer. The solar collector is a gift from my practical husband,

who agreed to the solitary month in the mountains--“Go for it,” he said--but was concerned when I explained the only electricity in the cabin was a 1960s desk lamp connected to small solar battery.

“Without the computer your time there will be a waste,” David groaned.

“I’ll write in long hand.”

Sensing my stubbornness, he began to scour the Web for a portable solar unit compatible with my MacBook computer. After several weeks of searching, he found a company, in Kansas, that produces foldable plastic light-gathering panels for soldiers trekking through the desert. When the box arrived by FedEx, he walked me through the steps to set up the \$899-before-sales tax-sheet of plastic outside in the sun, connect it to the enclosed battery for charging and finally how to hook the battery up to the computer for instant power. Throughout the days here I have become symbiotically attached to this miracle nectar-producing machine.

I’ve brought lots of stuff to assist the writing--a small mountain of reporter’s notebooks, dated by month and year, fifteen years of assorted journals and diaries, all colors and sizes, hours of audio interviews with

relatives in Tampa and in Cuba, old photographs, Cuban sones, danzones and guaguancos loaded onto the computer, as well as "Havana Blues" by a contemporary Cuban punk rock band with a cool song about home not being about a flag or country but wherever you happen to be. I also packed it with lots of Rock and Roll from the 60's and 70's. I even have movies of prerevolutionary Cuba downloaded from YouTube. This should all add up to *algo*, something, worthy at least of the MFA. What it might mean is something else altogether.

In his book about time and memoir, Sven Birkerts writes that the memoirist "is generally not after the sequenced account of his life so much as the story or stories that have given life its internal shape" (p. 53). This is my expectation for the book: that "the process of coming to understanding" will be "the main part of the story" (p. 53). The beauty of this approach is the certainty that the process continues long after the last word of the manuscript.

Thus, like a good Buddhist and journalist, I've come prepared for almost any eventuality; the life examined may yield incomplete or partial understanding, like the futility of estimating how much money is inside a

piggy bank without smashing it open. Can I accept living without definitive answers, like why my father beat me across the legs with a belt buckle when I was two and whether someone tried to molest me when I was four? I have other questions from later in life like why the Cubans or the Americans spied on me as an adult during my trips to Cuba. But a greater existential question underscores these ponderables: Can an exile go home? What is home?

At the very least, I hope to weigh the causes and conditions, personal and historical, which have brought me to this mountaintop and to an acceptance of where this search might take me next. There's something else about this personal writing exercise. All art is autobiographical. How could it not be? Whether we write a novel or memoir, personal experience is loam for art. Cuba and Tampa are rich clay for my creation; sugar cane and orange trees thrive in both places; the world's best tobacco from Vuelta Abajo in Cuba was cut, molded and wrapped in Ybor City and West Tampa for 150 years.

One last thing about this living close to the nub and in silence for a month: the deliberate slowing down instead of mindless doing should allow my practice to infuse my writing with poetry and imagination and the other

way around, one a call that elicits a response from the other, like Dad's sentimental guajiro ballads. As my daughter likes to say, I remind her of a roadrunner on speed. This is how I hope it will go. But I am also aware of the dark side of this adventure, the risk, and the possible disaster in the making. I could break a leg climbing. Encounter a bear or writer's block. I've checked the kitchen cupboard and there's an emergency horn under the metal sink in case I need help; I evoke memory and carry a diary as an antidote for possible fear of writing.

**

Day 1

A tanned, muscular young woman guides me up the mountain. She is about 25. Her name is Abbi Mountain. I call her Mountain. She is tall like the row of Aspens on the ridge of my mountain. An inscrutable smile punctuates her rosy-cheeked face, and her dancing blue eyes remind me of a wind-ruffled lake in summer. I admire her robust health, the circumference of her calves--compared to my chicken legs--and the ease with which she wrestles 30-pound jugs of water. She shares her Buddhist name but I immediately forget it as I did mine at first. I'm terrible with names,

especially if they are foreign. In the West you receive a new name from your lama or teacher when you take Buddhist vows. I have noticed that Buddhist women wish for a nice-sounding Tibetan name--Ani, Jetsun, Pema--instead of something harsh sounding like Drolma or difficult to pronounce like Lhakton. My teacher, Tsultrim Allione, Tara Mandala's founder, has given me Drolma of the sangha. Drolma means Tara--a popular female deity; sangha means community. I'm fine with this one, my third so far in this life.

Mountain mentions that someone sighted a bear on the trail near my cabin. Keep the door shut, the food stored in airtight containers, she warns. I shouldn't put out a bird feeder. She's leaving for Cuzco in a few days, a spiritual place where she hopes to live for some time. Someone else will take over delivering my water and groceries. Danger warnings flash through my mind like a blinking red light: What if the new person forgets I'm here? This is what happened to me when my grandfather was dying and I was left behind in the house while my sister and cousins were bundled into a car and taken to stay with relatives. What if I'm stranded here?

My guide has me park my lime-green Toyota Camry hybrid--which I do reluctantly because I would rather drive it up and park near the cabin just

in case 'cause you never know--next to the yellow, red and blue Tibetan inspired community center in a clearing at the base of the mountain.

Mountain points out the mud-caked beige Subaru nearby, which will be our camel up to the cabin. The car's rear doors are jammed and the hatch blocked by two mammoth blue water containers, my first week's drinking water.

We climb into the front and she helps me toss my hefty red suitcase, a dozen or so plastic, cloth and leather carry alls, the plastic folding table and chair, a black meditation cushion and a sheepskin rug over the headrests and into the back seat which now resembles a suburban garage on moving day.

The Subaru creeps up the mountain for about a mile and turns left onto an unmarked, unpaved downward-sliding rutted road strewn with hunks of rock the size of bowling balls. I think I detect bear tracks between the chunks of rock. The car slides and jerks sideways and up and down like a go-cart at a carnival, and Mountain laughs softly: "Impossible to cross by car when it rains." Great, I think. It's rainy season.

I must walk this stretch each week to retrieve bags of groceries, she tells me. Here's how it works: On Tuesdays I walk uphill three quarters of a mile on the windy, bramble-and-rock-strewn path, carrying my smelly plastic trash bag from the previous week, to the top where the path meets the roadway. I am to leave my scribbled grocery list inside a battered blue cooler, along with a black zippered pouch containing cash.

On Thursdays after 5 in the afternoon I walk back up hill to retrieve the jugs of drinking water, dried soups, pasta, a bag of granola, a loaf of whole wheat bread, some apples and bananas, a bar of cheddar cheese, half a dozen eggs, two or three containers of yoghurt, and some dry ice for the perishable items. I later learn that the ice will last as much as three days if I wrap it inside a brown paper grocery bag before placing it in the cabin cooler.

My caretaker offers to shop in town for unusual items--a hammer, duct tape, thumb tacks, a hummingbird feeder, which I request although I've been warned not to put one out because of the bear. She says she can also bring candles, incense, books and meditation practice materials from the retreat center bookstore. As she drones on, I calculate how many

recyclable grocery bags I can carry at a time given my flabby arms and surgically reconstructed right meniscus. I'm 5 feet four inches and weight about 130; I just turned 59. I suspect I'll have to make two, maybe three, trips in one afternoon to retrieve all the stuff. I make a mental list based on the weight calculation of each grocery item--I scratch off the Pellegrino, the half gallon of soy milk, the cans of black beans and tortilla soup--and thank my karma the return trip on the trail is downhill. Maybe Mountain's replacement will accept a little extra *dana* in exchange for carrying the water jugs to my cabin.

Day 2

The cabin, built of wood and cracked reddish mud falling off in chunks in places, is called, Ratna, wish-fulfilling jewel--a sign I interpret as auspicious. It resonates with my desire to finish the book. A former guest has tacked up a page torn from a magazine, a picture of the Dalai Lama, grinning, hands folded below the waist. Behind him a path leads into an opening in the woods. He's inviting me in. I'm determined to squeeze out meaning where I can. Buddhists, I've noticed, like to say "auspicious," which

to me means that everything, like my being in this spot on July 1 of 2011, happens for a reason. Even the fissures in the floor are useful centering tools during meditation.

My one room is slightly smaller than a two-car garage with a badly cracked concrete floor covered by a few faded and dusty rugs. X's of masking tape cover some of the worse cracks in the floor and I add to the checkerboard effect by crawling on all fours and laying down more duct tape. Like an abstract painter, I seek symmetry in the patterns I create on the earth beneath my feet.

There are windows along three walls, two doors, one of them a set of French doors overlooking the meadow, a wood stove in a corner and a woodpile outside, nice to have but unnecessary in the 100-plus summer heat. I sleep on a lumpy twin mattress, perched on top of a wood platform, which I have covered with lime green sheets from home and a dark green bedspread festooned with Native American designs from a souvenir store in El Paso. Last night ants the size of pinheads crawled over and under the sheets and pricked my arms, legs and back as I slept. This morning I collected those still squirming and released them outside on the grass; I

dumped the dead ones in the trash. Buddhists believe all living things, even insects, could have been our mothers in some previous or future life. I've probably already squashed hundreds of ants under my inert sleeping body and bare feet. I reason that since I lack the intention to kill, these tiny deaths should not count as future bad karma. Besides, Buddhists don't believe in hell--a relief for a former evangelical Christian such as me. But lines of ants in procession crawl along the crack behind the sink where it meets the wall. A previous tenant has jammed a paper towel into the crack to keep them out. I douse the paper and the crack with vinegar water I've brought from home, which works for an hour or two and then I have to repeat the process. I want them to stay out of my honey.

Day 3

I've already cleaned the dust from all the surfaces and crevices of the cabin with damp paper towels and swept the floors and rugs with a shredding broom. I have unpacked pants, shirts, cameras and art supplies and then set up the plastic folding table and chair from my home in Las Cruces. I will write in front of the French doors that open onto the woods. I

have cleaned every window pane, crusted over with traces of dried mud and streaks left by rain, with the white vinegar and water--something I used as a child when my family could not afford store-bought window cleaner. I've unloaded bags of reporter's notebooks, the journals, the audiotapes, the early chapters of my book, the half dozen childhood photos. All this and other writing props have sprouted around my feet like mushrooms in an English meadow. I found a thumbtack in a basket near the propane stove and use it to pin one of the pictures on the wood frame of the door to the right of the computer and within my line of sight. Now I can see both the photograph and the meadow at the same time--past and present juxtaposed, call and response, counterpoint, contrapunto, like my father's guajiro ballads. The black-and-white five-by-seven photo shows Mom, Dad, my younger sister Olga and me. We huddle uncomfortably on a brocade sofa. With our two skinny arms and legs peaking out from pretty frocks, my sister and I resemble undernourished waifs. Mom is pregnant, six or seven months judging by the budge under her tight skirt. Dad appears rakish in a printed short sleeve guayabera and dark glasses. From the 50s clothing we wear and my mother's frizzy permed 'do, it's obvious we are just off the

boat. Our faces denote promise and disappointment, our new permanent condition.

Day 4

I took a break from writing earlier to set up the meditation altar, a small wood cabinet with doors carved with red and blue lotuses. The lotus in Tibetan Buddhism carries symbolic meaning, but I can't remember what that is and can't check the web. I decorate the top of the cabinet with personal totems: two Buddhas, one jade and the size of a mango, the other of wood and the size of a large marble, three small square green dishes for candles, bits of bark, stones and leaves, a pearl mala--a gift from the temple painter's wife--and a small white shell from the bookstore. Shells, I know, represent sound. I light incense, clean and check my Nikon camera battery and tape up a poster of Machig, a Tibetan Dakini and gift from Lama Tsultrim, at the head of my bed. Some say Machig, who liked to meditate in cemeteries and charnel grounds, tamed a dozen or more demons by feeding them nectar from her body. I have exercises I learned here to feed demons of my own.

I slink back into the folding chair in front of the table, which I have covered with a green tablecloth from home. I sip jasmine tea from a metal container also from home. I stare out at the lush circle of trees and fix on a giant scorched pine with leafless black limbs, victim of some long ago fire caused by a lightning storm no doubt. Behind this tree, which jumps out like an albino in a dark-skinned choir, the previously luminous meadow below resembles a dark yawning womb. I stare into this forbidding orifice that resembles my vague thoughts right now. I slip on my sandals and walk outside. I scan the turquoise sky for rainclouds. I spot a photo op, a string of faded prayer flags dangling between two trees.

Day 5

I meditated this morning between two Cyprus trees--a dead one on the right and the other, healthy, to the left of me with a view when I stand of the distant meditation peak and its strings of prayer flags flapping madly. Twenty minutes into the meditation, I hear dry thumping in the dirt all around me. Baby chipmunks scuttle across the dirt and others race up and down the trunks of trees. One, more brazen than the rest, circles the spot

where I sit. I remain still as a maypole and it scampers across my left hand, startling me. I feel its sharp claws click lightly on my skin. After that, it is hard to mix space and awareness and my thoughts scurry all over the place like the tiny creatures. When I make the ending sound of OM, birds screech in the dead tree branches above me. A stranger is in their midst.

Day 6

This afternoon I sit at the desk and wonder if I should I transcribe some of the tapes of Mom and my aunt reminiscing about their childhood in Guira de Melena, reread the hundred or so pages I've written thus far, scour the journals for juicy, useful tidbits. I feel anxiety start to creep up my butt and spinal column like a visit from an old enemigo. My body feels electrified as if ants are crawling up and down my limbs, and there is a strange and familiar pressure, like a vice, around the center of my right forearm, as if someone was squeezing hard and won't let go. I stare at the phantom sensation on my forearm to identify its source. It has haunted me since I was a child. It appears like a relámpago, a crash of lightning, whenever I'm startled or under intense stress. I once felt this ghost clamp on my forearm

during a written master's exam in college. The question I was trying to answer in number 2 pencil on sheets of lined notebook paper was: "What were the theoretical, social and political foundations of the Enlightenment and how did this era manifest in the literature of the time?" The entire rest of my life--mainly my escape from part time jobs serving pastries at Olympia Bakery, making Triptix for retirees at AAA and selling souvenirs at Busch Gardens--seemed to hinge on my ability to provide a cogent response to that question. My feet dead stumps under the plastic veneer table, I knew if I tried to leave the room to get water or go to the bathroom my legs would buckle like empty flour sacks. I stayed; finished the five-hour test. I later learned that I got the degree not because I aced the test but because of a strong oral presentation, a comparison of *Madame Bovary* and *La Regenta*, a contemporaneous Spanish novel.

I connect the fear now to my short-term survival. What if the solar panel doesn't work with the computer? I've yet to set it up to test it. If it doesn't perform--like me--I'll be out of power and luck for four weeks, the meticulous planning all a well-constructed sham. I'll have to head home. Cálmate, Zita. You already have several chapters in various stages of

completion and had some good, strong thoughts about revising the work this morning. My eye gravitates to the battery icon on the top right corner of the screen; the bars indicate it's 77 percent full. Now's a good time to set up and test the thin plastic sheath and keep my fingers crossed that the bars on the battery pack will light up one at a time.

Day 7

In the morning, the cabin is my cocoon; this retreat center the umbilical cord to the outside world that keeps me nourished.

In the evening, I feel restless. I don't feel like a welcome inhabitant inside the cabin. I will perform a purification ceremony tonight, gather twigs and build a bonfire with logs from the woodpile. I will make Sur, "Offering of Nourishment Through Scent," to burn in the flames. I have no flour or molasses, only honey, yogurt, sugar, and olive oil instead of butter. I wish I had tobacco, a good Cuban cigar. I have a box tucked in a credenza drawer back home from my last trip. I can't believe I forgot one.

Day 8

I read that the Tibetan bardo is an in-between state, a gap, a space that opens up when a person dies and lasts until she's reborn as another human being, or bypass it altogether and reach enlightenment--only a select few reach this final stage. During the transitional state--it can last days, months or years--the consciousness cycles through three distinct phases: Bardo of dying, the bardo of Dharmata and the bardo of becoming. There are also three stages of bardo while someone is alive: Bardo of birth, the bardo of dreams and the bardo of samadhi-meditation.

After a person dies, Tibetan Buddhists perform special rituals for seven to forty nine days to assist the dead in their movement through the bardos. During this transition between death and rebirth, great fear and anxiety arise, like my escalating fears of running out of food or water or being injured and stranded. The uncertainty of not knowing what might come next is like a circus gymnast straddling a high wire without a net. Bright lights, jolting sounds and intense fears bombard the disembodied consciousness which encounters assorted peaceful and wrathful beings and experiences all sorts of terrifying delusions, most of all an intense desire to return to the former self.

Day 9

I just returned from a walk down the mountain. I took some nice pictures of the darkened trees against the blustery sky that had patches of bright blue peeking through. Several things happened today that made me think I should leave. I'd been watering and observing with pride the sprouting of a row of sunflowers I planted outside the cabin near the woodpile. I brought a packet of seeds with me. When I raised the blind and looked out the window this morning their tops had been chewed off by some critter, probably the chipmunk that lives in the woodpile.

The tedium is getting to me: waking, meditation, yoga, washing up, breakfast, writing, lunch, long afternoons I try to fill with Chod or a nap, a walk about six (photography or sketching), dinner, practice, reading in bed with my erratic book light, sleep. Then it starts again. It feels like I am stuck in the movie *Groundhog Day* about the unending repetition of one day, but of course things do change moment to moment. I'm trying to keep an eye on how my thoughts flow one into the next, and eventually circle back to where they started. As the Prajaparamita sutra says: thoughts come from

emptiness and return to emptiness. Thoughts are like bardos, arising, playing themselves out, and dying, like a gentle flowing into the next one, and so on.

Day 10

Bardo seems an appropriate metaphor for the condition of exile too, and the process of writing about my past. There's my bardo; there's Cuba's bardo; and the various points where they parallel or intersect. My bardo began the day my grandfather died in May of 1957, followed by our departure from the island five weeks later. Two years after that we were physically stuck in Cuba, waiting for the airport to reopen, another bardo, when the Batista dictatorship collapsed and a young enigmatic revolutionary named Fidel Castro seized power. It was supposed to be a family vacation, a return trip to pay old debts and wipe the slate clean. Instead, the revolucionarios shut down Rancho Boyeros airport, now Jose Marti, for almost a month. We remained in Guira, our hard earned dollars gone, listening for news on radio reloj hunched over my deceased grandfather's Phillips cabinet radio in the corner. It was the same station I listened to

when Abuelo Simon rocked me to sleep on his lap in the sweet sultry pre-revolutionary afternoons. Back then, the sones and boleros coming from his radio were like totis--Cuban birds black as obsidian--and doves calling beyond the tall, bare windows of the sparse living room, beyond the wide front porch that faced the red-dirt street. The news reported that jubilant crowds were smashing parking meters and casino slot machines in Havana; exuberant milicianos were searching for guns door-to-door; Batista police and soldiers were fleeing or being arrested to face the paredon, firing squad; men with guns had set up roadblocks to stop all cars going in and out of Havana. We shuttered the windows and locked the front door. Zoraida, my aunt, tucked my grandfather's Smith and Wesson, Batista-era police revolver, a Batista-era relic, into the far corners of the top shelf of the chiffarobe in the front bedroom. We waited for an opening, a sign we would be allowed to return to our lives in Tampa.

I cling to these memories, impressions, feelings and events that occurred within those two narrow bands of time, 1957 and two months at the end of 1959 and January 1960, but they remain there stuck like burrs in a silk skirt. My parents apparently hadn't seen the colossal events coming,

and we were trapped like the spiders hanging from the corners of the ceiling of my grandmother's house in Guira.

Day 11

On my way back up the mountain after a hike, I turn around to gaze at the cascade of giant Aspens declining like a staircase that leads into a meadow below. "What am I supposed to do?" I say out loud. " You tell me?" Later, I meditate for a while and say it again: "Why am I here? What am I supposed to do? You tell me." Plop, plop, plop, *three* drops from the water tank seem to respond, followed by moth that dives into the candle flame, which goes out with a definitive hiss. A spiral of smoke dances above the extinguished candle. Gone.

