



TO HAVE BEEN THERE THEN

**MEMOIR OF CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH
CUBA: 1969 – 1983**

GREGORY RANDALL

TRANSLATION BY MARGARET RANDALL





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CUBA: 1969 – 1983**

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TO HAVE BEEN THERE THEN

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CUBA: 1969 – 1983**







*“Gregory Randall grew up in revolutionary Cuba. He left in 1983, and later he and his wife Laura relocated to Uruguay and Gregory established himself within the academic world there. Revolutionary Cuba’s literacy campaign in 1960-61, which sent young people into the mountains during a period that included the Bay of Pigs invasion, is generally recognized. Cuba’s far flung medical assistance in situations like the recent Haitian earthquake is also well-known. This book explores the more comprehensive Cuban effort to create what the Zapatistas call *un otro mundo*, another world. I know of no other book that so richly provides an empathetic view of the twentieth-century socialist project from both within and without.”*

Staughton Lynd

“To Have Been There Then is an extraordinary book. Gregory Randall recreates scenes from a revolutionary childhood and youth in Mexico and Cuba during the 1960s and 70s with brilliant vividness that brings an adult’s wisdom to the child’s perspective. He evokes the spirit of revolutionary consciousness of the era, when Cuba’s radical experimentation and commitment to building a new world intersected with revolutionary dreams and movements throughout Latin America. Randall’s childhood was peopled with artists, intellectuals, and revolutionaries from throughout the continent who shared a deep belief in the possibility for radical social change. Cuba’s revolutionary history is told here with verve and drama, through personal detail of a child and young man coming of age in truly historic circumstances.”

**Aviva Chomsky, author of *The Cuban Revolution*,
co-editor of *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics*.**

“Here is the perfect book for this time of change in US-Cuban relations, and when a new generation in the United States has embraced the idea and goals of socialism and human solidarity. Gregory Randall’s exquisite coming of age story, set in Cuba during the second decade of the Cuban Revolution, is unflinchingly truthful and compassionate.”

**Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, historian and author
most recently of *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States***

“Gregory Randall has done it: written a captivating, ethically humane, and inspirational memoir of growing up in revolutionary Cuba as a child of exiled political activists. He is able to tell forthright yet loving stories of his engaged life with multiple fathers, escaping the 1968 military crackdown in Mexico as a seven year-old in charge of his younger siblings, forging friendships in Cuban boarding schools, and living his adolescence as an intellectual and political coming-of-age banquet among artists and revolutionaries from across the continent. He sees dogma and cant yet remains deeply committed to the vision of a liberated space and new women and men. Read this powerful book and be stirred anew to live fully in harmony with your values.”