Is it randomness, coincidence, or the universe conspiring to send me a signal? Those two insignificant, chance events--surely some action caused the drops to fall and the moth to extinguish the flame at that particular moment--happening at another time and witnessed by someone else would mean something different. To me, right now, sitting in this wilderness cabin, it brings up these connotations: the drops of water are words dropping one

by one onto the page. The unthinking moth seeking warmth but finding death: Is my book dead? Or a sacrifice, like Jesus on the cross. It feels like that. The phrase "old flame," as in a previous boyfriend, jumps in my head. That's it. Time to put out that old flame and light another. Put another way: end a thought, start a new one; finish a page, start the next one.

Day 12

I watch a DVD of a movie, *Conga Lessons at the Bay of Pigs*, on my computer before walking down the uneven path behind the cabin to sit on this hand hewn stone bench. The movie has little to do with Conga lessons or the Bay of Pigs, the seaside location where a group of CIA-trained exiles invaded to overthrow Castro. The invasion was a fiasco; the exiles ended up dead or in jail on the island. The rambling film was part history, part diatribe with a dash of present day Cuba thrown in. It triggered this thought: What if Cuba has been trapped in the bardo for more than five decades? Like my family? Like me? The bardo of death is the fall of Batista, followed by the bardo of dharmata, a litany of shocking historical events: Castro's triumphant march from the Sierra to Havana, his I-am-not-a-

Communist speech, his trip to Harlem and the UN where the crowds loved him but the politicians didn't, the Cuban Missile Crisis and close call nuclear war with the U.S, his "I am a Communist" speech, various CIA attempts on his life--each a bardo of its own. Then there's Cuba's expulsion of over 100,000, including prisoners and mental patients, on the Mariel boatlift, the disintegration of world-wide Communism and the Soviet block, more recently the thousands of desperate rafters on their way to freedom on the coast of Florida. After more than fifty years of revolución--Mom calls it robolución, a pun on *robar*, theft--perhaps Cuba is now in the bardo of becoming, waiting for what comes next. Like me, still stuck in the in between.

Day 13

Late this afternoon, as I sit at on the floor listening to a CD of the Green Tara practice late this afternoon I see Anje, Mountain's 20-year-old replacement, waving at me outside the French doors. Puzzled--we are not supposed to be interrupted during retreat-- I invite her inside. She leans

forward awkwardly on the white plastic chair I use as a clothes rack next to the door.

"I have sad news," she says. My mind flies to Dad. Did he fall, have another stroke?

"It's David," she says.

I catch my breath and feel the hands gripping my knees grow numb. My husband?

"He died on the land."

I exhale realizing she means David, Lama T's husband.

"He died in his sleep," she whispers, the golden late afternoon light framing her blonde hair like a halo.

"How?" I say softly.

David is 55, a skilled musician. Lean and tanned, his unlined face framed by an unruly cap of snow white hair that make him look like a sprite or leprechaun or something out of Grimm's Fairy Tales. He wakes each day by 4 a.m. to do chores followed by meditation on the mountaintop at 7. He works the rest of the day, exercising his horses, supervising construction of

the temple on the land, fixing faucets and leaks, basically mending anything that needs it. A month ago, he taught me to play the Chod drum.

Anje says it may have been a heart attack or stroke.

A few days before he died, he told his wife that he was experiencing a sensation of his body dissolving. A good friend, Gloria, a Chicana artist who had ovarian cancer, told me the same thing a month before she died.

Anje says his body will be cremated Tibetan style near the stupa on a small hill near the community center, followed by rituals for several days. I am welcome to come.

When Anje leaves I slide into my rain jacket, grab my red Tibetan bag that contains the warning horn and my meditation supplies and race downhill toward the meadow. My eyes are dry, but I can barely see the ragged trail beneath my feet. I glance up and the low-hanging clouds look like smudged fingers across a sky that threatens rain but I need space to think. Why? I asked Dad a similar question when I was ten and demanded to know why God has to send anyone to hell. Why would a loving God punish a human being with perpetual pain? Sensing my distress, he said, "hija, everyone goes to heaven." I knew this was a lie according to his belief.

Now I am pervaded by the eerie sense that everything around me, the path, the trees, the sky, all of nature, is untouched, the same as it was before Anje brought the news about David's death. But for me reality splits into before and afterward. I feel unsteady as if the ground has shifted and I am standing on a precipice. I walk toward the edge of the path and it is indeed a precipice of rocks and forest debris. It would be easy to jump. Was Anje's visit a delusion fabricated by my over-active imagination? Reality IS what we think it is, right? This event really didn't happen. David is *not* dead.

An old fear gnaws at me. Perhaps I somehow had a hand in his death. I remember that when he called on me during Chod practice to play and sing a stanza in Tibetan I froze and said, my eyes glaring at him, that I couldn't do it yet, a touch of exasperation in my voice. He nodded and smiled, as if he understood my frustration, and called on someone else. Can a look or harsh word kill, or a child's reluctance to touch a dying man's hand? Sometimes it feels as if I died next to my grandfather. I am still dead but do not know it. This fear surfaced when I was in elementary school and

sometimes landed me in the school infirmary. Afraid to admit this crazy thought, I told the nurse my stomach hurt.

How uncanny that I am writing a book about death and, exile and death strikes suddenly like the sudden burst of flame from an open fire singeing my cheek.

I walk back to the cabin to make dinner and remember the three drops and the extinguished flame. Here's another interpretation: I've got to let go of my thoughts, extinguish my intellect, so I can write this goddamn book.

II

Bardo of Dreams

Now when the bardo of dreams is dawning upon me,
I will abandon the corpse-like sleep of carless ignorance,
and let my thoughts enter their natural state without distraction;
controlling and transforming dreams in luminosity,
I will not sleep like any animal
but unify completely sleep and practice.

--The Tibetan Book of the Dead

CHAPTER 1

ADIOS, QUE TE VAYA BIEN

Mami totters at the top of the airplane stairs, looking down at the shiny tarmac of Miami International Airport. It is 11 at night, January 1960, and an icy wind pierces our flimsy tropical clothes. Mom wears five-inch heels and carries a bag of naranjas, oranges are from my grandparents' backyard in Guira de Melena. As she wobbles down the metal stairs on her spikes the paper sack bursts; the oranges tumble down the steps one at a time and roll onto the smooth landing strip.

Mom and Dad scurry after the fruit that looks like gleaming dice spinning out onto an edgeless blacktop universe. My sister, two years old, and I, five, clutch our dolls--almost as tall as we are--and watch our parents scoop up the crazed oranges as if they were a handful of family diamonds. Dad stuffs some in his pants pockets and Mom inside her handbag. A nice lady in a pencil thin skirt runs after them with a bag in one hand and helps collect the rest of the items. From our perch at the top of the airplane stairs,

Olga and I observe as the blonde woman hands a sturdy bag to my dazed mother.

She wears a little blue cap above her bouffant and has perfect lips like a Kewpie doll. They remind me of the hot red pepper I once plucked from a bush near my grandparent's house in Guira. The pepper looked like a Christmas ornament and my mouth watered as I crammed it into my mouth expecting candy. No amount of water--I must have asked my grandmother for at least a dozen glasses that afternoon--quenched the fire that scorched the tip of my tongue down my throat.

The blonde woman waves us down the stairs and onto the tarmac that to me resembles a precipice into a universe of unexplored planets, shooting stars and black holes.

"Welcome to Miami," she coos, as I run my tongue over dry lips.

Everything about leaving my homeland hurt: the icy blast of Canadian air that slapped my face when we landed; the smell of jet fuel in the airplane cabin that caused me to puke several times during the flight. Mom held a white bag she found in the front seat pocket near my mouth, and brought it to my chalky lips whenever the plane lurched or vibrated too much.

Three weeks earlier at the American embassy on the malecón, I trapped my right index finger inside the crease of the plate glass front door. We'd gone as a family to sign for visas. I cried from the throbbing pain in my finger during the various interviews with the nice ladies behind the big desks who offered me water, cherry cough drops and assorted office goodies--yellow pencils, pads of notepaper, pink erasers and handfuls of paperclips.

The treasures did not alleviate the pain but did gain me some notoriety back in Guira when I showed off the office booty to the neighborhood kids. My finger turned black and blue and hurt for days. My sister nursed a different wound on the trip north--a stitched lip from a blow to the mouth from a male cousin when he caught her playing with a box of pilfered buttons a few days before our departure. As a child I was terrified of this cousin, about eleven or twelve when we left and now in his 70s and still living in my hometown. As a child he pushed me into an outhouse and wouldn't let me out until his mother Zoraida came running when she heard me yelling and banging on the pine walls.

"Hijo de puta," my aunt cursed as her son jumped over my grandmother's roses and disappeared down the side alley of the house that

was lined with orange and yellow marigolds, flores de muertos because they are used for funeral wreaths. My sister remembers him doing the same thing to her.

As a child and adolescent this cousin would often run away, returning home a few days later for a hot meal and a place to sleep. Even then I think he drank. Once he threw clods of fresh red dirt on my mother's newly washed floor yelling, "para que te jodas" so she'd have to wash the "damn" floor again. He terrified me.

A few years back I heard his wife hanged herself with a bed-sheet from a beam in the kitchen of their house. My mother says he served jail time after he killed a cow. An ardent Fidelista, he had a job watching a government farm. One night he mistook a cow for an intruder and shot it. After his release from prison he turned anti- Castro and even tried to leave for Miami a few times. He now has a son and grandchild in Tampa. Like a wrathful bardo being this relative has appeared at significant moments in my life both before and after exile.

My parents were in their mid 20's when they emigrated. If she'd gotten her way, my mother, Olga, would have left at age 17 when my great

aunt Carmen, my grandmother's sister, invited her to move to Florida. A black-and-white photo taken in the 1940's shows aunt Carmen, probably in her 50's looking well fed and proper in sensible dark shoes, leaning forward in a rocker on the front porch. She wears her hair in a blunt matronly style--it resembled George Washington's hair in the portrait that graced every U.S. classroom in the 50s and 60s. My youthful mother--she was perhaps 16--reclines in another rocker a few feet away. Her legs are bare and her eyes are locked on her aunt's serious face, as if a question dangles between them. Wedged between them yet at the same time nearly imperceptible, Zoraida, her two young children, and my petite grandmother stand with stiff backs pressed against the doorframe. Given their placement in the photograph this group could be mannequins or props for the riveting exchange taking place between the foreign visitor and the young girl. The picture doesn't show this, but my mother eyes are the same shape and penetrating shade of blue as her aunt's.

Carmen, who had married a barber and lived in Tampa, made yearly pilgrimages to the island to visit her sister and nieces and nephews. When she visited she always brought suitcases filled shoes, underwear, tins of ham

and Vienna sausage, jewelry, as well as a handful of Hershey candy bars. She liked to sit on the front porch rocker, as in the picture that graces the sideboard of my front hallway, and tell stories about life in America: hard work and good money, a first-class public education, grocery store shelves stocked with every sort of food imaginable from Moroccan figs and Italian virgin olive oil to Spanish ham and anchovies. And there were also Saturday movie matinees and Sunday dances at el Centro Español in Ybor City where nice young ladies met nice young men.

“I want to sponsor you,” Carmen offered her favorite niece, who had her aunt’s firecracker tongue.

She’d already lined up a job for Mom at the cigar factory across the street from her rooming house on Armenia Avenue.

“Are you serious?” Mom hesitated, glancing at her older sister, Zoraida, hunched against the doorframe with two young children sprawled on the floor next to her feet.

“There’s no future in Cuba,” Carmen huffed.

The decision to leave was not my mother's to make. Her father, who guarded his four daughters like hothouse orchids, held the key to the alligator-shaped peninsula to the north.

He had already quashed her desire to work as a seamstress--too many men at the factory, he said--apprentice with a shoe maker--too unladylike--or attend the University of Havana, 40 minutes and three buses away from home.

"I will not have a daughter of mine climbing on buses and brushing up against riff raff," Abuelo retorted when my mother begged to attend the university.

When she begged for permission go with Aunt Carmen to Tampa, he said: "Rotundamente, NO!"

With no suitors on the horizon, Mom and her unmarried sisters, Zoraida, the oldest, Caridad and Carmen, the two youngest, spent afternoons embroidering table clothes and doilies. The women made themselves useful, washing, starching and ironing clothes, including their father's canvas-thick police uniforms. They even ironed the bed sheets and

towels like the maids did in the fancy Havana houses. But they were not allowed in Matilde's kitchen.

"There will be plenty of time to learn to cook once you are married," Matilde chimed, shoos them away if they approached the door to watch her dicing onions, garlic and green peppers for the sofrito.

On Saturdays, the girls walked arm in arm to the glorieta de Guira to stroll the plaza, a courting ritual as ancient as the Spanish Golden Age. The girls walked clockwise while the boys walked counterclockwise, casting furtive glances at each other the entire time. Once in a while one of the bolder boys would shout a piropo to a pretty girl--"If you cook like you walk I know you make a darn good cup of hot chocolate." If the girl smiled or raised her chin in a slight nod, this meant the boy had her OK to ask her parents for permission to court her.

Mom met Dad at a neighbor's house when she was about 20. Three years older, he impressed her with his dark good looks--he had a mop of shiny black hair that he brushed away from his forehead with brilliantine--shy manner and gift for poetry. Maybe he would write her *décimas*, like he had for his previous girlfriend.

Abuelo immediately to a shine to Dad, the serious, hardworking son of Domingo Arocha an honest animal trader with family roots in las Islas Canarias. Simon had previously turned down suitors for Zoraida and Caridad because they were too “mulatto,” which meant that at some point in their genealogy their Spanish blood had mixed with African blacks. My grandparents proudly traced their lineage to Galicia and the Canary Islands.

Before meeting Armando, Olga was engaged to Orlando, a furniture maker and the son of prosperous store goods owners from Spain who looked down their noses at the local guajiros and mulatos. Fair-skinned with light eyes, Orlando clerked at his parents’ store, where Simon went often to buy lard, flour or coffee. He enthusiastically approved the match, although Orlando’s mother considered Olga too *pobre* for her ambitious son.

Orlando entrusted the money he was saving for the marriage to his novia. Olga squirreled the sweat-stained *pesos* and *reales* inside a locked cedar box she kept under a pile of blankets in the back of the highest shelf of her wardrobe. Soon after, he built a cama matrimonial for their future life, and she gave him a lock of her hair and a portrait of her profile taken in a photography studio.

A year into the courtship, a stranger knocked on the front door of Abuelo's house. My mother and her sisters had already noticed the strange woman before promenading down the sidewalk as if she owned the block. The woman looked disheveled and gaunt. Matilde answered her knock. She seemed to be in her mid to late 30's, her body covered in a gray shawl and she cradled a bundle in her arms.

"Que quieres?" Matilde said sharply, "what do you want?" using the personal tu to assert her obviously higher social status.

"I want to speak to Olga's father," said the woman, blushing.

"Espere un momento."

Wiping her hands on her cotton apron, Matilde rushed past her daughters sewing in the living room in the declining afternoon light, and burst into the back bedroom where Simon was taking his afternoon nap.

"Aquí hay gallo tapao," she scowled, using a popular expression from cockfighting that means one of the players is planning something crooked. After telling him about the visitor, Simon grouched but got out of bed and buttoned the white starched guayabera his wife handed him.

"Come in," he said, inviting the stranger inside and sending his wife to the kitchen for a glass of water, ordering his startled daughters outside. From the porch stairs, they could not make out words, only a low drone punctuated by cat-like wails.

Forty minutes later, the woman emerged, her face tearstained, clinging tightly to the bundle beneath the shawl. Simon asked Olga inside, and cleared his throat.

"I have something to tell you."

"What?" asked Olga.

"The woman says she has had *relations* with Orlando."

"What sort of relations?"

Simon stared at the floor and puffed on a cigar.

"The child is Orlando's," he said.

"Mentira," said Olga, her eyes tearing. "She's lying."

"Whether you believe her is beside the point," Grandfather said, tugging a pressed white handkerchief from his shirt pocket and handing it to his daughter.

"What *is* important is what you do now."

"What should I do?" said Olga, her voice trembling.

"The child will always be a stone in your marriage bed."

"What if it's over?"

"I can only say what I would do."

"What?"

"*Termínalo.*" End it.

Over the next few days, Olga refused to leave her bed or eat or drink even her mother's special herbal concoctions for nervios or batido de leche condensada, her favorite sweet milk drink. When her sisters tiptoed to the shut bedroom door they heard muffled cries as if Olga's pillow were a sponge.

On Monday morning the following week she arose, splashed her face with cold water, and ate her pan con mantequilla dipped in café con leche. She dragged a chair to the wardrobe, climbed up and fished the wedding money from its hiding place on the top shelf.

Without saying a word, she marched out of the house with the cedar box tucked under her left arm.

She stopped at the front door of the handsome house near the Parque Central where Orlando lived with his parents and sister.

The maid answered her knock.

"I want to speak to Orlando's sister," Olga demanded.

When the girl came to the door, Olga shoved the box of jingling coins into her arms.

"Here," she said, as if she were getting rid of a dead rat. "Tell your brother to return my lock of hair and photograph."

Orlando sent her several letters that she returned unopened. Later, he sent his sister to her house to explain that the affair with the woman was *un error*, a youthful folly.

Olga insisted he return her personal property, which he did a few months later when she couldn't be moved to reconsider.

"Do you think Orlando ever came to the *unai-des-stay*?" Mom asked me recently after she had repeated yet again the sad story.

"I wonder if he's still alive."

I agreed to do a people search on the web for Orlando and for the only son of Manuel Antonio, her uncle, who was rumored to have gone north. I

haven't done them yet, maybe because I don't raise false hopes. I try to imagine what my mom's life might have been like had she married Orlando instead of my father. Would she have stayed in Cuba? Would she have been happy?

Exiles live in the present or the future. Dad exists forever in his Cuba of the mind, to paraphrase Salmon Rushdie. His past is always present. I have this pining for an imaginary past too. I once had a dream about Humberto, tia Caridad's husband for more than 50 years. Humberto was a coffee salesman in Guanabacoa and fled Cuba for Tampa with his family after he spent a few years in a post revolutionary jail. The charge, never proven in court, was that Castro agents had caught him selling sugar-adulterated coffee.

In my dream, Humberto, sleeping in his bed in Tampa, says, "The mattress was better in Cuba." At a family wedding at his house once, he paraded around the swimming pool wearing the same mothball-smelling coat--it was springtime-- he wore on his voyage to exile.

Dad recently told me about a dream in which his brother Mario is standing beneath a palmar tree in Cuba that has magically appeared outside his bedroom window in Tampa and calls to him to come outside and join him. Mario is long dead, as is Nene, the youngest brother who was eleven when Dad left.

I think he still feels guilty he never brought el Nene to visit him in the U.S., although Mario did visit him twice and the two of them hung out like schoolboys playing hooky, visiting pawn shops along Hillsborough Avenue and going together to dad's itinerant plumbing jobs. Only two of nine siblings are still alive--Dad and a sister, Juana, 82, who never missed one of his punto guajiro performances when they were teenagers and still giggles when I ask her about those long-ago days.

Dad has confided that he'd rather be buried in Guira instead of the plot he owns with mom at Garden of Memories a few miles from their home. After telling me about the dream, he whispers: "It was a mistake to leave Cuba."

"Why?"

"La tierra," my land. "My brothers."

He seems to have forgotten that he did leave Cuba once of his own volition after considerable nagging from my mother. He was in his early 20's and they lived in a wood-slat shack. La casa de las cucharachas, Mom dubbed it, because the sagging structure was infested with flying roaches that zinged like giant spitballs against the gauze mosquitero covering their double bed. This decrepit bahareque was all they could afford on Dad's \$1 a day job hauling pineapple and sugar cane from Guira to other parts of the island for the Remedios family. Its only advantage was that it was just a few blocks from where my grandparents lived, which meant that Mami could visit them and Zoraida every day. When I was a toddler and Mom was pregnant with my sister we scraped by because of the generosity of tia Zoraida, who received generous alimony checks from her soldier husband. Although she and Antolin never divorced, they had lived apart since their honeymoon. He lived in a cuartel on the eastern tip of Cuba while Zoraida and their two children stayed with her parents in Guira. Zoraida was our purveyor of shoes, medicine and bars of soap, which gave her certain rights like naming my mother's firstborn child.

Mami was boiling a kettle of malanga to puré into baby food when Dad walked in mid afternoon one day, catching Mom by surprise because he usually worked until eight or nine at night. This day he left his mud-caked guaraches outside by the door to avoid dirtying mom's gleaming floors-- usually Mom had to remind him. He sighed as he walked into the kitchen, sank into a chair and wiped his brow. There were half moon dark stains on the undershirt below his armpits. He sighed and asked for a glass of water.

"Olga, dame agua." His mouth was parched.

"What are you doing home so early?" Mom asked banging the chipped glass on the plywood table next to Dad's elbow.

"The zafra's over," Dad said. He'd hauled the last of the sugarcane harvest to the processing plant that morning. No work until pineapple season.

Mom returned to stirring the boiling pot on the coal fogón. She twirled around and faced Dad, shaking the wood spoon in her fist like a devil's pitchfork.

"We're going to Tampa," she said thrusting the spoon inches from Dad's nose.

"I don't care what you say. I'm done with this porqueria," she said.

"Porqueria" means shit hole; Dad knew better than to mess with Mom when she began to curse.

A month later, Aunt Carmen responded to a letter from Mom. "Yes," Carmen wrote in her tiny childlike script. "You've always been my favorite. Armando can stay with me until he finds a job." The plan was for Dad to save some money, rent an apartment and send for the rest of us.

Three month's later, Dad landed on Carmen's doorstep, freshly shaved and smelling of agua de violeta, a battered suitcase in his hand, a \$10 bill and some change in his pocket. This was while Batista was still in power so it was easy for Dad to get a tourist visa to visit his mother's aunt in Tampa; Mom borrowed \$100 for his airfare from tia Zoraida.

"Stay out of her hair," warned Orlando, my mother's younger brother and a recent immigrant also living at Carmen's. "La tia es del carajo," Orlando warned, meaning aunt Carmen was hell on wheels.

The men shared a back bedroom in Carmen's fortress-like wood-frame boarding house, next door to her dead husband's barbershop, now rented out to another exile barber, and across the street from the Garcia y Vega

cigar factory, where Mom would work sorting and packing cigars ten years later.

Armando could not stop staring at the passport-sized photos of his daughters--my sister had been born by then--he kept in his battered wallet and placed every night on the windowsill above his bed.

"Think of your family," Carmen admonished. "Sea hombre." Be a man.

He did his best to avoid prickly aunt Carmen. Each night he went to bed immediately after dinner, which was usually a sancocho, a stew, made with assorted vegetables and inexpensive cuts of meat or the dark parts of a chicken.

"I'm not rich," Carmen said. "I can't afford to serve steak every night."

The refrigerator was off limits after dinner. Orlando had to smoke outside on the stair landing or the sidewalk. One day after Dad had finished taking a quick shower -- Carmen insisted on conserving water -- she marched into the bathroom with a pail and starting scrubbing the tub with bleach and Pinesol.

"Guajiro asqueroso," Dad heard tia mutter from the kitchen where he was combing his wet jet-black hair. She repeated the phrase--disgusting guajiro--several more times.

"Who's she talking about?" Armando asked Orlando later that evening in the closed bedroom.

Orlando flicked the ashes from his Camel out the screen-less open window that looked out to the red brick cigar factory across the street. He propped an elbow on the ledge and turned toward Armando's angular profile. Dad's skinny legs peeking out of cotton boxers looked like driftwood on beach sand.

"She was talking about you," said Orlando, suppressing a laugh.

"What did I do?"

"Nothing," Orlando said turning toward the wall and shutting his eyes.

"She has a problem with all men."

Two weeks into a job at a glass factory, Dad sliced open his right palm on the jagged edge of a sheet of glass. A few days later, immigration agents raided the place and demanded to see his work papers. He'd left them home, a lie. Fortunately, the agents didn't follow him home and he decided

not to risk a return to work. A week later, exactly one month after leaving Cuba, he was back in Guira and in the arms of my mother, who complained that, after the time wasted and expenses of the failed trip, they were back in “la misma mierda,” the same shit pile.

It took another year of scraping together money and several more letters to my now less-than-cooperative aunt before my mother finagled another chance to emigrate, this time together as a family.

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Buddhists speak of cause and result, the notion that everything that occurs, every action we perform, has its origin in what came before, like tracing the present moment all the way back to the Big Bang. This effect happens with personal traits as well, where a pervasive emotion like anger, fear or jealousy--demons in Buddhism--is passed from adults, to children, to grandchildren, across generations. Some of these recurring traits are physical like the skin around my nails cracking in winter, like my mother, or the mole I have just above my stomach like my father's.

In my family, there are character traits that have trickled across generations and have made their home in me--and unfortunately, in the case of least appealing ones, in my daughter--like a bear's cave in winter. Some are good, others not so.

I've inherited Dad's depression, manifesting at various stages in my life, after a move from Miami to Washington, DC, or a traumatic event like a miscarriage. But I also harbor his love of poetry.

When I was a child on summer afternoons, after he'd park his Ford truck in the carport and store his wrenches and other plumber's tools in a closet, he'd sit with me in the backyard gazebo he'd made with two-by-fours and scraps of metal screening. He'd recite décimas and tell stories--when he and some other young well-regarded poetas sang punto guajiro on Radio Quisa in Havana as teenage girls swooned outside, or when he beat up Corucho, his younger brother, who everyone thought was a little "flojo," touched in the head. Dad had good reason to be pissed after Corucho smashed the truck they'd recently purchased for \$300 from a guajiro into a cañaveral and blew out the motor, the metal hood crumpled like an accordion. The refurbished truck--they still owed \$250--was a total loss

and ended the brothers' dream of starting a fruit-hauling business. He'd punched Corucho to the ground, and hit his grown brother until he cried.

"I still can't forget the look in my brother's eyes," Dad says, growing quiet when he's done telling me the story.

My favorite tale--after the one about Benito Remedios--is about his cousin, Ramoncito, a police sergeant in Havana, got him a job as a policeman. During the two years Dad walked a beat and earned extra money from off-duty gigs like guarding churches or the Colón cemetery on Sundays, he bought a second-hand Smith and Wesson, six police uniforms handmade by a mulatta seamstress, and he had money left over to send home each month. In the 1940's Batista's policemen were targets for the student revolutionaries. A few blocks from the station where Dad worked, six policemen were gunned down in an ambush. Later, after the head of the police force was gunned down while eating dinner at a fancy restaurant, Dad got to thinking about his future.

After considering his options, he went to see his straight-as-an-arrow police sergeant to tell him he was resigning. The man gave Dad an icy look, and sputtered, "Resignation is for cowards."

"Well, then," Dad responded, wiping the sergeant's spittle from his cheek, "I'm a coward."

In Buddhism there is a fundamental belief in karma, the idea that an individual comes into physical life with character traits and environmental conditions that spring from past actions. A Buddhist friend explains Karma in terms of throwing a pair of dice. The final sum is contingent on a significant number of factors or influences--the day and time of the game, the swing of the arm, the mood of the thrower, the angle of the table, the smoothness of the surface, and an infinitude of other factors some obvious others not.

In a sense, we carry within us the karmic actions--and traits-- of our parents, our ancestors, and our communal history. Like Dad I once quit a good job at a The Washington Post because I decided to spend more time raising my daughter. Sleepless nights watching over a fevered child, school board meetings lasting until 2 a.m. and the crush of daily deadlines had fed my decision to quit. My colleagues, especially the female reporters in the newsroom, thought I was tossing my career out the fifth story window of the downtown newspaper building. Even my mother questioned my sanity. "It's such a good job," she groaned. "What if you can't find another?" After five

years of car pools and play dates I did find another job that took me in a different career direction.

I inherited much different traits from Mami. She comes from a long line of hard-driving women--although Mom never learned to drive--who do not know when to hold their tongues. Cubans call this "no tener pelos en la lengua," which translated means to not have any hairs on one's tongue. Hers is smooth as a baby's butt.

Once in the 1970's when we visited the Cuban Interests Section in Washington, D.C. to get travel permits to the island, Mami began snapping pictures with her Kodak Instamatic of the clerks behind the plate glass windows, the water cooler, the copy machine. A large sign above the counter said, "No se puede tomar fotos," photography prohibited.

A security guard materialized from the back room, demanding the camera. She resisted, muttering, "Comunistas, hijos de puta," but finally relented when he threatened to take her into the back office. The guard returned the camera a few minutes later after removing the film. I couldn't believe it when three months later our travel permits arrived in the mail. On several trips to Cuba with my mother, I've overheard her--I like to keep a

safe distance when we are walking down the street--loudly blaming "that cursed Fidel" when she can't buy eggs or toilet paper.

Tia Zoraida was not one known to hold back either. Once, when two of Fidel's milicianos came to the house to search for guns--grandfather was dead but his police pistol was hidden in a closet--she blocked the front door with her 4-foot, nine-inch frame.

"Que quieren?" she asked sharply.

"We've come to search the house," said one of the men, a sprinkle of adolescent pimples across his smooth checks.

"Forget about it. The only way you'll get inside is to come through here," she said spreading her legs apart and pointing with her right forefinger to her crotch.

My husband David likes to remind me that I am a lot like my mother. A few years ago in a restaurant parking lot in El Paso, I challenged two burley, oily truck-drivers with tattooed forearms as they were getting ready to chain my car to their tow truck. Before they could attach chains onto my rear tires, I shouted a few bilingual invectives: "Coño! How dare you touch my goddamned car!" I jumped into the driver's seat, gunned the motor, ran

over a parking embankment and sped off. My husband and two university colleagues watched the exchange in utter astonishment. "*No one* touches my car," I explained later.

On one of my trips to Cuba I was planning to interview dissident journalists. My mother and I were staying at a 50's era hotel near the University of Havana. I'd scheduled the interview with a woman and two men for 9 p.m., and planned to take a taxi to their apartment in Old Havana. A journalist who worked for the state news agency and had befriended us in the past few days conveniently showed up at our table just as mom and I were finishing our after dinner coffees. With 20 minutes to get to the interview, I pondered what to do. If I said goodnight, that we were going to bed, he would see through the ruse.

I decided to be direct.

"If I were to interview some dissident journalists while I am here," I asked calmly, "will I get into trouble?"

I could see the man flinch. He tapped the table with his index finger. "No trouble at all," he said, finally.

Recently, Mom accused my sisters and me of trying to control her. She claims we didn't tell her she had to put down a \$1500 deposit on a nursing home for Dad. She's found another for the same monthly price that didn't require a deposit.

"Mom, you were with us in the room when we discussed the deposit and agreed to pay it," I remind her.

"You were speaking English," she huffs. I distinctly recall turning toward her and explaining about the deposit in Spanish, I tell her.

When I become angry with her for being stubborn, David says, "Don't ever forget that without your mother you would still be in Cuba." Of course, he's right.

When Dad returned from his brief foreign adventure, he took to bed in the first of several severe depressions that incapacitated him for months.

No amount of cajoling or protests from my desperate mother had an impact on his glum mood.

"Think of your children," Mom begged. "Think of our future."

One morning Zoraida marched to his bedside. "Your boss says you can have your old job back if you want it." Two days later Dad climbed back on board the hauling truck, determined to remain forever a guajiro.

Mom had other plans. To her Florida was shiny promise, Cuba, a mirror covered in black mourning cloth. She wrote her aunt again, asking for help this time, not with money for a visit, but requesting she sign sponsorship papers on our behalf.

Carmen, still fuming over being out several hundred dollars on account of Armando, wrote back "Yes" after letting Olga know what she thought of her simpleton of a husband. Without telling him anything, Mom took a bus to a Chinese grocery man in San Antonio de los Baños and borrowed money for four tickets to Florida. When Armando was at work, she began packing suitcases, just as she would do later when we were children and she planned a summer beach vacation to Miami or Weekeewachie Springs without telling Dad where we were going until the night before the trip.

After supper one night, she broke the news. "Nos vamos."

"We are NOT going anywhere," Dad shouted--one of the few times in his life he's raised his voice to her. "I plan to die here."

At four-foot-nine in panty hose and weighing less than 100 pounds, Mom braced her spindly arms against the crooked dining table and leaned toward Dad, her contorted face coming within six inches of his flushed one.

"If you want to be buried in this shit hole that's up to you," she said.

"We are going. With you or without you."

Dad, of course, came with us.

This contradanza has played out between them for 60 years of marriage: Dad dragging his feet and looking back in time and Mom moving forward deliberately one or two steps at a time. Since adolescence she trained her aquamarine eyes on the North Star and kept them fixed there, even though sometimes the horizon shifted or moved out of sight. Dad would have been content to stay at home, like me sometimes. Mom reminisces about the past with a mix of detachment and awe, as if she were talking about the life of a long-dead relative.

At lunch recently, she and her sister Caridad, also in her 80s, remembered the forbidden *escotes*, bosom-revealing necklines, they wore as teenagers. Like schoolgirls sharing a cigarette in a school bathroom stall,

they giggled over flan and *cafecito negro*, recalling a small town dance they attended six decades ago in hip-tight revealing dresses before they married. "It came to here," Caridad, said, sweeping a brown spotted hand across the chest of her house dress to show where the neckline plunged on the satin sheath she wore that summer night 60 years ago. A talented seamstress since she was 14, Tia explained she had made two dresses, one green for Mom, one red for her, from a picture in a fashion magazine with the latest dress styles from the U.S.A.

"I looked fabulous," Carmen winked at me.

"I had to cover up," Mom sighed and explained that her boyfriend, Armando, my stick-in-the-mud father, insisted she cover her exposed bosom with a second hand fur stole he'd given her as a present.

Once inside the dancehall, she flung off the wrap and accepted a policeman's offer to dance to *Lágrimas Negras*, her favorite *son*. As she glided across the dance floor on the arms of the lucky officer, my father fumed in a corner. When Dad could walk, he would leave the room when Mom told this story. Now he stays silent.

"The policeman was such a good dancer," she said, taking a bite of caramel flan.

Later that night, she explained, she danced a different number with Humberto, her sister's dashing dark-haired boyfriend.

Once Mom witnessed her father try to shoot 15-year-old Carmen when he caught her smooching with a boyfriend in the backyard. Mom says she and Caridad grabbed his arm just in time to prevent his pulling the trigger. A month later, the high-strung Carmen ran away with her older boyfriend, a mulatto to boot, and later bore him two children--a gorgeous blonde baby with porcelain skin and ocean-colored eyes and a dark-haired boy who looked just like his grandfather. Neither child made it to age two. The girl died from an unspecified illness and the boy withered, despite the special diet of goat's milk, a condition now called failure to thrive. When Mom recounts this story, an uncharacteristic sadness creeps into her voice. "Your grandfather refused to go to their funerals," she sighs.

Another terrifying incident was when Antolin, Zoraida's irascible husband, almost shot my grandmother. Their daughter Mirta was a sickly little girl with sores covering her skinny legs and needed daily doses of a

curative jarabe. On one of Antolin's infrequent visits to Guira, he walked into the kitchen as the adult women attempted to shove a spoonful of medicine into her clenched mouth while they restrained her flailing limbs. Mirta was shrieking like a pig under a machete.

"Let the girl go or I'll shoot," said Antolin, pulling out his Smith and Wesson and pointing it at my grandmother's head.

The women backed away and Antolin scooped his daughter into his arms and carried her out of the house and to the military garrison where he stayed when he came to town. He returned her only after my aunt filed a complaint of abuse with the head of the garrison. Shortly afterward he was assigned to a faraway unit on the Western edge of the island.

Over the years, I've listened Mom's more pleasant childhood memories, such as how she bribed her father into letting her go to the movies by offering to wrap and package his handmade cigars, and if Zoraida went with her. It was at the Guira movie house that she first saw Mexican comic actor Cantinflas, the sexy Sarita Montiel, who Mom resembled, and Errol Flynn.

"Mami, remember when we arrived here?" I asked not long ago.

"Porque preguntas?" Why do you ask?

She knows I'm writing a memoir and gets a little testy now and again when I ask about the past. I persist.

"Remember when the sack broke and you dropped the oranges?"

Mom interrupts: "They were tamales."

I have always remembered oranges.

But, no, Mom insists they were tamales with trocitos de puerco from my grandmother's kitchen, tamales another Cuban staple like café con leche. I decide not to argue. What use would it do? Mom remembers tamales. To me that bag will always contain citrus fruit from back home, a symbol of our heritage no longer relevant and which we surrendered voluntarily upon our arrival here. There are oranges in Florida after all; they just taste a little less sweet.

Day 14

I take a walk down the mountain in spite of the persistent sprinkles and the ugly gray clouds, determined to defeat them. No pictures to take. My stomach feels queasy from my too-heavy lunch of left-over pasta with

garlic olive oil and cheese. Maybe peppermint tea will help. I miss ice cubes.

The entire day has unfolded like this, missing things and being dissatisfied.

This whole thing is a mistake. I sold myself a fantasy of a writer in the woods, like Thoreau, my *Walden* a memoir and an MFA.

I'm worried about the solar unit for my computer. It charges as slow as pouring molasses into a narrow-necked bottle and I have to baby it. At about 9 a.m., after meditation and yoga, I unwrap the long rectangular piece of plastic the size of a storage trunk with crisscrossing lines, embedded storage cells, and I carry it outside next to the clothesline, using rocks to hold it down flat. I connect one outlet of a 20-foot black electric cord to the plastic and the other outlet to black battery pack inside. I let it charge for four to five hours. At about 1 p.m. I disconnect the battery from the solar panel and connect the battery pack to the computer. It takes about two hours to charge the Mac, which translates, roughly, into two hours of writing time. At about 3 or so I plug the battery back into the solar collector outside, hoping I'll have about fifty percent juice by nightfall so I can write again some the next morning. At sunset I drag the unit inside and use the battery to recharge the computer. I don't think I've quite mastered the solar

choreography. I'm afraid of running out of juice. That would be a good excuse to go home. No. If I run out of electricity, I'll write in longhand.

Day 15

Last night I fell asleep thinking about how words fail to capture our experience. They approximate, simulate, tease us into thinking they are getting at the core of our experience but, in the end, they are at best phony simulations. Just as the words we use to describe perfect wisdom--indescribable, infinite, unnamable, emptiness, liberation, luminosity, etc--are simply symbols for what one can only experience. Which is why, perhaps, Buddhists try to convey the experience of nirvana by trying to get new practitioners like me to think beyond duality and achieve a state of mind in which the internal and external worlds melt into one--no subject, no object or someplace where subject equals object.

Day 16

I'm now aware of this quandary as I approach the memoir: Words, ideas, symbols fail to capture the essence of my story. I can relate the story

of my life and of my parents' lives chronologically, using a linear time-centered structure to convey the details and facts of what has happened to me in the past. But the experience of the life as it unfolded in time is something altogether different. You can't capture the sense of time moving. This is the moment-to-moment felt sense that evaporates moment to moment. A book I read describes film as empty moments, the minute an image flashes across the screen it's gone. I know no words to capture reality. I read yesterday how Gertrude Stein used words strung together nonsensically to show how words have no intrinsic meaning. The mind imposes meaning on them. So if I say or write Zita, Zita, Zita, Zita, I am showing how Zita is just four letters strung together signifying nothing. What is Zita? Who is Zita? She's certainly not me, I, mine. Buddhists believe the self doesn't exist. It is a false construct of the ego. Although I know there isn't supposed to be a goal, the goal is non-self, a canceling of the *I*.