Bernardine Dohrn





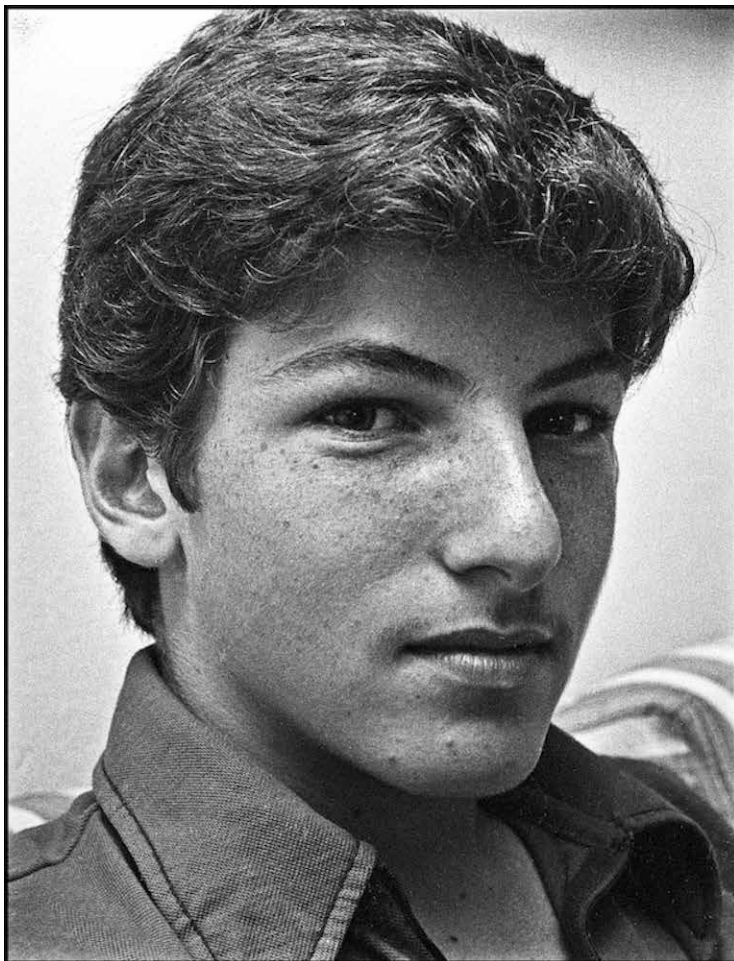


*This book is for the love of my life, Laura,
a gift from my years in Cuba.*

For my mother, to whom I owe so much.

*For my children Lía Margarita, Martín and Daniel,
and my grandson Guillermo
who will shoulder their own time.*







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INTRODUCTION

Be there when it happens; write it down!

Joel Oppenheimer

I was lucky enough to live in Cuba from 1969 to 1983. I arrived at the age of eight and departed when I was twenty-three. I began fourth grade there and by the time I left had finished my undergraduate degree in engineering. In Cuba I witnessed and took part in one of the most interesting experiments of the twentieth century, perhaps in the entire history of humankind. It's not often that a society actually tries to build a better world, truly prioritizing the interests of the majority. Even less often does such an experience last so many years. As time has passed I have learned how exceptional this process was. Cuba marked me profoundly. I am a proud son of the Cuban Revolution.

I left the country in 1983. At the time I never thought I'd be away so long, but it wasn't until 2003 that I was able to return. Between those two years the world had changed a great deal. The Socialist bloc became mired in a terminal crisis and disappeared as such. The Latin American dictatorships had given way to democratic administrations, but the revolution we'd dreamed hadn't been possible. Globally an ideological crisis took hold of the left, and for many years our certainties were replaced by doubts, and then by a deep crisis of its own. During the 1960s and '70s it looked as if we would be able to build a more just and beautiful world. Currently many of us are overwhelmed by pessimism. Today individualism would seem to be the most powerful mover of people, and yesterday's collective dreams seem impossible.

In the years since I left Cuba, my compañera¹ Laura and I built our nest with the materials that country had given us. We lived in France for eleven years; since 1994 we've been in Uruguay. Our youthful ideas kept pulsing in our veins and helped guide us through turbulent waters. In this nest our three children were born: Lía, Martín and Daniel. They arrived with tenderness and love, each with her or his unique curiosity and strong character. And they became the mirrors in which we are able to glimpse the rawest and most palpable features of our own past. They came into our lives with all those attributes with which children always captivate their parents. But one of the greatest gifts they have given me is the discovery that through them I can go on nurturing my own youthful dreams. In my adolescence collective work took precedence over the individual, even over the family. Now it seemed our children were our utopia.

¹ *Spanish word which at the time covered by this book was used for one's life partner as well as for a political comrade*





In 1994 Laura, the children and I went to live in Uruguay. I began to teach at the University of the Republic. All these years, first in France and later in Uruguay, I have continued to speak publicly about my ideas. Over lunches, with colleagues or students I've often reminisced about the highlights of our life in Cuba. My opinions of the current international situation continue to be marked by that experience. As time passed I could see how ordinary people were finding it more and more difficult to understand the reality I had experienced. Many believed life in Cuba to be a carbon copy of that in the Soviet Union. All sophistication of analysis was lost and the implosion of Soviet socialism took with it any possibility of imagining an alternative to capitalism as we know it. As the years went by I realized that the histories I told were becoming legends. Today's young people weren't even born when I left Cuba.