Day 17

Why write at all? What's the purpose? Who will benefit? If experience is the only thing that matters why write about my family? I console or delude myself with this thought: Writing memoir is about loose ends, trying to connect dots like planets in a grade-school mobile. You move toward what you suppose is some sort of conclusion but discover instead unending new stars, galaxies, infinite universes, bardos. You recognize your imponderable condition—you are spinning in place and rotating around a sun that is itself rotating in a vast galaxy. The sun, your steady beckon, will some day be a dead star. You realize that there isn't ever going to be something solid and fixed like an ending.

Day 18

I tasted and smelled toothpaste for the first time today. The peppermint flavor tickled my tongue. Every experience here seems like the first one. Boiling water in the blackened kettle, washing dishes in cold rain water, figuring out the best way of disposing my little packages in the outhouse 20 feet away. I refuse to sit there. Avoiding the ants crawling on

the backboard behind the metal sink. Figuring out what to do with the stinking trash until Anje returns in four days to pick it up. I like watching how my mind solves each challenge posed by this more elemental life. Technology robs us of the pleasure of using out wits to meet daily circumstances.

III. Bardo of Meditation – Heading 1, H1

III

Bardo of Meditation

Now when the bardo of Samadhi-meditation dawns upon me,
I will abandon the crowd of distractions and confusions,
and rest in the boundless state without any grasping or disturbance;
firm in the two practices: visualization and complete,
at this time of meditation, one-pointed, free from activity,
I will not fall into the power of confused emotions.

--The Tibetan Book of the Dead

CHAPTER 2

LAGRIMAS NEGRAS

My grandparents' garden in Guira de Melena was lush with magenta, white and yellow rosebushes that Abuela Matilde watered by hand each morning with a battered tin can, then tossing a handful of corn to the excited chickens and rooster scratching in the dirt. Following a summer downpour, her rose leaves glistened like emeralds on silk threads. The backyard was both rose garden and mini finca planted with tobacco, coffee, rice, yucca and malanga. Abuelo sold the produce each day in the town plaza. This was during the last ten years of his life after he fell off a jeep and knocked his head on a rock—he was chasing a mulatto who'd stolen a bag of papas—giving him a good excuse to retire from the police force with a pension.

The half-acre also contained matas de plátano, oranges, avocados, guavas and figs all surrounded by a half-moon strand of slender palm trees visible in the distance over the garden fence. What to me then was paraíso

is now when I visit a scraggly tangle of weeds and dirt with a few diseased fruit trees and some skinny mud-caked chickens scratching the dirt for kernels of rice. On recent trips, my surviving relatives have placed a large cage in one corner where they lock the cat at night. During repeated waves of food rationing over the last two-dozen years, cats have shown up in neighbors' pots of ajaico stew. A woman friend of my family told me she developed parásitos after a year on a diet of sugar, water and white bread. I am thankful my relatives have replaced the wood-plank outhouse with an indoor commode and sink with money Mom has provided over the last few years. They now also own a Soviet-era black and white television set and a newer model refrigerator. During my 2006 visit with David, we joined them around the set in the dining room to watch Sabado Gigante straight from Miami, Fla. My cousin says they also stay current on the latest Spanish-language telenovelas shown in the states through a pirated cable signal.

Until I was four before our exile, we visited the ecstatic garden behind my grandparents' house each afternoon while Dad was away hauling cane and pineapple on Benito's trucks. After Olga and I awakened from our early afternoon naps, Mom bathed and dressed us, sprinkled our scalps with agua

de violeta, grabbed each one of us by the hand and walked two blocks to their house. While Mom gossiped on the front porch with Zoraida, I chased pollitos in the back and played among the rows of yellow and orange marigolds lining both sides of the house like a church aisle decorated for a bride. I spent blissful hours plucking flowers to make shapes and letters in the dirt, even a carriage for a princess. The petals released a slightly unpleasant odor when I crushed them between my thumb and forefinger, and I remember thinking it was sad that such a beautiful flower should emit such a foul odor. I cried once from rage when my teenage cousin Silvio slinked toward me and knocked me down. I landed on hands and knees, spilling the bouquets I had carried in my arms, and learned an inevitable lesson: even in paradise the ground shifts suddenly.

Sometimes, when Mom and Zoraida were not looking, my abuela slipped me a glass of batido de guayaba that tasted better than the Tootsie Roll pops I had later in Tampa.

An elflike 4 feet 6 inches tall, with deep wrinkles like craters lining her forehead and cheeks, Matilde she was in her early 50's when I was born, her sad brown eyes glued to the ground when she walked or addressed my

grandfather. Her feet were so tiny she had to wear a child's shoe. She never smiled, or so it seems because pictures we have always show her arms folded across her flat chest and thin lips in a downward tilt, although this may have been to hide her missing front teeth. She cooked three meals a day, cleaned house, heated a dozen buckets of hot water each day for bathing and washing clothes. She also mended and ironed her husband's khaki police uniforms, every piece of clothing, even underwear, and all the sheets, towels and pillowcases in the house, until her daughters were old enough to use the coal iron without setting themselves on fire. This had happened to my paternal grandfather's first wife, who died after she set her skirt on fire while she ironed. Dad tells the story of how this woman--is eldest sister's mother whose name he can't recall--ran out the front door of her thatched bohio one day with her skirt blazing like a Fourth of July cohete and yelling for help at top of her lungs. A campesino hoeing nearby managed to put out the fire with a donkey blanket. She was barely 20 when she died. This and many of Dad's other reminiscences about pre-Castro guajiro life--some days he ate only eggs he stole from the nests of wild birds in the fields; his grandfather's dream of buying the land he'd farmed

died when he lost his savings in the bank crash of 1924—undercuts romantic notions of idyllic country life presented in the old Cuban songs like *en mi bohio* and *romance guajiro*. It's no surprise that the revolution, masterminded and carried out by middle and upper class citizens as well as peasants, drew the active support of thousands of landless, illiterate campesinos that had grown tired of eating tierra.

Abuela's kitchen was her exclusive domain. "There will be plenty of time to learn to cook when you marry," she'd say when Carmen or Zoraida tried to peek as she chopped vegetables for sofrito.

For some reason, she brushed and braided her four daughters' waist length hair each day, although that stopped for Mom when she turned 15 and Matilde tricked her into getting her hair cut short. This episode seems strangely out of character for my self-effacing grandmother who my relatives say was a "santa." Dad's mother, Florinda, is also a saint, immortalized by him in a series of *décimas* praising her kind spirit and purity.

According to Mom, Matilde grew tired of having to comb and braid her hair each morning and began to hint--then insist--that she cut it short.

Mom said, “No,” she liked her waist-length blonde silky locks and, most importantly, the young men of the town thought long hair was a sign of great beauty and pre-marital virginity. One day Mom’s uncle Ramon, who lived in Havana with his wife, showed up unannounced. The elderly couple had no children and doted on their nieces. Tio invited Mom to spend a week with them in the city. The day before she was supposed to return home, the couple said they were “taking her shopping” but instead took her to a beauty salon where her hair was shorn to below her ears in the latest U.S. style and given a permanent. Mom cried in the car all the way home. When Matilde saw her daughter’s frizzy helmet of hair, her only comment was, “you’ll be much cooler this summer.” To spite her, Mom let her hair grow out and did not cut it again until she was on the U.S. side of the Caribbean Sea.

Another uncharacteristic incident involving Matilde occurred after Mom married Dad and confided her marital troubles to her mother. Instead of comforting her daughter, Matilde said simply, “con la cuchara que escogiste tienes que seguir comiendo,” a dicho that means you’ve got to keep eating with the spoon you’ve chosen.

Although my grandmother appeared submissive--a product of her patriarchal times--she possessed a hardness impossible to decipher now given how little we know about her past--only that her family came from northern Spain around the end of the 19th century and her maiden name was Yero.

Relatives say that when Matilde served her family dinner she never sat at the table with them but stood in the doorway to the kitchen in case her husband needed a glass of water or more plátanos. She ate standing in the doorway to the kitchen with a plate in her hands like a sparrow pecking at her small portion of food.

She also preferred the tail end of a loaf of bread--el culito del pan, she called it--and the burnt rice at the bottom of a pot. She was fastidious about cleanliness and kept a close eye on my grandfather to make sure he was bathing behind the bedroom door with soap and water from a palangana instead of just changing into clean clothes.

"We may be poor," she said, "but we are clean."

One of my few memories of Matilde is of her leaning over her estufa de carbon in a cotton apron, gray from too much washing, and stirring beans in a pot. I do not recall her ever kissing or holding me.

Often I think of Abuelo, a stern disciplinarian with his wife and children. To me he represented blue roscas of aromatic tobacco smoke twirling around his head and shoulders on languid afternoons as we listened to boleros, sones, and the news on his 40's era Phillips cabinet radio in the corner. He smoked half a dozen or more puros a day, and continued to smoke, without my grandmother's consent, even after it was clear his lungs were rotting like sea sponges.

I sift memories like this one as though I were picking through black beans. I've seen my mother, aunts and cousins on both sides of the Caribbean Sea sort through a few pounds of beans for ten minutes or more looking for any that are moldy, pockmarked, cracked, or broken. They removed the bits of straw, bean peels, sometimes even a desiccated beetle, not worthy of the bean pot. Once in a while a tiny stone escaped the housewife's eagle-eye inspection and landed in someone's soup bowl. Some say it's good luck to crack a tooth this way because it reminds us that you

can't know pleasure without pain, sugar without salt, lo bueno sin lo malo.
The same goes for memory, which evokes an idealized past forever gone.

**

Abuelo rocks me on his lap as we listen to a man's booming jackhammer voice coming from the tall box in the corner. He coughs and spits into a small bowl next to him. His eyes semi closed, from time to time, he rests his head against the wicker chair back. He has wrapped his left arm around my left shoulder and chest, like a lover's embrace. His large freckled hand rests on my thigh and I can feel its comforting warmth seep through my skirt. His right elbow rests on the wood arm of the rocking chair, and a puro is wedged between his right thumb and index finger. He takes a puff, then another. He coughs.

My ojos follow the rising smoke rings he blows as they float upward in large, small, and medium-sized circles and semi-circles, begin to expand and eventually evaporate near the ceiling. Each is different--a bruja, a dragon, a flower. I shut my eyes to enjoy the sweet woodsy aroma. When I bury my nose against his starched linen shirt, it smells of condensed milk. He

coughs again, this time louder. I hear wheezing in his bony chest.

Grandmother appears in the doorway.

"Simón, quieres un buchito de café?" Matilde asks if he wants some coffee.

"Sí," he shouts back, so loud I can hear the rattle in his chest.

She brings a miniature white teacup filled with thick black liquid. It smells like the lollipops sold at the parque. Abuelo takes the cup with his free hand and sits up. I watch him bend his head and bring the child-size cup to his lips. He blows on it, sips. When he's done, he licks the cup's rim with his tongue. He sighs and leans back.

"Don't let la niña drink from your cup," Abuela yells from the kitchen. "I don't want her to catch what you've got."

He takes another sip and glances toward the kitchen door.

"Aquí, linda," he says with a wink.

"Here's your little bit of coffee."

I blow on it like he did and take a swallow. It's the last little bit and my tongue feels grainy from the grinds. I lick my lips to catch the last little bit of sweetness. I smile and Abuelo and smiles back.

"Rico, mijita?" he says and I nod.

"Our secret."

To grandfather I owe my name, Zita. Actually it is Zita Maria, an acomodo, a sort of truce, between him and Tia Zoraida. Mom has told me this story many times and assures me it's verídica, quite true. Before she married Dad, her father asked her to promise she would allow him to name her first born.

Three months after the wedding ceremony, when she announced she was en cinta, Zoraida, being the oldest and bossiest, asked to name the child. Mom couldn't refuse her beloved sister and agreed without telling anyone else.

On the morning after my birth, Abuelo, an avid newspaper reader, ran out to the bodega near the parque for the day's copy of *el Diario De La Marina*. He read this paper, which was started in Colonial times as a daily log of ships arriving and departing Havana harbor, religiously and liked that it also listed the name of the Catholic saint or saints connected with the day of publication. That day, April 27, 1952, was Santa Zita day.

Simon rushed home from the town square that morning with a paper rolled under his right underarm

“Le ponemos Zita,” he shouted. “After today’s saint,” he added, jabbing at the name beneath masthead with his forefinger.

Zoraida was bent over the dining table spreading mantequilla on a slice of bread. She puckered her lips.

“Maria Elena,” she declared in an even tone of voice. “She’ll be called Maria Elena. Olga gave me permission.”

As Dad likes to say, se armó el escándalo, a huge fight ensued between my obstinate grandfather and his equally stubborn eldest daughter.

Zita.

Maria Elena.

Zita.

Maria Elena.

Zita.

The pitch of the argument rose and fell, like competing musicians practicing scales. It abated; it started again. Days passed, weeks, finally a month. I still didn’t have an official name.

Some family members rallied behind the Simon-Zita camp. Then were convinced to switch to the Zoraida-Maria Elena side. Mom put a stop to the squabble when I was about two months old. Without telling anyone, she took a walk with Dad to the municipal clerk's office and wrote, "Zita Maria," on the birth certificate. A fair compromise, she announced in front of the family.

Zoraida would have none of it.

"Maria Elena ven a comer," Zoraida said, when I was older, calling me to lunch. "Maria Elena come and give your aunt a little kiss. Maria Elena, don't touch the stove or you'll burn your hand."

Soon Mom's other siblings, Caridad, Carmen, their younger brother Orlando, Zoraida's children, Matilde, then mom and dad were calling me Maria Elena. Finally, even Abuelo, pobrecito, gave in. I was Maria Elena.

All this changed in Mrs. Moore's first grade class at West Tampa Elementary. As one of 30 students, some of them from Italian and Spanish families, I was the only Cuban immigrant and did not speak or understand English.

Mrs. Moore calls roll. I sit rigidly in the second row across from a chubby boy with baseball-sized cheeks who will help me learn English a few months later counting pennies and nickels.

"Zita," calls out Mrs. Moore in her impeccable Ohio English. The class is silent.

"Z - I - T - A," she repeats, saying each letter slowly this time.

Silence.

"Zita Maria Arocha," she calls out finally.

Oh, she means me!

I raise my skinny arm. Thirty pairs of eyes stare at me. I stare down at the tooth-marked yellow pencil on the scratched wood desk.

Wow. The teacher says I'm Zita. In America they must give you a brand new name. The old one faded until my adult trips to Cuba.

Two years ago, I walked into cousin Silvio's back yard in Cuba. As he sauntered toward me like an aging cowboy who'd just climbed off his saddle, he smiled broadly and blurted: "Coño, mira eso, Maria Elena."

He repeated this welcome--"Damn, look at her, Maria Elena"--as if

to make sure the person who had materialized before him really *was* me and not some CIA agent double.

I was always Maria Elena to his mother Zoraida until she died a few years ago on her childhood bed wearing a pair of Adidas tennis shoes Mom brought her from the states. She shared this same house in Guira with my grandparents her entire life except for a few days when she went on her honeymoon to Pinar del Rio with her soldier husband who she hated the minute she set eyes on him. Zoraida always exuded a sense of dashed hopes. After turning down a potential suitor for his daughter because he was too mulatto for his liking, Simon had insisted Zoraida marry Antolín, who had Spanish blood and he liked to play dominos with.

Keeping alive a fight over who gets to name a child must be ingrained karma in my family because something similar happened to my cousin, Tia Caridad's daughter, Rita. For the first 14 years of my life I called Rita by the name Zoila, everyone else did and I didn't know otherwise. Later, when she immigrated to Tampa with her parents and younger brother, she became Rita at West Tampa Junior High.

Perhaps my relatives intuited we would both need different names

later for our different selves--uno Cubano, the other American. I now have a Buddhist one as well, and there may be others.

Day 19

Writing a book is reaching the state of emptiness during meditation into absolute reality. You can't hurry the process. I wrote two whole pages this morning! That's an hour a page. If I write a 250-page book that's 250 hours divided by three hours a day of writing which is about 80 days, or three months of writing time.

Day 20

On my way to pick up more groceries this morning--mineral water, apple juice and soy milk--I wondered if it is possible to write a book without any "I's." Imagine a memoir without I, me, mine? An omniscient narrator relates a story about a girl/woman named Zita or Maria Elena, her parents and extended family. Perhaps just the prologue and final chapter would be in first person to capture the idea that life is a dream and we create our own story about who we are. We are narrators to our story--an idea that I think

circles back to a previous diary entry. I am the path I walk this instant. It would be difficult if not impossible to eliminate the “I” from this journal, although I could pretend I am someone else writing it. Perhaps I find it in this cabin, and pick up where someone else left off.

Day 21

I just did practice developed by Lama Tsultrim called “feeding your demons,” which is about visualizing your fear as a demon with physical traits and learning to release it. The demon was my grandfather and Cuba. He was black and emaciated with white hair, no teeth. He wore a diaper. When I asked what he wanted he said he wanted to lie down in a warm bed, next to a fire and eat. He said, “If you let me go I will let you go.” I didn’t want to want to and fought back tears. At first I resisted feeding him nectar from my body—a visualization you perform during the third stage of this practice—but when I began to imagine feeding him he began to dissolve and I had an image of him becoming part of the mountains and sky outside. Then I realized he had merged into the goddess Prajna Paramita, all-knowing wisdom, emptiness, ground of being. She told me that I could now access

him anytime I want to. All I have to do is meditate.

Day 22

Am I addicted to suffering? I keep Cuba alive by not letting go of my longing for her and everything else I've lost and am afraid to lose: the garden, Simon's lap, Matilde's batidos de mango y guayaba. In a dream last night, I was mourning the death of my father. I was in a public place with many dignitaries sitting on a stage. Someone close to me staged a eulogy to Papi and asked me to make sure I cried for the camera.

IV. Bardo of Death – Heading 1,H1

IV

Bardo of Death

Now when the bardo of the moment before death dawns upon me,
I will abandon all grasping, yearning and attachment,
enter undistracted into clear awareness of the teaching,
and eject my consciousness into the space of unborn mind;
as I leave this compound body of flesh and blood
I will know it to be a transitory illusion.

--The Tibetan Book of the Dead

CHAPTER 3

THE STRANGE MALADY OF EXILE

When I was 12, I walked the ten blocks from my little house in West Tampa to the neighborhood junior high school and my hands would sweat. Writing that sentence just now made my palms shiny with sweat. The perspiration began the second I stepped out the back screen door into the scraggly yard, past the rooster and two hens scratching for dried corn in the brown dirt, and through the wrought-iron front gate to St. John Street.

I'd wave curtly to our neighbor Nick across the street peering from behind his living room drapes looking for juicy gossip, and shout adios to Mamie and her grownup idiot daughter Rosie. Rocking away on their front porch every morning and evening, these next-door neighbors were unofficial sentinels for our Cuban and Italian barrio, with streets like mine, St. John, named after the biblical Apostles. My 15-minute walk along red-brick streets lined with hibiscus bushes and Florida palms took me west on my street (east took me toward a ramshackle house where a crazy man liked to expose himself to children) south on St. Peter for two blocks to W. Beach,

then north on W. Beach for one block to N. Albany, where A. L. Cuesta, my former elementary school, and West Tampa Junior High, where I attended, faced each other like giant goads.

Seeing the chain link fence and the low-roofed vomit-green concrete-block cafeteria beyond—I passed out once in this building while watching a documentary about the dangers of contracting gonorrhea—sent chorros of perspiration pouring down my palms.

The sweat became rapids pouring on the notebooks I carried in my hands, and down my skirt, legs, and bobby socks to my laced oxfords. As the sweat flowed as fast as a churning waterfall, my brain raced alongside it.

Why can't I stop them from sweating? Think of something, anything, to make... them...S...T...O...P!

The more I tried thinking of something pleasant—the heavenly rectangles of moist dark cake with one-inch-thick chocolate icing in the school cafeteria, the new Trixie Belden mystery I'd discovered in the library—the more my thoughts spiraled. *What if Dad stops going to work, loses his job?* Dad, who worked as a plumber, occasionally crawled into bed and refused to leave the house for days or weeks, ignoring my mother's pleas

that she needed him to work to pay the rent and buy groceries. The doctors at El Buen Público clinic in Ybor City diagnosed major depression and prescribed a series of shots of B vitamin, which kicked in after a few months of our twice-a-week family visits to the clinic.

What if our house burns down? Our pre-World I bungalow, built of wood slats and a tin roof for early 19th century immigrant cigar workers, felt like the heart of the swampy Everglades in the humid 100-degree-plus summers. Fortunately, the closest we ever came to a house fire was when the pressure cooker exploded and spread black beans all over the walls and ceiling. My mother was thrilled later when the insurance company paid for new paint for the kitchen.

What if the Russians drop the ... BOMB? This last catastrophe seemed especially real. We had lived through the terror of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis several years before, when the teachers at Cuesta Elementary had reassured us that if los rusos attacked, all school children would be boarded onto buses and taken north to Georgia. *What about my parents*, I demanded raising my hand. *What would happen to them?* Don't worry, the principal said. You and your parents will be reunited once the nuclear threat passed. I

was rightly skeptical having already heard the schoolyard gossip about the apocalyptic power of the bomb and seen graphic depictions on the 6 o'clock TV news that once Russia dropped la bomba--roads, buildings, schoolyards, our parents, even the flying Florida roaches--would be incinerated, *poof*, gone without a trace. I reasoned that after this certain holocaust, my sisters and I probably would end up in an orphanage or living with Midwestern Baptists who had never heard of Fidel Castro or Cuba.

As the perspiration poured, it left stains on my colored paper folders--blue, green, black, red, one color for each subject, history, English, science, math--and, over time, their frayed edges became ugly and useless as toothless combs. The stains from my sweat mixed with the ink and leached onto my palms and fingers. Red was my special enemy. By the time I got to first period homeroom my *palmas* were the color of pomegranates.

Ashamed, I hid my dye-streaked hands in the folds of my skirt, and prayed that the teacher would not ask us to write something in our notebooks and force me to reveal the foreign objects hiding in my lap. If she asked why my hands were like the bright red stripes of the American flag, what would I say? The red clay of Guira de Melena, where I was born, does not wash out.

I suspected there was something seriously wrong with me. Otherwise, why was I plagued by these fears? This out-of-control sweating and other physical symptoms like insomnia, sleepwalking, peeing in bed at night? If I wasn't physically damaged, I must be *mas loca que Juana*. This was my parents' expression from the old country for someone who is crazy. I knew I was definitely not like the other children my age whose parents didn't need them to interpret when the gasman came to collect or when there were teacher conferences at school. While the auditorium filled with smiling, cheering parents every holiday for plays and musical performances, my parents *never* left their working class jobs for a school activity, even if I was playing granny in the *Beverly Hillbillies* and got to show off by shooting at the audience with a rifle that produced real smoke. At that play, I remember scanning the faces in the audience and imagining Mami and Papi smiling in the audience.

I think I intuited then that my being different--the only Spanish-speaking girl in a class of whites and assimilated Italians just as in later life I was often the only Hispanic or Spanish speaking reporter in the newsroom--was somehow to blame for the overflowing swimming pools dangling from

the ends of my arms, the hard lump in my throat, the constricted breathing and heart pounding like a jackhammer. It wasn't until I was an adult and had a child of my own that I recognized the symptoms were products of childhood traumas stemming from losses.

I didn't dare tell anyone about my morbid thoughts or somatic symptoms--least of all my overworked and preoccupied parents, who in addition to holding down 40-hour-a week jobs also made tamales at home to sell out of Dad's station wagon on Saturdays. This side business brought in close to \$150 on good weekends and paid for lots of school clothes, binders, notebook paper and pencils. Why add to their troubles?

Around pre-adolescence I also began to suspect that If I said something to them or any other adult I would be sent away to the U.S. equivalent of Mazorra, a mental asylum in Cuba. My parents sometimes joked that so and so from Guira had done something crazy--shooting their spouse or eating their excrement--and their relatives had them locked them up in Mazorra. Something similar had happened to my prickly piano teacher Miss Marie, a spinster who lived with her bachelor brother, Mr. Anthony, and their elderly mother who spoke, rarely, in a foreign language like Polish or

German. Ms. Marie and Mr. Anthony lived in a bucolic, wood-frame house on a half-acre lawn with a half dozen giant oaks dripping Spanish moss. A sign in their yard said "Debussy School of Music," and the "school" was on Laurel Street, where my aunt Carmen lived in a postage stamp-size house after she had a major stroke and sold her boarding house and barbershop. Somehow my parents managed to pay \$10 a month times two so that Olga and I could take lessons on Monday and Friday nights. Olga studied with the moon-faced, kindly Mr. Anthony, while I was assigned Ms. Marie, who smoked cigarettes and rapped my knuckles with a ruler when I hit a wrong key. Although Olga dropped out after a month--Mom detected her lack of interest and decided to spend the money elsewhere--I trudged on under Miss Marie for two years, learning to play scales faultlessly and even *Clair du Lune*.

"Your teacher's away on vacation," Mr. Anthony said one day, which I knew meant Miss Marie had gone to the state mental hospital in Tallahassee and he would be my substitute for a while.

When she returned from vacation, Miss Marie would resume giving lessons. Fortunately, the raps decreased and her faded blue eyes looked less

dazed under the raccoon-shaped reading glasses that kept sliding down her nose.

Once, after an unusually long absence--I think she overheard me tell another student, "Miss Marie is back from the loony bin"— she dragged a chair next to mine as I waited in their sitting room for my parents to pick me up after buying groceries. Her eyes glowed mischievously that night--like tiny flashes from a sparkler.

"Do you know what they do at the mental hospital?" she said, in her quick low voice.

She explained how the orderlies tied her up and threw her Pall Malls in the trash. How the other female patients scratched and pulled each other's hair, or crouched alone in corners moaning for hours. At night, she said, describing her unadorned cell-like room that contained only a bed with iron railings and a single chair, she heard strangers yelling to be let out. While she told me all this, face turned white and the inside of my mouth began to feel like sandpaper.

Mr. Anthony, who was sitting in a corner near us, shifted awkwardly in a creaking overstuffed chair, his manicured hands folded in a knot on his

frumpy lap. He glared at Ms. Marie, muttering, "That's enough now, sis."

When my parents showed up thirty minutes later to pick me up and pay for the lessons, I flew down the rickety wood stairs and into their parked station wagon, convinced I would eventually end up like Miss Marie.

As I grew older, I began to suffer physical symptoms from what my mother calls *nervios* and what I have diagnosed as the strange condition of exile. I began to hyperventilate and faint from time to time, once in the school cafeteria over a plate of cold peas, a noun that sounded like "piss" to me and tasted awful. I hated the metallic taste of this American vegetable--Cubans use it to garnish--and every bite made me gag. After a while I learned to tell when I was about to faint and asked to go to the infirmary pretending I was sick so the nurse would let me lie down on the cot in the corner. An hour or so later, after the spell passed, I would ask to return to class.

When I was about 13, I became afraid that if I fell asleep I would *never* wake up. I begged Dad to stay up with me until I dozed off, almost always not until after midnight. I knew he would rise at dawn to be at work by 7, and felt incredible guilt as he held my hand and sat motionless as a

statue of the Virgin holding the baby Jesus on the edge of my twin mattress three or more nights a week--my sister slept less than three feet away but was oblivious--until I finally shut my eyes. I had other night terrors. The paisley curtains in the bedroom harbored monsters and scary creatures with giant jaws and spikes for arms. I'd stare at them as long as I could, reasoning that as long as I stayed awake they wouldn't move. This, I now know, is a common coping strategy for children who feel out of control; they convince themselves they can magically control their outer reality.

I saw a movie about Dracula with some friends and became convinced this fanged creature too hovered outside the Sears Replacement window above my bed waiting to suck my blood. I tried to fall asleep with the edges of the blanket scrunched up against my neck to prevent this from happening.

I feared a disembodied hand, waiting for me outside the bedroom door. I think the hand surfaced after I started to watch *The Adams Family* with my sisters on TV on Friday nights, after we returned home on foot with paper bags full of groceries from the Italian Imported Supermarket six blocks away. My parents even let us buy a stash of candy, *Sugar Babies*,

Red Hots and Sweet Tarts that we devoured in front of the RCA color TV.

The store owner was a middle aged Italian named Mauricio who befriended my parents, and gave us a free ham every Christmas. In the show, *Thing*, the butler, scuttled over lamps, books and furniture to answer the doorbell. My dreamtime hand bore a remarkable resemblance to *Thing*.

In spite of the fear generated in my mind from scary shows like *The Adams Family* and the *Twilight Zone*, watching TV was a pleasure my sisters and I cherished. While we munched on candy and watched our favorite shows from the red plastic sofas, Mom and Dad went into the unfinished back porch to make tamales. Mom shucked the corn, and ground the kernels with a metal contraption that locked onto the edge of a table. She fed the loose kernels into the top of the machine and turned the handle. This produced the main ingredient, the corn masa. Next, she fried up a batch sofrito consisting of onions, tomatoes, green peppers and garlic. Dad then took over, using his entire arm--the masa reached three-quarters up his forearm--to mix the aromatic sofrito into the masa. Next he set the pot--an empty lard can--of the mixture over a kerosene heater he'd converted into stove. I was mesmerized by the motions of his broad hand--well scrubbed

of that day's plumber's grease with a bar of Lifeboy--making circles in the thick masa until it turned pink. After it cooked for an hour, the mixture was ready--after midnight—my parents went to bed. The next morning they rose at 6 to begin parte número dos, part two.

Sometimes I'd help by separating the cornhusk leaves, smoothing out each one and placing them in a little mound on the table next to Mom. I'd watch her spoon the cooked masa into the cavity of four or five moist corn husk leaves, add a few trocitos de puerco, then use several more leaves to create a rectangle she tied with string, like a Christmas package. The tamales went back into the lard can, now filled with boiling water, and allowed to steam an hour. By 1 o'clock, the back of Dad's guajuita was stacked with pyramids of steaming tamales he sold to neighbors driving slowly down the sleepy Saturday-afternoon streets of West Tampa, crooning, "Tamales, tamalitos de Olga," a variation on the well-known song from prerevolutionary days called *Los tamalitos que vende Olga*. Neighbors and friends from those days still remember the succulent 75-cent tamales--\$1 after their fame spread--they purchased from the back of Dad's turquoise and white '72 Chevy.

Unfortunately the business, totally illegal, ended when a jealous tamale competitor reported my parents to the health department. The city sent out two men to inspect the unfinished back room, the lard cans and the portable heater converted into a stove. They were ordered to stop. While it flourished, the tamale business brought in \$150 or more a week, enough for school clothes and shoes, Saturday matinees at the Centro Español theater in Ybor City to watch the gorgeous Montiel who dripped sex from every pore and the mannish Maria Felix--Dad claims he drove her to the Remedios' plantation once and she cursed the entire way. Occasionally, we went on holiday trips to Six Gun Territory and Weekewachie Springs to watch the mermaids. These pleasures were the summit of our immigrant experience, a counterpoint to sitting on hard wood benches for church service on Sunday morning and evening, Monday and Wednesday nights.

One night I woke up and saw a hand the size of a tarantula on the closet door. It walked toward me. I screamed and ran to my parents' bedroom begging to be allowed to sleep on the shag rug next to Dad's side of the bed. Mom shooed me out.

"You're too old to be sleeping with your parents," she said through half closed eyes. When she fell back asleep, I sneaked into their bedroom and lay down on the floor. This became a pattern during preadolescence.

I suffered stomachaches that no home remedy--castor oil, Milk of Magnesia or occasional enemas--seemed to cure. Dad tried giving me belly rubs with coconut oil to see if that would help.

In fourth grade, my teacher Mrs. Rodriguez, who was from Cuba and spoke Spanish, asked us not to talk in class. She reprimanded me constantly because I was a chatterbox. When I stabbed a boy in the hand with a pencil--he had pulled my hair--she sent me to the principal's office. Worse than being suspended for a day, I agonized that the boy, who I had a crush on, was going to die of lead poison from the injury. When I returned to school the following Monday, I was greatly relieved to see Richard sitting in a chair, no longer behind me, but on the other side of the classroom.

One day Ms. Rodriguez had had enough. She asked me to come stand in front of the class. "Extend your arm and open your hand," she ordered, then she slammed a ruler against my palm a dozen times. I quieted down for a while then forgot about the punishment.

One afternoon after the bell rang, my mother showed up outside Mrs. Rodriguez' classroom. She invited Mom inside and asked me to wait in the antiseptic linoleum-tile hallway that resembled the lane of a bowling alley. The heavy wood classroom door had a square frosty glass pane at the top for privacy and I pressed my ear against the wood frame but didn't hear a thing. I went to pee and get a drink from the water fountain. When Mom was done we walked home in silence.

After supper a few weeks later, she asked me to slip on my shoes. We were going out and a neighbor waited for us outside in her car.

"Where are we going?" I asked, puzzled because we never went out on school nights, and certainly not without my father and sister.

"Don't worry," Mom whispered as she spirited me out the door. "You are going to feel better soon."

She told me she was taking me to see a babalao for a limpieza, a ritual cleansing that I knew about from back home. Babalaos cured paralytics and sordomudos, cast spells and lifted curses like the evil eye. When I was an infant one of my aunts pinned a tiny black fist, called an azabache, on my

gown to prevent harm. An azabache was said to protect babies from others' evil intentions. I found one recently in a jewelry store in the Dominican Republic and purchased it. I have a vague recollection of attending a Santeria ceremony with aunt Carmen when I was two or three years old. I stood in a circle of mixed race people who were swaying and chanting loudly to the beat of a drum. In the center of the circle, a hefty perspiring black woman dressed in white shook violently as she danced. Her undulating shoulders and hips hypnotized me. When I told her about this recently, Mom said I must have made this memory up.

The night Mom took me to the babalao, she told Dad we were going out to shop for school loafers. The santero lived in a shotgun bungalow in a neighborhood of dilapidated houses not far from our West Tampa house. When we arrived, he led me into an enclosed room no larger than a walk-in closet and separated from the sparse living room by a flowered curtain. He asked Mom to wait outside. The tiny windowless space reeked of cigar smoke and sandalwood. On a long table against one wall, candles flickered around two statues--a gold statue of la Virgen de Caridad, patron saint of

Cuba, and another of Santa Barbara, dressed in red with a chalice in one hand uplifted like a sword to slay dragons.

The table sat askew as if it might topple over, with various other objects on top: a neat row of cowrie shells, a brown coconut pod, a black pipe, a whole malanga, next to a small container filled with rice, and a glass filled with a honey-colored liquid in front of a half-empty bottle of Bacardi rum. I saw photographs in pretty frames but I was too far away to make out if the people in them were men, women or children.

As my eyes adjusted to the dark, I noticed a waist-high bed covered in white in the center of the room.

"Quítate la ropa," the man growls, his flabby exposed upper arms and skin the color of dark chocolate, his voice a deep timbre. A fat cigar protrudes from his fleshy lips like a black beetle.

He hands me a white sheet, and turns toward the wall to give me privacy.

I fumble with the pearly buttons on my white cotton blouse. The buttons too large for Mom's homemade buttonholes, I pull the blouse over

my head and toss it on the floor next to me. I drop my red pleated skirt, panties, brown-and-white oxfords, and cotton socks. The pile resembles a sand dune on the causeway beach. I wrap the sheet around me mummy style.

When I'm done, the man whirls around, drops to his knees and gently rearranges the folds of cloth around my torso, leaving my skinny arms and legs exposed. I hear clicks and realize it is his tongue striking against his large yellow teeth.

"Cierra los ojos," he barks.

I shut my eyes tight. The frigid air makes contact with my perspiring skin and I detect a sweet woodsy smell in the room. It reminds me of my grandfather's cigar.

The man utters slow, rhythmic, guttural sounds like the cries of an injured cat.

"Oni no iku, obi no aro mo ku ko. Oni no iku, obi no aro mo ku ko..."

The intensity of his chanting rises and falls. He varies the rhythm, and sometimes adds new words to the chant: Ochún, Yemayá, Changó, names of Afro Cuban deities I recognize.

He rubs an oily substance that smells like coco butter--what Dad uses to soften my chapped lips in winter--over my arms and legs in deft, even strokes. My eyelids flutter. I want to see what he is doing.

He stops rubbing. "Cierra los ojos," he snarls again. I hold my breath. My heart bounces against the sides of my chest like a volleyball.

He resumes chanting but in a different rhythm:

"Iya ye kuma kue yu mao! iya ye kuma kue yu mao! iya ye kuma kue yu mao!"

I sense he has moved near my feet and peer into the solid wall of darkness in the room hoping to make out something in the dark recesses--a shapeless form, my dead grandfather? A few times I think I see a pair of yellow eyes staring out at me. I blink and they disappear. My ragged breathing seems suspended outside my body, floating somewhere near the ceiling.

Should I jump off? Run for help? I can't move. An invisible pressure pins down my arms and legs, and my entire body melts into the table. I need to pee. Is that humming?

Heavy fog surrounds me. I am in the front bedroom of the family home in Guira. My grandfather's dead body lies on a table in the next room.

My right arm pinned behind my back, my head shoved into the pillow, I can't breathe. I struggle to turn my face, to gulp some air, but can't; the force pushing down my head is too strong.

I'm going to die. Please don't let me die.

I kick the mattress hard; my free left arm boxes at empty air.

The pressure on my head lifts, my right arm is free to move. I turn my soaked face toward the door and breathe in deeply, the scent of gardenias. Cicadas shrill outside the paper-thin walls, fill the empty space in the room. I open my eyes. A slight breeze caresses my wet forehead. I catch a scent of lime cologne. Does the curtain move over the doorway?

The santero sneezes and I open my eyes. He calls out to my mother in the next room.

"Vístete," he orders and I dress hurriedly, a buzzing inside my skull. I feel woozy, the floor liquid under my bare feet.

When I am done he leads me to the door and pulls the curtain apart, Mom on the other side, her face pale. I want to run and touch her, squeeze her arm, make sure she's real.

Mom pulls a five-dollar bill from her plastic purse and presses it into the man's oily palm. When we step outside into the balmy night air he gives us final instructions to place a fresh glass of water, half full, under my bed each night.

"Si queda algo, el agua lo limpia," the water will clean out any remaining spirits," he says.

Mom has always insisted that the idea for the babalao came from Mrs. Rodriguez who handed her a small piece of paper with the man's name and phone number. I understand why she has never told Dad about the babalao. He believes that Santeria is the work of sataná's and blames the onset and long continuation of Communism on the devilish practice--Fidel is said to consult santeros daily for guidance.

I wonder what he would have done had he found out. Divorce her? Somehow I doubt it. I've asked Mom about this strange episode in my

childhood and she denies it happened. I see no reason to challenge or blame her. My parents did the best they could, survive. Had they taken me to a psychologist, I would have been diagnosed with extreme anxiety disorder. But where's the source? Fear of death, loss, disconnection, poverty, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the time during the Revolution when Cuban soldiers pointed guns at my uncle's car and threatened to shoot if he drove an inch further into the courtyard of their military garrison. My uncle saved us by jumping out of the car, raising his hands in the air and shouting at the top of his lungs: "Don't shoot. There are women and children inside." The soldiers, perched like parrots on thick walls around us, lowered their guns. They let us go after Tio convinced them he had taken a wrong turn.

Is it none or all of the above? Some would attribute this to my karma from past lives. I could have been a prisoner in a concentration camp, an abused spouse, an incest survivor.

Even today, I continue to experience occasional panic attacks--over an impending deadline, while waiting in a doctor's office, just before going into a hospital room to interview a suspected murderer--but now I have coping

skills. One is meditation, the other medication. One day I hope meditation will be enough.

Yet no matter where I am, I feel dislocated, with roots as shallow as those of an untended tobacco plant. The cultivation of tobacco is tricky. Unless the plant is methodically pruned on a strict schedule, it produces auxiliary buds called suckers that suppress the roots. Unable to lay a deep root bed, the tobacco plant shrivels and fails to produce quality leaves for rolling into premium cigars. Without proper nourishment and pruning did I grow too fast in transplanted soil?

A few years ago, I made a friend, a Cuban transplant like me. Humberto was well into his 70's, and moved from Austin to El Paso to complete, in neighboring Juarez, a medical degree he'd started in Spain 40 years ago. He was upset, I learned later, that a professor at the Mexican school wanted to kick him out of the program because of something Humberto had said in class. He stepped into my office one bitter cold January day, spry as an athlete after a jog. He wore an elegant dusty-gray

cashmere coat that reached his ankles like a carapace; he reminded me of a migratory locust. He put out a smooth hand, the nails manicured.

“Hola, I’m a fellow Cuban.” I’ve met other exile cubanos but none like Humberto, with his sly smile, sharp wit, and twinkling brown eyes. I could tell he’d once been a chulo, a devil. Once, he brought me a handful of black and white photos of him showing off his slim teenage body in swim trunks beside the Olympic size swimming pool of the Havana Country club. He told me he was on his third marriage, to an American woman this time.

Humberto had belonged to a wealthy and politically connected family – an uncle was a Supreme Court judge and they often vacationed in Varadero beach with the Batista clan. At age 13 he fled Cuba on a ferry boat to Key West the same night the dictator Batista boarded a plane to the Dominican Republic to flee the advancing Castro rebels.

After completing high school in South Florida he left for Spain--where he was kicked out of medical school for circulating a poem calling the dean an enano, a dwarf--later returned to the East Coast, and finally settled in Texas where he married again and raised two daughters. He never returned to Cuba.

After I got to know him, he confided that within minutes of our meeting he could see that "all that was necessary to bring out the 'Cubanaza guajira' in me was to "slightly scratch" my skin.

Because our friendship was rooted in parallel memories of la isla, I decided to let him read an early chapter from my book. A week later, he offered to buy me lunch. We met at a busy Italian restaurant, less than a mile from I-10 in El Paso. "You get a lot of meal for your money," Humberto said as we sat down at the square table covered with a red-checkered plastic tablecloth, a red glass candleholder in the middle. I remember our table was separated from the others by a wood trellis partition with dangling plastic ferns.

After lunch--I order spaghetti and meatballs and iced tea; Humberto has a plate of spaghetti with clam sauce and a carafe of red Chianti--he grins and hands me a manila folder. Inside are four typewritten pages, with a few scrawls in pen on the margins.

"Read it," he urges, excited as a schoolboy about to go home for Christmas.

"OK." I begin.

"Unqualified, Unsolicited and Unwarranted Psychiatric Evaluation of a
Writer, for Whose Forgiveness I Beg: "

Little girl whose security is shattered by a new, hostile environment when forcefully adapting to the new realities of exile in an alien world, withdraws, as a snail, in order to maintain her sanity, which she barely manages to do throughout life at a substantial psychological cost. She only finds security within the walls of her dwellings, but immediately loses it every time she must leave them for another experience."

I stop reading and look up. Humberto sips his wine.

"There's quite a bit of truth here," I say, blushing.

"Go on," he says softly.

"Although it triggered the condition, the problem is not limited to the split from her native Cuba. It returns as an unwelcome, fearsome, terrible phantom everytime her frail, difficultly built security is broken by a compulsory move to a new, and therefore always-hostile place. The patient is hopelessly insecure and incapable of making her new habitats adapt to her, so instead, intimidated by them, she tries to cope as best she can, with

the accompanying psychological cost. Even when empowered and protected by family, her own intellectual and excellent professional level, and relative wealth, her psychological condition requires time in order to achieve minimal stability. Personality being extremely stable, she will always be highly insecure and, probably, will only unify her double sense of identity if she were to return to her native origins, which she so strongly identifies with.”

The patient is like a symbiotic hybrid, in with both sides overlap, and simultaneously, reject and feed off each other. However, she is really not much different from the rest of us Cubans, who for many years have not been able to return to the land where we first saw light.”

I look up again.

“Symbiotic hybrid?” I chuckle. “Perhaps I’ll use that in my book.”

Humberto nods and leans forward. He looks sleepy.

I shift uncomfortably in my chair when I come to the next part of the report:

“You are an extremely sensitive person, one able ‘to feel’ the differences between your natural (Cuban) and your American, acquired pragmatic and defensive selves. You have suffered most of our life from pre-

morbid paranoid schizophrenia--in this sentence Humberto has crossed out the "you" and written in pencil "we" above it--which means you have been only neurotic, having maintained certain contact with reality, versus psychotic which would imply a total disconnection with it. This naturally confuses you The main problem here is that, unlike most people, you are intelligent enough to realize all this, question its cause, look for potential cures, and express it so honestly and eloquently."

I look up and hit the table with my fist.

"Amazing," I say, half in jest, a little too loud for the thinning restaurant. It's now after 2 o'clock.

"You've explained *me*."

"My pleasure," he says, waving the waitress over for the check.

"You're not so weird after all," he says lowering his voice.

"You are Cuban, and only Cuban; your acquired self, like mine, has developed only for the pragmatic need for survival."

"But that's just part of it," I protest turning my face toward the strong sun streaming through the open screen door.

Humberto frowns and his light brown eyes twinkle as he adjusts the collar of his jacket.

"You are not really searching for home, Zita."

When he says this a movie image from *The Wizard of Oz* flashes through my mind: Dorothy back in bed in Kansas awaking from her coma, Toto beside her, surrounded by Auntie M, and her former companions in Oz, the Tin Man, Cowardly Lion and Scarecrow, now dressed in work clothes.

"What's home?" I implore.

"You have always been in Cuba; while just renting in the U.S."

"Renting implies temporary," I interject, shaking my head, adding:

"Temporary means return. I'm not so sure that's possible."

I grab my purse and walk out of the restaurant.

Day 23

I've decided to conserve energy by using my red notebook for journaling and using the computer to practice Chod just once each afternoon. Every time I play a twenty-minute CD it saps about 20 percent of

the battery. I need to save as much juice as I can for writing. I'm beginning to think I can make it until the 31st.

Day 24

During this morning's meditation, although I have covered my head with a white scarf, a bee buzzes around my head, ears and face. It even lands on my cheek near my nose and stays a while. I can't concentrate, and try to recreate a previous meditation where I visualize myself passing through a narrow back doorway into emptiness. I suddenly think of Troma, a female demon that tries to scare Machig. Instead of giving in to her fears, Machig tames Troma by feeding her with her body and blood. I imagine myself feeding Troma. I offer up my body, heart, limbs, head, and blood, then I feed her a little girl, me, at about age one. I say, "here, take her," hand Troma the child and she accepts my offering with glee. As I watch Troma devour the child, I feel sad; a tear springs in my eye. Then, I disconnect from the scene and watch without emotion. Once the child is gone, I absorb Troma and the remaining blood back into myself. The timer goes off and I notice the bee is gone. When I open my eyes they gravitate to a dark spot in a clump of trees in the distance.

As I fall asleep tonight I have this vision: I push a blank book out into the universe and say, "here, you take it. It's yours to finish."

V. Bardo of Experience – Heading 1,H1

V

Bardo of Experience

Now when the bardo of dharmata dawns upon me,
I will abandon all thoughts of fear and terror,
I will recognize whatever appears as my projection
And know it to be a vision of the bardo;
Now that I have reached this crucial point,
I will not fear the peaceful and wrathful ones, my own projections.

--The Tibetan Book of the Dead

CHAPTER 4

LAMENTO CUBANO

Our first home on Union Street was an unfurnished shotgun duplex with paper-thin walls, a short block with two corner bookends: a missionary church on our right and West Tampa Public Library to our left. We moved in the same day we moved out of Tia Carmen's rooming house, just three weeks after we landed in Florida.

That day Mom hung over the rail of the upstairs landing outside Tia's front door waiting for Dad to arrive from his job at the roofing company. Before he took one first step up, she broke the news.

"We're moving," she yelled down. "Come get our suitcases."

As Dad mounted the stairs to retrieve our three scruffy bags, Mom descended the sagging staircase with my sister and me in tow. Brushing past him, her brown handbag swinging wildly at her side, she huffed, "Tia es imposible." Aunt Carmen was impossible to live with.

Carmen had various rules for her just-off-the-boat relatives, including that we were not to open the fridge after dinner.

She appeared at 3 a.m. the night before in the kitchen as Mom reached into the freezer for some hielo, ice.

"What do you want?" Carmen barked.

"Ice," Mom said, startled. "For the pain in my gallbladder."

"Make it quick. You know the rules."

After feeding us café con leche and bread the following morning, Mom grabbed her purse and us and, without saying a word to Carmen, headed south on foot along Howard Avenue. As she approached the intersection of Union Street she noticed a white sign in English taped to the window of a black-and-white clapboard cañon. Cañon is Spanish for the typical Tampa cigar workers' shotgun house, built as a single line of rooms lined up like dominoes--living room, bedroom, bedroom, dining room, kitchen--and sandwiched between the front porch and postage-size yard. Our cañon had been divided down the center into two apartments.

Mom approached a neighbor in an orange housedress rocking on her porch.

"What does the sign say?" Mom inquired.

"Se alquila, for rent."

"How much?"

"Five dollars a week."

"Where's the owner?"

After talking the immigrant Italian immigrant landlord into accepting \$5 up front, and \$15 three weeks later Mom walked back to aunt Carmen's to let her know we were leaving that day. Tia refused to talk to her the rest of the day, but grudgingly offered to let her take the crib she'd bought for my infant sister.

"The floor's no place for a baby," Carmen fumed.

Our first night in our new home, we curled up on a few blankets on the wood floor of the living room next to my sister in her crib. The next day, our next-door neighbor, Cuca, a single mother with four sad scrawny children, gave us a box of used dishes, pots and pans.

We took in a boarder: Mom's brother Orlando, who had lived with Carmen a few years before we arrived, and was tired her intemperate barbs-
-"ni baila ni come fruta," Carmen huffed under her breath, meaning Orlando was a good-for-nothing loafer.

Orlando worked in a baseball factory and drove a '58 Chrysler convertible--he lost it later when he was laid off from the baseball factory. He also owned a laminated bedroom set he'd purchased on installments at an Ybor City furniture store. He shared the second bedroom of our (to us) spacious bungalow for a few years until he went to Cuba to meet and marry Elda and bring her back to Tampa. A month after our move to Union Street, we too had beds and living room furniture purchased at the same store. A year later, my parents bought a black and white TV and a 14-year-old black Ford sedan. There's a picture somewhere of Dad in dark glasses leaning against the hood.

Unlike my memories of Cuba which are sensual--the smell of caramelized sugar, the crimson of lodo on my white dress after a neighbor girl pushed me into a mud puddle, the ache from a shard of glass buried deep inside my armpit--the early Tampa ones are buoyant as dust mites riding on air. A part of me wants to forget, and to retrieve them I must sink my hands deep in humus and loam and dig them out one at a time like pupae of a Death's Head Moth. On occasion a memory from childhood floats by like Tinkerbell in a cartoon, triggered by the scent of a Macanudo cigar, a

bolero playing on the radio, a woman's red fingernails sliding across a car seat reminding me of my mother's perfect manicures.

I call these sense impressions. The smell of bleach still takes me to the immigrant clinic with polished tile floors where we rushed my hemorrhaging mother one night; the glow of light through a red curtain makes me recall the fuzzy red blanket hung over a window to block the sun from my measles-weakened eyes; a single man in a truck at a stop sign brings back the time I was seven and raced home heart pounding after a stranger offered me candy to climb inside his cab.

Some memories are more feeling than substance: I am deeply hurt when a neighbor girl, much older than I am, takes me to a birthday party and later complains to my mother that I have no manners because I opened my mouth to speak when I was chewing cake.

Or the humiliation I felt the time Aunt Carmen chastised Olga and me for pretending we were speaking the language of Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse on TV.

"Escucha, tia," I cried. "We are speaking English!"

"Basura," Carmen grumbled. "You're speaking rubbish."

Does a cesta, a bushel, of childhood memories like these from Tampa and the ones from Cuba comprise a self? Would I be *me* without these memories? For the most part we think our experiences make up who we are, in my case, a teacher, a wife, an exile. Because I am all three and more, simultaneously, which one is real? Are none of them real? As I approach 60 I grapple with the Buddhist conundrum of how to let go of attachment to a sense of self when I've lived life thinking *I me mine*. Detaching from ego is still a foreign concept for my dualistic mind that continues to insist on two childhoods, one Cuban, the other American.

The first day of first grade is like a thick line running down the center of a face, one side red and the other white, like a mask of the afro-Cuban diety Yemayá. After that day I made a distinction between "true" self and exile self.

As Mami walks me to a classroom down the chalk-and-pine-scented first floor hallway of the brick school building I am frightened. Mom has parted my hair down the middle of my scalp and twisted my unruly curly blonde hair into two ponytails. She has tied the ponytails with bows of wide

green ribbon. I wear shiny black patent leather Mary Janes, and smell of agua de violeta, like in Cuba.

Mami and I pause in front of the classroom door where a tall blonde lady greets us. Mami nods as the woman bends over to give my head a sharp little tap with her elongated red-tipped fingers. Angular with a little cap of short-cropped hair, its blunt angles framing her creamy white face, her eyes are turquoise like mine, she smiles.

"You are the Spanish girl," blonde lady coos. "Welcome."

With a wave of her right hand, the woman points my mother toward the front door of the school at the end of the hallway and away from me.

"There's no need for you to come inside, Mrs. Arocha," the blonde lady declares and takes my limp hand into her broad one. I turn to look at Mami, who seems pinned against the classroom door like a cardboard Thanksgiving turkey, a frozen smile on her Greek-like features.

The blonde lady gives my shoulder a little shove and guides me to a desk in the first row. She makes a sweeping motion with her hands. I am supposed to sit down. She says something I do not understand. Then she is gone.

I strain to peek outside the doorway, hoping to catch a glimpse of my mother, but cannot see past the doorframe. Donde está Mami?

I hear sharp, shrill cries outside the door, and scraping sounds as if something were being dragged across the wood floor catch. The cries become wails that grow louder, like a fire-truck siren.

"Now, now, Donny come inside you will not need your mother," says the blonde lady appearing in the doorframe looking flushed.

She backs into the classroom pulling on something ... I can't see what... until ... finally... I catch a glimpse of her hand latched onto the forearm of a pudgy boy with short-cropped hair that reminds me of porcupine quills.

The boy tugs in the opposite direction with all his might, trying to free himself from the woman's claw-like fingers clasped around his puffy arm. He is sobbing, deep echoing sobs that seem to pour out of his chest as if from a mineshaft after an explosion.

"I want. . . my mo. . . my. . . I. . . wa. . . nt. . . my....mo. . . om. . . my. . . "

The blonde lady will not let go of Donny's doughy arm. A small-boned dark-haired woman with a tight smile and embarrassed-looking brown eyes appears in the doorway. This woman makes a slight movement toward the struggling boy but the blonde lady waves her away.

"Leave," she shouts, still pulling on Donny.

The brown-haired woman freezes, her lips parted.

"The best thing you can do for your son is leave *this* classroom *this* minute."

Donny's mother backs up three feet, turns around and runs out the door. As the sound of pattering on wood fades, blonde lady drags the boy behind a portable blackboard at the front of the room.

Above the blackboard, her upper body bends toward Donny like a sand crane picking at shells. His stubby legs and scuffed tennis shoes with untied laces resemble wet strings of spaghetti beneath the blackboard.

If I breathe, everything around me--the sobbing boy, the irate woman, the other students, even the pale sunlight streaming across our desks from the tall windows--will shatter like a picture window struck by a

tree limb during a hurricane. I see sudden movement behind the blackboard.

The woman's shoulders and upper arms shake forward and backward, fast, faster, fastest... as if she were rattling marbles in a cup or a jug of chocolate milk. Beneath the divider, the boy's legs thrash in sync with her shaking. Like an unraveling old-fashioned top, his wails slow and soften, imperceptibly at first, then subside. Several minutes later, the blonde lady and the boy emerge from behind the divider. With one arm draped over the boy's limp shoulders, she walks him--his chin sunk into his chest-- down the middle aisle past us to a seat at the back. He whimpers as he sinks into the desk.

Returning to the front, the blonde lady straightens her back like a Barbie Doll, adjusts her narrow shoulders to reposition her pink cardigan and smooths her skirt with open palms. She trains her blue eyes like searchlights on 30 motionless children. She coughs lightly.

"I am Mrs. Moore. Welcome to first grade."

She taught me the letters of the alphabet, the Pledge of Allegiance and a poem--*The Tree* by Joyce Kilover--that we'd recite outside once a week in front of the flagpole.

One afternoon that first year of school I understood English without having to translate in my head. I was sitting across from a boy whose name I can't remember only that he had chubby fingers. We play a counting game with pennies, nickels, dimes and quarters. Mrs. Moore called out 16 cents. I began to count, *in English*, "ten cents, five cents, one cent – a dime, a nickel, a quarter." The boy smiles; I smile back.

By the end of first grade, my diction was just like my teacher's unaccented Ohio English. To this day, new acquaintances marvel that I speak with a clear Mid-western accent, no trace of Spanish. A few prospective employers, one an editor at a major metropolitan newspaper, took one look at my blonde hair and blue eyes and exclaimed: "You don't look Cuban." They were expecting a short, plump coffee-colored Cubana with a Ricky Ricardo accent. I explain, trying not to sound too condescending, that my ancestors were from northern Spain--thus my light eyes and fair skin--and I learned English at age six, a magical age during

which children acquire a second language with the ease of a native. Several times I've been in restaurants in Miami or Madrid, and overheard customers commenting about me in Spanish. I saw the shocked look on their faces when I glanced their way and began to speak in flawless Spanish to my tablemates.

Once I learned to read in second grade I visited the school library each day after classes. I checked out as many books as I was allowed to or could carry while walking ten blocks home, returning the next day for a new batch. By fourth grade, I had read Martin Luther King's *Why We Can't Wait*, *Little Men*, *Little Women*, *Tom Sawyer*, the *Bobbsey Twins* series and the entire collection of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. By age nine I'd graduated to adult section of the public library.

The matronly librarian grimaced when she saw my selection of books and tried to steer me toward the children's section. When she wasn't looking I'd hide among the adult aisles for hours and thumb through dusty tomes looking for the ones that seemed interesting or racy. She squinted as I tiptoed toward the counter with a dozen or more hardbound volumes from multiple disciplines--music, history, geography, and assorted romance

novels--in my arms. One memorable 500-page novel told how two hermit brothers filled their house with newspapers until one accidentally set the house on fire and died and the other was taken away to an insane asylum. The librarian must have been appalled by my gown-up selections.

"That's an awful lot of books," she said, demurely, while I starred at the floor, hoping she wouldn't remove any of the books from the foot-tall stack.

"Are you sure you can carry all these home?" I nodded yes, my mouth salivating from the anticipated pleasure of having 24-hour access to this treasure, and follow her hand with my eyes as she pressed the red date stamp on the back page of each book. Each click of metal on paper represented an ecstasy, another voyage into a soon-to-be entered void.

Mom worried I was reading too much. After school, curled in an overstuffed rocker, a gift to us later on from Tia Carmen, I read until Mom asked me to set the table. After helping wash the dishes, I'd read until bedtime. On weekends, I spent 10, 12 hours in my rocking chair, with a beige nubby upholstery that reminded me of an outgrown baby's blanket,

preferring books to playing kickball with the neighborhood kids who begged me to join them.

"Te vas a enfermar," Mom scolded. I was going to get sick from reading. She was convinced the reading was upsetting my stomach and making me nervous at school.

She tried to limit me to one hour after school and 30 minutes after dinner.

But because she didn't come home from the Tropical Garment factory until 5 or later and then went straight to the kitchen to fix dinner, I ignored her and continued to curl up in the chair, which was located in a choice of the TV room next to the kitchen. There was always a two-foot pile of library books on the floor at my side.

One day I walk into the house after school and my chair is gone.

I wait for Mom to come home from the factory.

"Where's my chair?" I demand.

"I sold it," she says.

"Why?"

"We need the money."

"How much?" I moan.

"Fifty dollars."

"Bring back my chair," I yell, probably the first time I've ever raised my voice to her.

"Hecho y derecho," she says and slaps her hands together. That was that. Later, when I refuse to eat my plate of food, she sends me to bed. I couldn't sleep thinking about my vanished chair, which to me had an invisible map of Cuba sewn into the fabric. What was next?

I think back on that incident and recognize the futility of my mother's gesture. It was as if selling the chair would erase the widening gap between my life and hers, still tethered to the old ways. There was no stopping the assimilation of her children. As far as she was concerned, each book I digested separated me more from her, from them, and reinforced their irrevocable exile.

Dad took English classes at night at a vocational school, but never became more than conversationally fluent; with a factory job and three daughters to raise Mom never mastered English's tenses or difficult to

pronounce guttural consonants so different from her native lilting romance language. English, like an archangel, blocked the door to the English-speaking world with a flaming sword, while I'd already made it safely to the other side. I remember Dad once chastising me for listening to a Beatles record because he thought the singer was saying four-letter words. "No, Dad," I explained. "He's saying 'twist and shout.'" Still, he shook his head.

After I lost my chair, I found other places to read--the school library after class let out, under the backyard orange tree out of sight of mom's kitchen window, and behind my closed door bedroom door. As the oldest, I became the official English interpreter for English documents, and translating when the postman--"el Americano," mom called him--knocked--or the gasman--"el del coco pelado" because he was bald--came to read the meter. When salesmen called I answered the phone: "Sorry, my parents don't speak English, can I help you?" An exception was the Spanish speaking man who came to collect our monthly membership to El Bien Público medical clinic in Ybor, where we always went when we got sore throats or sprained ankles.

I translated at school conferences. I helped Mrs. Caruso from third grade explain to Mom that my sister Olga was going to fail because she was not doing her homework. From that day on, I had to sit beside her at the kitchen table after school until she finished her multiplication tables and answered questions about the capitals of the 50 states.

Once, Mami asked me to go with her to the red brick building where she worked just a few blocks from another house we rented on Pine Street. The building, a former cigar factory, cast an everyday shadow almost as far as our bungalow.

Her boss Sue--my mother pronounced her name *Suit*--had decreed that the seamstresses, most of them immigrants like Mom, had to increase the number of jeans they produced per hour. Mom worked a serger finishing off the side seams of the pants and took pride in the tight stitches of her straight seams.

As I stood between Mom, sitting at her machine, and the lanky Suit towering over us, Mom asked me to explain why she was having trouble meeting the increased quota.

"My mother says she doesn't like to hurry," I said, my hands shaking.
"She likes to take a few extra minutes to do a good job."

"Tell your mother we have quotas to meet," Suit said dryly. "Tell her she has two weeks to increase production or I am going to have to let her go."

"Dice que tienes que apurarte," I told Mom. Hurry up.

Mom lowered her head and muttered under her breath:

"Sonafambich."

"Mom says she will try her best," I said.

Day 25

I just worked on the demon of resistance to completing my book. He manifested as a creature half-bird and half-human, also half dead. First he said he wanted my life force, my energy but then he said he needed me to let him go so he could finish dying. I felt resistance on my part to letting him go. When I asked how he would feel if I let him go, he said at peace and

released so he could complete the process of dying. I then visualized my receiving green light from the universe--Tara--and transmitting it to him. He slowly began to fade and transformed into tiny bird inside a bright light and then it disappeared. Birds began to take his place and when I asked who they were they said "friends." Then a bear came out of the trees and joined the birds. He said he was my ally and promised to give me courage and confidence for my writing. He said he couldn't stay but will come whenever I call him. With that he disappeared back into the woods.

Day 26

We are mental processes unfolding, one thought tumbling into the next. The bardo is about what happens to that consciousness once our physical bodies die. Right after I finished washing my hair a while ago I smelled marigolds. The phantom scent lingers on my fingertips. That is the flower I associate with my grandfather's death. The day he died, I played with marigolds in the garden until my grandmother called me inside. I made a carriage with them until my cousin pushed me in the mud and they scattered like broken matchsticks on the dirt. I will always associate that day with marigolds. This

retreat has been a bardo and I am about to be born as something else.

When I was thinking of this yesterday I visualized a wolf but that didn't feel right. This morning at meditation I visualized a chubby black baby instead. I still am not quite sure what will manifest after I leave.

At meditation--can't remember if it was last night or this morning--I had an intense feeling of wanting to merge and lose myself in everything out there. I didn't feel bliss, like some meditators say they feel from time to time. It was more a sense of expansiveness and inner freedom. I felt joy and relief at being released from the incessant thinking that goes on in my head, all the daily concerns of eating and washing and writing and planning. I think these feelings arose after I let my mind wander into the future and what I might be able to do at Tara Mandala and Lama Gyurmed's dreams for an art school and a program for helping the dying go through bardo. I'd already built a cabin for my self and an art school (heck, we could also teaching writing in a Buddhist context) on the parcel of land that has the meadow right before the entrance to TM. I was going and going and going and then I stopped and let them all float away like fuzz on a baby bird. That's when I

felt such joy at being liberated from all my astronomical projections. After letting myself experience the joy I began to think of David and Miranda and my parents and my family and school and my web project and how I might someday help this place. Then it clicked: the compassion toward others that Prajna Paramita talks about means we seek liberation not for ourselves but to help others who suffer like we do. I feel joy when I help others, whether it is helping Miranda by discussing her writing or helping a young person land a job or internship. It takes courage to sacrifice the demands of the ego to help another person.

Along these lines, as I was eating granola this morning I got a spoon full of almonds. They were too many to each at once and I had to chew them one at a time in my mouth. That gave rise to this thought: when it comes to a dream about doing something that means a great deal you have to approach the project one almond at a time. That way you do not take on more than you can chew (funny!) and savor the flavor of each morsel. It brings to mind the phrase living intentionally.

Later, as I lay on the floor doing yoga, I heard rattling outside the open French doors. I got up and saw a brown bear with his nose stuck in the

empty cooler I'd placed outside to air out. I tiptoed toward the door and began to yell at the top of my lungs. The startled bear took off toward the outhouse. I will keep the doors shut from now on.

VI. The Bardo of Becoming – Heading 1, H1

VI

The Bardo of Becoming

Now when the bardo of becoming dawns upon me,
I will concentrate my mind one-pointedly,
and strive to prolong the results of good karma,
this is the time when perseverance and pure thought are needed,
abandon jealousy, and meditate on the guru with his consort.

--The Tibetan Book of the Dead

CHAPTER 5

CANDELA, MUCHACHOS!

I met maestro R on my first trip to the island in 1979—at least I think it was 1979 because time has erased the chronology of my visits, each trip blending into the next and making me wish I'd kept detailed notes on each one. I don't use his real name because he asked me not too after our first encounter got him into trouble with the Communist authorities.

R taught history at the high school in Guira and was a close friend of the mulatto family who lived across the street from Tia Zoraida and her family. These neighbors—their house faced ours less than 20 yards across the muddy road—celebrated birthdays, weddings and funerals with my family. The friendship reached back more than 50 years to the time my grandfather retired from police work and moved with his wife and children from the nearby rural hamlet of Gabriel to Guira, a slightly more sophisticated town with a plaza and a cathedral.

The two families knew intimately the daily routines and habits of the other: what time the husband left for work and returned home at night;

which daughter had started her menstrual cycle; what teenage son was hanging out with the wrong crowd. They were so close they even knew my grandfather's pistol was buried in the backyard after the revolution.

One day during my second trip to Guira, cousin Silvio mentioned that a friend, a teacher, wanted to stop by to meet me.

"He's never met a reporter from the U.S.," Silvio said, excited.

"He's got a lot to tell you about the Cuban education system."

I said I looked forward to meeting R because, in addition to visiting my family, I intended to write a few articles about Cuba for my newspaper. Education could be a good story topic, the teacher my first interview subject.

He stopped by one weekday afternoon after school, his white guayabera drenched in sweat from the mile-long walk on mud-caked streets to my relative's home. A short, stocky man in his 30's, with a sincere smile, soft palms and gentle manner of speaking, he'd studied history at the University of Havana and planned to return at some point for further studies. When he knocked, my aunt was in the kitchen cooking. My mother and Mirta were out visiting. The only other person in the house was Silvio.

The teacher and I sat on rockers facing each other in the half dark living room--someone had shut the front door and drawn the shutters. I mainly listened as he explained how he was forced to teach history only from the Revolutionary perspective--nothing about U.S. or world history--from government-mandated text books; how young children were denied milk after a certain age; how teenagers were yanked from the classroom each spring and trucked to coed government camps to work the sugarcane harvest. He spoke in rapid-fire Spanish and several times I asked him to repeat what he was saying so I could write down it down in my notebook. We chatted for perhaps two hours--taking a break once for coffee. When he got up to leave, he shook my hand and thanked me.

After I returned to Miami, I wrote a story about agrarian reform that featured a thriving campesino family that supported the Revolution and another that opposed the system and was struggling to grow enough to eat. I thought the story was balanced, but it provoked the right-wing radio commentators, who called me a "Communist." Mom heard the talk show in Tampa and called right away to find out why they were calling me names over the radio. She and Dad were not happy that I'd gone to work for a

newspaper most exiles considered a propaganda tool for the Cuban government. After the story ran, my editors also received various irate phone calls from right wing Cubans. The outcry may have been why I shoved the notebook with my interview with the teacher into a drawer and forgot about it.

Four years after this incident, I returned to Guira with Mom, this time not to work but just to visit. The taxi driver who drove us to Guira from the airport was a loud-voiced middle-aged woman who hung around drinking coffee and chatting even though we'd already paid her a generous fare in U.S. dollars. It was obvious she wanted us to open our fat suitcases to reveal the gifts we'd brought our relatives. Returning exiles call these bags *gusanos*, a pun on the fact that they left *as* gusanos and now return *with* gusanos. Cubans have a perverse sense of humor.

As Zoraida poured us coffee, a young black woman I didn't recognize walked in and introduced herself.

"I'm the neighbor's daughter," she said. "My mother has something for you."

When she grabbed my elbow I sensed she wanted me to follow her right away.

Inside the house, another woman greeted me, this one in her 70's and vaguely familiar. Motioning for me to sit on a twin bed covered by a brown bedspread at the edge of the living room, she disappeared behind a doorway covered by a flowered yellow curtain. When the older woman emerged she handed me a sealed envelope stamped on front with "por avion," my name written in long hand.

"Léela," she ordered. "It's from someone who is like a son."

The sheets of paper were thin and crinkled as I unfolded them. It was a six-page letter, each page covered in a tight, squeezed-together blue script. It was from the teacher.

"Estimada Zita," he began. "I hope this letter finds you and your loved ones in good health and spirits."

Without additional niceties, he launched into a detailed explanation of what occurred when he returned to school the week following our "interview." Two agents from State Security were waiting outside his classroom door, he said. They escorted him to a solitary room where they

repeated word for word the conversation he'd had with an American journalist. His statements, the men said, were "counter-revolutionary." After this meeting, they ordered him to leave the school. Later in some sort of official hearing he'd been forced to sign some documents admitting to errors in his thinking and crimes against the revolution. His punishment was permanent expulsion from school and teaching.

I looked up from the letter, blinking away tears. I searched the glum faces of the two women in the room but they refused to meet my gaze.

I continued reading: He'd asked the U.S. Interests Section for permission to leave, but they'd denied his request because he'd never served any prison time. He was currently working on a farm tending pigs; the only job the government was willing to give him. He and his wife were barely scraping by.

When I came to the next part, my thighs against the hard mattress where I sat began to shake uncontrollably.

"My decision to speak to you some years ago has cost me dearly... I was never sentenced but I will never again raise my head. I am a

marginalized person, a pariah. I will never again obtain decent work... I will carry this sentence for the rest of my life.”

Finally, the clincher:

“I fell into a political trap that reminds me of the last pages in the diary of Anne Frank--there are spies even in your own house. But you shouldn’t feel responsible for what happened. When bad things are destined to happen they happen. If I had gone straight home that day after school nothing would have happened...”

He ended by asking me to help him go to the U.S., Spain, Mexico--“I don’t care where.” He said I should not publish the letter or write anything about his situation. It would only make matters worse. He signed his full name at the bottom.

With trembling hands I folded the pages, returning them to the creased envelope. I must have looked imploringly at the older woman because she offered me some water.

When she handed me the lukewarm glass, I asked for his address.

Where is maestro now? It's been more than 40 years since we met in the living room of my aunt's house, since someone--a relative, my cousin no doubt--taped us or repeated our conversation to the authorities. Perhaps he lives now somewhere in Europe or Latin American, maybe even in Miami. Is his wife with him? Does he have grandchildren?

A few days after I read his letter, we met for a few beers at a hole-in-the-wall somewhere in downtown Havana. On my way to the bar, I tripped on broken tiles of the sidewalk and ended up with badly bruised and scraped knees. Inside the bar, R wet a handkerchief inside a glass of water and used it to wipe my bloody knees. He repeated the pathetic story. When we parted ways three hours later after a few beers, I pressed two \$20 bills into his palm, promising to help him. When I returned to the states--I was working in Washington, D.C. by then--I made an appointment to see a Cuban Congresswoman from Miami. She listened politely, rolling her heavily made-up eyes several times, and said she couldn't help. The U.S. was only interested in helping political prisoners, and there were plenty of those waiting in line for exit permits.

"Muchas gracias," I said and walked out of her office. I lost touch with R until about ten years ago when he sent me another letter, this time carried back to the states by an exile acquaintance that had traveled to the island to see his family.

R reminded me that 20 years had passed since our fateful conversation in my family's home. Things were no better. Could I send him a few hundred dollars to tide him over for a few months? Was I returning to Guira?

I did not send money or look him up when I returned with David a few years ago, or see the neighbor who hand-delivered the first letter. I'm not sure why, and we had an agenda--my memoir and David's novel. David wanted to visit a Jewish cemetery and a synagogue, which we found sandwiched between crumbling buildings in La Vieja Habana after asking half a dozen taxi drivers and hotel clerks about its location. The gabbai, leader, of the well-preserved temple--it's supported by donations from U.S. and Israeli Jews but there isn't enough money to hire a rabbi--told us that only 400 Jews remain on the island, a far cry from the ten thousand or more who thrived there before the Revolution. Like the upper- and middle-class exiles

that left right away, the majority of Cuban Jews fled to the U.S. or Israel after the Communists confiscated their lands and businesses. We befriended Isaac, a reed-thin man with an engaging smile who was in his late 70's. His only daughter had immigrated to Israel and he lived alone in a crumbling apartment with a hole in the roof that authorities refused to fix or condemn. It had been ten years since he'd seen her, he told us. David took Isaac's portrait on the sidewalk in front of the temple and later mailed it to his daughter in Tel Aviv. Unlike the pristine synagogue, the Jewish cemetery was full of brambles and broken headstones. The caretaker, a man in his 30's with missing teeth who is also the embalmer, said there are few burials to keep him busy nowadays.

David and I took a taxi to Guanabacoa, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Havana where Tia Caridad and her family lived before they left for Florida. As we drove through the main avenue in the blazing noonday sun, I recognized the Café Regil building where my uncle Humberto had worked as a young married salesman. As the taxi crawled down the bumpy street where Caridad had once had lived, I spotted her former concrete-block house, freshly painted in green with a sign next to the front door that

said "Block committee for the Defense of the Revolution." My parents, sister and I had spent the night there on New Year's Eve of 1958, on the revolution's eve. A powerful explosion knocked my pregnant mother out of bed sometime after midnight. The next morning we learned that Batista and many of his top officers and cronies had fled, and the long-suppressed country erupted in joy and mob violence, causing my anxious father to insist that Humberto drive us back to Guira immediately. He thought we'd be safer there despite the roadblocks around Havana set up by the milicianos.

When I knocked on Tia Caridad's former front door, the new owner, a friendly mulatta wearing shorts, invited us to sit beside her on the sofa. "I am block captain," said the smiling woman, in her 40's, adding that she lives alone now. Her children have university degrees and are accomplished professionals. As she told us this, I glanced at the ceiling and recognized the art deco chandelier my uncle had bought Tia at El Encanto, a fancy Havana department store that was torched or burned down in the early 60's. I wondered if the revolver my uncle had hidden among the pink petals five decades before was still inside. I thought of asking if I could take peak but changed my mind.

As we left the neighborhood, I stopped to chat with an elderly couple across the street. They asked about my aunt, uncle and their children. After more chitchat, I asked if they remembered the explosion.

"What explosion?" the man said.

"You know," I pressed, "the explosion that shook the walls of all the houses on this street the night Batista fled." The man and his wife gave me a blank stare, and I said goodbye. Perhaps they've forgotten, I thought, or would rather not remember.

A few days later we spent the day in Guira with my cousin Mirta, her son Orlando, his wife Dayami and their three young daughters. They live in my grandparents' former home. The house now has a commode, an indoor shower, and concrete walls and floors, thanks to remittances we and other family in Tampa have sent. Over the last dozen years, cousin Orlando, who magically transforms discarded bike and motor parts into lamps and radios, managed to purchase bags of cement, bathroom tiles and lumber on the black market.

"The house will be finished and painted next time you come," he said. I don't doubt it.

Later, I carried my tape recorder when we went to see my father's two remaining brothers--el Nene and Mario--and asked them to speak loudly into the recorder so I could deliver their messages to my parents in Tampa. We visited Juana, in her mid 80's, Dad's only remaining sister. Juana once carried home a hand grenade she found discarded in the road. She stored it in a closet and forgot about it until it exploded, nearly killing her.

On this August afternoon she rocked on her front porch at the edge of the old family farm in Guira, the last piece still inhabited by an Arocha. She reminisced about the times she slipped into her one fancy skirt and rope sandals to follow her brother, my father, to a canturia at some farm or other village.

"He was a poeta de verdad," she crowed, the real thing, "one of the best."

Later, Juana's son, who lives next door, tells me that some local guy with party connections is trying to force her to move from her acre of land.

"A mi no me saca nadie," she said, daring anyone to run her off. "I plan to die here."

Later, when we entered Silvio's backyard, he ran toward me shouting, "Maria Elena, coño, it's Maria Elena," and he hugged me.

"I'm Zita," I said frostily and moved away.

Part of me wanted to add: "The little girl you punched and locked in the outhouse and whose faced you probably pushed into a pillow and did who knows what else to." Of course, I didn't say these things to Silvio, whose smooth face looks like the one I remember from 55 years ago but long skinny arms now surround a swollen belly from too much liquor.

Why didn't I finally speak up when I had the chance? Because David is with me on this trip and I am embarrassed? Because Silvio has suffered enough, from his wife's suicide and five years in jail for killing a cow? Jesus taught to turn the other cheek; the Buddha that another being may have been your mother in a previous life. Maybe it's simpler: I lack courage.

We walked into a far corner of the yard to admire Silvio's chickens and pigs rooting behind a mesh-enclosed area, when several neighbors, men in their 20s, stopped by to say hi and check us out. Later, we overheard them whispering.

"A lancha leaves in two days for Florida from la costa," said one man.

"I'm thinking of going," said another.

Walking into the house of another uncle, my cousin Mari shouts a greeting from the second floor where she and her husband are making contraband fideos, noodles. Covered head to toe in flour, she explained how her husband concocted a mixer/grinder from assorted spare parts. They mix the dough in the machine, pat it flat and shape it into thin rounds that they dry on the roof. Later, they cut the rounds into noodle strips and wrap them in plastic bags to sell to relatives and neighbors for a dollar.

When we comment on the harsh economic conditions under which they live, Mari smiles and responds, in typical Cuban fashion, "Se resuelve," meaning, "Somehow we'll find a solution." Another cousin, a pre-school teacher during the day, charges for manicures on nights and weekends. She asks if I can send her nail polish in unusual colors: purple, white, neon orange. Orlando repairs bike tires in his backyard. His wife makes vanilla ice cream at home from a machine we sent her from the U.S.

Before I leave, Mari asks a favor: "If my son shows up someday on your door step please help him." Of course, I assure her, shocked on this trip by these open confessions of illegal immigration.

Returning to Mirta's house after a day visiting Dad's relatives, José, the 9-year-old son of another female cousin, waits to see us. Tears well in his eyes as he tells us that his father drowned in the ocean on a boat crossing the Florida straights. Before the boat capsized, his managed to save the lives of several others. His body has not been recovered. I wrap an arm around Jose's bony shoulders. "How sad. Lo siento," I said. Later, I hug his morose mother and press a few \$20 bills into her palm.

During the trip, I notice that my perception of the land of my birth is shifting. The lush, magical island of memory that nostalgia has coveted for so long is not just a producer of sugarcane and tobacco but also of bodies--bodies in motion, bodies in flight, bodies thrust into the ocean on makeshift rafts and inner tubes, bodies that die at sea, for what? Cuba is a cruel lover. I'm not sure I want her anymore.

The growing disillusionment--will I *want* to return here?--fuels the pressure I feel to collect information for my memoir. I spend two hours with Mirta at her kitchen table with my tape recorder asking questions about the family: When and where were my grandparents born. "No sé." When did Aunt Carmen meet her Tampa husband and move to the U.S? "I don't

know.” What were the names of Tia Carmen’s two babies who died within a year of their birth? “I can’t recall.”

What did they die of? Where are they buried? I have a million more questions to ask.

“No sé,” she says with embarrassed laugh and twirls a thin gold ring on her index finger that is missing a stone. She remembers this: The ring was a gift to her mother Zoraida from Tia Carmen during one of Carmen’s summer holidays to Cuba. Mirta says she plans to have the ruby replaced.

At 9 that night in a taxi back to our hotel, I feel tightness in my chest, as if I’ve walked 8000 feet straight up a mountain without stopping to catch my breath. I realize I feel bereft, but am not sure why. My head feels light and heavy at the same time. Then a realization hits me: Even though I left as a child, I remember more about the past in Cuba than my relatives who’ve remained. I have had good reasons to remember, and they to forget.

A few days before David and I fly back to El Paso by way of Cancun, I finagle a visit to the newspaper archives of a cultural institute. It is our second trip to this place. We’d arrived one afternoon earlier in the week, scheduling the visit in advance only to learn after we arrived that the place

was about to be fumigated for mosquitos, which carry dengue fever in the tropics. The librarian politely asked us to leave.

After several phone calls to a Cuban friend, we managed to convince the librarian to provide us access for two hours on Saturday morning, the day before our departure. I was dubious the woman would show but she proved me wrong. She arrived promptly at 9, officiously unlocking the door and letting us inside.

"Que quieren?" What do you want? she asked in a huffy tone, flipping on the sickly yellow florescent lights to reveal more than a dozen long, gleaming wood tables scattered in rows throughout the cavernous room.

I tell her I am searching for facts for a memoir--perhaps I shouldn't give away too much, I think, but then I decide honesty is best.

"I want to see copies of *Revolución*, *Diario la Maria* and *Bohemia*," adding that I want specific dates: April 27, 1952, my birthday, and December 31, 1958 through January 8, 1959, the day Castro marched into Havana and gave his victory speech as a white dove perched on his left shoulder. I don't tell the woman I'm interested in *how* the newspapers presented these first few days of the revolution.

She waves me over to a tall wood file cabinet filled jammed with index cards. I use a three-inch pencil--the only writing implement allowed there--to scratch down the Dewey decimals of the issues I want. Acutely aware of the ticking clock over our heads, I feel like a Colorado miner panning for gold.

The library cards indicate that the newspapers are available on microfiche, but when I approach the table with the Soviet-era microfiche machine, the librarian explains that the light is burned out and has been for five years now.

"What about the actual papers? Can I look at those?"

She lowers her eyes and her voice. "We suffered a flood a few month ago and there was some damage. The volumes are quite fragile. I'm not sure you can see them."

"Please," I implore. "It's important. It's for my book. What about letting us at least see the volumes that are least damaged?"

"Well...." she hesitates, but I can tell she's thinking about it.

I play my last card.

“My husband and I would like to make a donation to the library.”

From the corner of my eye, I can see David is giving me a dirty look.

But I plunge ahead. “We really would like to help. Perhaps I can even find you a replacement blub for the microfiche machine.”

She turns abruptly and disappears among the stacks and emerges ten minutes later her arms full of newsprint booty. She has brought me several issues of *Revolución* for the first week of 1959, issues of *Bohemia* for the same period and a heavy volume filled with issues of el *Diario* from 1952. I lick the point of my miniature pencil and get to work, scribbling down dates, headlines, the contents of ads, and paragraphs from a few important stories. The edges of the yellowed pages are crumbling in places. I turn each page as if I were wiping a baby’s rash-raw bottom, aware of the historical significance of these fragile broadsheets filled with dozens of photos of the young bearded Castro, Camilo, Ché marching triumphantly through the provinces into Havana, the famous picture of a beaming Castro, with three doves perched on his shoulders, delivering his victory speech from a balcony, the one of guajiros hanging from the top of electric poles to get a look at him, of crowds smashing casino slot machines in the streets, of the

return from exile of the politician Urrutia who acted as President during the first few months of the revolution until Castro declared himself maximum leader. I realize I am imbibing history--most of these volumes do not exist anywhere else in the world. They probably won't last much longer. I breathe deeply the scent of library dust and glue embedded in the 60-year old newsprint. I flip to another page and see a story in *Revolución* about the mysterious explosion in Guanabacoa—10,000 tons of munitions blown up by Castro sympathizers to prevent Batista's soldiers from having access to the weapons. My knees are shaking. There in black and white is the answer to the blast that rocked my family's house and flung my mother off the bed after midnight in the early morning hours of January 1, 1959, right after Batista fled.

Suddenly, I realize David is snapping pictures with his Nikon.

The librarian rushes toward us from her desk.

"No pictures," she says sharply.

"Perdón," I say, "I promise he won't do it again." I give David another dirty look.

I move on to the volume filled with *Diario de la Marina*. I leaf through the pages expectantly. Finally, I find what I am looking for: April 27, 1952, and there under the masthead, just as my mother has told me, is my namesake, Saint Zita.

David snaps a few more pictures and I am done.

I thank the librarian for her assistance and press two twenty-dollar bills, our donation to the library, into her outstretched palm.

The following morning, after we've landed in Cancun, we turn on the TV in our ocean-view hotel room and learn that Castro, upon returning to Cuba from an economic summit in Venezuela, has announced he is turning over power to his brother Raul because he is ailing with an unspecified illness.

CHAPTER 6

CUANDO ME MUERA, RIEGEN FLORES

I visit Cuba this time with just my mother. It is my third trip or fourth trip. I've forgotten the exact dates and the chronology don't seem to matter anymore. Buddhism has taught me that time and distance are illusions. And this trip feels like an ending.

Mom is away somewhere this morning, probably delivering presents to my father's sisters, Lolo, Juana, and Ernestina. I am alone in the house with Zoraida and Mirta. It is perhaps 9 or 10 in the morning, January, and a soft breeze wafts through the doorway and into the dining room from the backyard where a few chickens scratch in the dirt. The room smells of just-poured coconut water.

"Tia, where did I sleep the night grandfather died?"

I've never asked her or anyone else for that matter this question before.

My aunt Zoraida is now in her mid-70s, her back jorobada like the rounded handle of a walking cane. Mirta, who stands near us, is a younger carbon copy of her mother. Tia looks morose when I ask this question, a

trick question because I know the answer. I slept in the front bedroom facing the street. Dad and I slept in the same bed. I believe someone else was in the room that night, but I can't recall who it was.

A good reporter, I am leading up to what I really want to know. Who was it?

"Vamos afuera," Zoraida says, motioning toward the yard and Mirta and I follow her brisk pace to the center of the patio. We stand in the center of a platanal, facing a large cage on stilts where Zoriada's family keeps the family cat at night for safety. During times of severe food shortages, Cubans have been known to eat cats and dogs.

Zoraida scans the verdant landscape, cool in the early winter light. The yard still contains vegetative remnants from the past, guayaba, mamonsillo, fruta bomba, cherimoya and plátano. I recall the vegas de tabacco for abuelo's puros in a far corner and my grandmother's blossoming roses near the house. The air smells of gardenias, and Zoraida takes a deep breath, turning her skinny neck from left to right and back again. Her dull eyes scan the high billowing clouds on the horizon beyond the waving tips of a row of skinny palm trees in the distance.

Mirta and I wait for her to speak.

She takes another deep breath.

“Lo que pasó se entierra aquí,” she says finally.

The past stays buried here.

We return turn and walk inside and don’t speak of this backyard encuentro again.

A few days later, before I board the taxi waiting at the curb to take me back to Havana for a flight home, I grabbed an empty plastic film canister from my purse, walk out to the front yard and use it to scoop up some red dirt. Zoraida and Mirta watch me from the porch.

I stuff the canister into my shoulder bag and wave to them as I climb into the red ‘57 Chevy taxi waiting to take me home.

Day 27

Today we left Cuba 54 years ago. I lit four candles for my grandfather and for David and have tried to keep them going all day although it’s been hard because of the wind and I like to keep all the doors and windows open. But it feels like a good way to honor them both. Perhaps it’s because of the

suddenness of Lama Tsultrim's husband David's death and my visit to the stupa yesterday where his body was cremated, but my thoughts today have been superficial, skimming along without depth like hummingbirds that come and go all day and compete for the feeder. I noticed a third bird joined the fight for the nectar. He's smaller than the others but feistier.

Day 28

I met a runner on the return from morning meditation to the cabin. She said the sangha plans a special Chod practice tonight at the temple for David. My meadow will be filled with children starting Tuesday for family week, she informs me. My retreat has been fractured, the solitude splintered by a group of excited, screaming children and teenagers. The woman said David started family week and working with children after he and Lama T moved here ten years ago. I was thinking about children last night; how I need to see children. Here they come! In a while I'm going to walk down to the stupa to circumambulate and chant and see how, without a car, I can logistically make it to the Chod tonight.

Returned from the stupa at about 7 and decided to do Chod here by myself. I miss the uninterrupted silence of the last few weeks. I was thinking of going back down again tomorrow but everyone I have asked is unsure of what if anything is planned. Most of the staff members I ran into seemed in a state of disbelief and shock. One said Lama Tsultrim and David's family have arrived and are staying in Prajna hall. Someone mentioned that Lama T is going into solitary retreat tonight. I had been unaware that David's body was cremated near the stupa until I arrived and saw a rectangular yellow piece of silk surrounding concrete blocks and other materials that had been used to build a cremation structure. The ashes inside were still smoldering and I smelled incense. In a few days Lama T, her son Costanzo and Kenpo, the lama from Bhutan, will sift through the ashes for bits of bone and teeth. I spoke to Miranda and David on the phone and it was nice to hear their voices.

Something funny happened three days ago. I discovered a dead lizard inside one of the buckets I use for peeing at night. I dumped him on the ground and washed out the bucket, brought it inside. Two days ago I noticed a lizard--this one alive--standing up and leaning against my

sandals for support. He seemed happy as could be, surveying his surroundings. He reminded me of a dandy against a lamppost. I saw him again last night on the side of the tree stump used for chopping. It looked like he was doing pushups. Yesterday, when I returned from the stupa, I was startled to see the lizard inside the cabin on top of a book about vegetarian camping on the sofa bed. I watched him for a long time--maybe 10 minutes--and he didn't move. Just sat there. Maybe he's the creature that I've given birth to during these 30 days. The old me died and this new one is going home with me. I think the universe is playing jokes because two days ago I read in my book about cubanizmos that in the Santeria religion lizards, lagartos, are evil spirits that inhabit human beings and a special ritual exists to dispossess them. Another book about Native American symbols says lizards represent subtle perception and detachment, because their tails easily break off. I like to think I'm taking both with me from this retreat experience.

Day 29

I'm cooking apple brown betty on the stove. This will be dinner. Not hungry after a lunch plate of wheat spaghetti and sauce that I doctored with garlic and a lonely last tomato. I believe it's a full moon but the sky has threatened rain all afternoon so I doubt I'll be able to see it. The day began with various intrusions from the teen group. I got up unusually early, about 6:30, and was out at my meditation spot by 7 thinking I would beat the crowd of teenagers as they trooped down the mountain. I was about to begin meditation when a woman jogger ran by and a few minutes later a red all purpose utility vehicle thundered down the road which is so narrow I had to pick up my stuff to let it car go by. The driver said he was sorry to disturb me and sounded like he meant it. I walked back to the cabin and meditated outside the front door. But the concentration and intent had been broken. That was just one of various little signs that this retreat is coming to a close. I'm starting to think about packing up and cleaning the cabin and when to take my last bath, Thursday or Friday. That's another sign my mind is definitely on heading home.

VII

With mind far off, not thinking of death's coming,
Performing these meaningless activities,
Returning empty-handed now would be complete confusion;
The need is recognition, holy darma,
So why not practice dharma at this very moment?
From the mouths of siddhas come these words:
If you do not keep your guru's teaching in your heart
Will you not become your own deceiver?

--From the Tibetan Book of the Dead

EPILOGUE

The mountains push me out and I resist being ejected from this temporary nest under the eaves of these woods. I know it's time to go; I hope I'm ready but I won't know for sure until Anje picks me up in two hours to drive me down to the community building where my green car, inert as a dead beetle for a month, waits to take me home. I've gathered bundles and bags, a dozen or so, arranged them in a semi circle on the floor. The rolled and wrapped solar collector, my umbilical cord to the outside, rests on top of this self-contained pile. I won't need it at home. I've removed the fetishes, candles and bits of bark and stone from the altar and dropped them into a brown grocery bag. I will fold this plastic and pack my computer last.

This dream came last night: A soldier, a Nazi, has shot me and left me for dead. A bullet is lodged behind my left eyeball, pressing against a critical artery. If I am to survive I must find a doctor. Finally, I am on an operating table--as I write this I recall when I was 10 and being operated to remove my tonsils I jumped up from the table and tried to run but the nurses restrained me. In the dream I let the doctor saw through the center of my

eyeball, like the first scene in the Spanish film *Un Chien Andalou* where someone slices through an eyeball with a shaving knife. I realize I must submit to save my life.

Interpretation: The experience of the last 30 days--the doctor removing the bullet from behind my eye-- has altered my sight, ushering in a new more holistic perspective on what's important, what's real. Another take: The doctor operates on my present "I." A new, different "I," or hundreds, will emerge as I depart this place, like seeds exploding from a ripe papaya. Another bardo begins when I climb behind the wheel of my Camry later today.

Here are some partial realizations. I'm sure more are yet to come. I have inherited *this* karma from my parents: my father's patience, my mother's resentment. Taming these two traits and sidestepping the results of their karma requires daily vigilance and mindfulness.

Another lesson is learning to let go--Buddhism is primarily about practicing detachment--of my grandfather's corpse, my sickle-shaped island. As I say in a poem, time to hundir el pasado, plunge the past into el Mar Caribeño. Giving up what we cling to--people, things, events, and the

belief in a separate self, even memories--frees us to connect with others more authentically. This empathy is true compassion.

Another thing: I have felt like an exile from place of origin and authentic self my entire life only to discover now there is no such thing as a "real" self, a permanent home. Self is illusion. Exile is a state of mind. Letting go of this projection is freedom.

Finally, memories are phantoms, suffering, samsara--a condition that feels like a spider trapped in a shoebox. We must summon them one at a time, offer them what they need and exorcise them. Bad things happen, happened--the nighttime assault on a four-year-old, my father losing it with a belt buckle, an innocent man destroyed by an ideology. I will never know what, who, why. It doesn't matter, anymore.

Tomorrow this cabin, the outhouse, the woodpile, the meadow disappear from my daily existence like wisps of dandelion floating across a field of wild grass. I may return to this spot but never to this experience, to the same visualizations and realizations. Strangely, while this place will no longer be part of my daily routine, it will still *be*, withered in memory but alive in my imagination, like my realization during my last meditation earlier.

I sat on a plastic raincoat on my favorite rocky spot in front of my dead tree, that I've come to call Troma. As I stared at the bare, wizened branches, charred from a distant fire, I shifted my gaze slightly and saw for the first time another tree behind it and to the right, this one full of leaves, young, strong. They are the same tree, I thought: The living tree replaces the dead one, but both are held securely in place and connected by the same underground root system, part of the extension of aspens surrounding me. Life and death, contiguous.

I like to think that I've finally accepted the infinite cycles of bardos, deaths past and yet to come. Tia Zoraida's death in Cuba in her child-size bed wearing tennis shoes my mother sent her from Florida; Aunt Carmen's dying alone in a Tampa nursing home, in her 90's, senile and strapped to a wheelchair so she wouldn't fall out; my friend Humberto's death in Austin after a visit to his daughter's tomb; my uncle Humberto, the Tampa butcher, in his 80's from a brain hemorrhage; his son, my age, also called Humberto, before him after the onset of terminal cancer that left him an invalid. Despite the debilitating cancer, this cousin, Humberto Jr., danced in his wheelchair with his daughter at her wedding to Louis Armstrong's *What a Wonderful*

World. I experienced neither sadness nor joy but both witnessing my cousin's final waltz with his only daughter at the fanciest Spanish restaurant in Ybor City. I passed around a copy of a family photograph from the late 50's. It showed four children--my sister Olga, Humberto, his sister Rita and me--sitting on a wall at the Havana zoo. It must have been taken right after Christmas of '58 because my cousins wear matching cowboy outfits they received as holiday gifts. Humbertico points a toy gun. The photo captures a moment frozen, gone. Am I ready for Dad's death, Mom's, mine?

I have experienced many bardos this month, including David Petit's death and that of the self that arrived here. The book is finished too, another bardo.

Which feels right, somehow.

POEMA

Nunca podré con las manos
Llegar a las estrellas
Porque sé que el plano de ellas
Es diferente a mi plano
Pero en el cerebro humano
Hay un pájaro, la idea
Que en el espacio alatea
Con sus alas impolutos
Y como si fueran frutas
Las estrellas picotea

Never with my hands
Will I reach the stars
Because their blueprint
Is different from mine
But in the human mind
Exists a bird--an idea
Which flies through space
With unpolluted wings
And goes pecking at the stars,
As if they were fruit.

--*Armando Arocha, sinsonte de Guira*

IDENTIDAD

I.

A Cuban is

authentic (like Martí), bossy, coffee drinker, (great) dancer, emotional, fire cracker, garrulous, hot air, ideologue, jester, king, leech, macho, number one, *not* a Communist, opinionated, pushy, paranoid, querulous, revolutionary (sometimes), santero, testy, unyielding, victorious, (always) waiting, xenophobe, yesterday, yes yes, zita

II.

Un cubano es

(siempre) ayer, bilongo, candela, diablito, egoísta entero, fenómeno, gritón guarachero, (mucho) humo, ideólogo, jarana, kerosene, lengua larga, mujeriego, número uno, no Comunista, payaso y paranoico, quimbombó, requetebueno, sabrosón, tremendo toro, vacilón, whisky, xenófilo, ya ya, zita

--Zita Arocha

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