A few years ago I was walking one day on the beach at Santa Lucía del Este with my son Daniel. Our dog ran happily across the sand. We were having one of those important father/son conversations, the kind that is a gift and remains engraved in memory. Daniel is a very sensitive person, someone who can't bear injustice whether aimed at a person or a bird. At one point in our conversation he began to rebuke me. He pointed out that I'd done nothing to try to change the world. He criticized the fact that although conscious of injustice I'd remained passive. He accused me of being a coward. It was then that I understood I had been excessively discreet. Within the family we'd always talked about the world, the injustices that exist and the imperative to fight against them, about Cuba and the various attempts at social change that had taken place throughout the twentieth century. But old habits had kept me from speaking of my own participation in that great collective effort. It wasn't that I'd been particularly important. I was a foot soldier, one among many. But the need for discretion had taught me to be extremely careful. Now I discovered that my sons, who were ten and thirteen, and my daughter who was fifteen, knew nothing about my political past. I explained to my children that I too had wanted to change the world. My participation had been modest and without much success, but it wasn't true that I'd sat back while others participated.

For centuries people have been fighting for a better world. This rich history is plagued by defeats as well as producing a few victories. And it's always been possible to pass on the relevant experiences. Young people in the 1960s learned from the struggles of Algeria, Vietnam and China, from the resistance to fascism, from revolutionary Spain. Those struggles in turn were influenced by the Russian revolution and from the Anarchist battles at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Farther back was Garibaldi and the Paris Commune, the French Revolution and the European revolutions of 1848. But my conversation with Daniel left me thinking. Could the defeat we suffered have been so profound that it stopped us even from speaking?

I believe this has been one of the most abrupt breaks in historic memory. Our generation's protagonists haven't told our sons and daughters what we went through. It's true that much





of what we did may seem absurd today. History tends to be written by the winners and they shape it as they see fit. But the absurdity is an optical illusion. The dreams we had back then are only absurd when seen through today's "common sense" lens. Contemporary society isn't very satisfying and its profound contradictions are visible everywhere. We know that our system doesn't work, but lack the imagination to propose an alternative. Defeat has left us reeling. All the more reason for us to pass on to today's youth the experiences of the recent past. They are essential for building the future.

At that moment I decided to write this book. Not in order to talk about what I did, which wasn't that important, but to speak of what it was like for a child and young person like myself to live in Cuba when I was growing up. I decided to try to transmit what we felt, what we did, the atmosphere we breathed. Of course as I speak of that part of my life I must speak about Cuba and about myself. I was a pure product of those times. All my parental figures were deeply involved in the struggles of those years and participated in them intensely; they were protagonists. As a child I lived in that whirlwind. Later, as a young man, I also participated: one more in a great army. I believe this story is interesting from the point of view of a child of the 1960s and also as the testimony of someone who lived in Cuba during that era.

In 2003 I returned to the island for the first time in twenty years. There had been many changes but from the moment I exited the airport I began reconnecting with the Cuba I had known. It was as if an invisible thread continued to link the present with the past. I immediately felt at home. I walked along those streets lined with luxuriant trees, their roots cutting through the sidewalks bordered by houses that seemed frozen in time. I filled my lungs with the salt air of the Caribbean as I wandered back to the scenes of my earlier life. Each night I wrote long letters to Laura, filled with the day's impressions. When I got home I had twenty pages. The years went by and I slowly digested those notes. There were many more lunches over which I shared with all manner of listeners the passages I'd reconstructed. I took stock of their reactions, their questions. And so this book was born.

In 2006 my friend Guillermo Sapiro invited me to spend a year at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. This was a rare privilege. During my sabbatical I was simply able to learn at his side, to study and spend time with my family. These were months given over to the intimacy of everyday connection. In the beauty of the city and company of so many generous friends I was able to relax. This was a time in which Laura and I, astonished, were also able to witness the political awakenings of our own children. All three became passionately involved in the struggle against the war in Iraq, and it was in this context that we saw them take their first steps motivated by the same ideals that had compelled us thirty years before. Was the circle beginning to close? One day I called my mother and proposed a shared adventure: that the two of us write our memories of Cuba. We could embark on a work in four hands, she from her point of view and I from mine. My mother, with her customary efficiency and craft, began immediately. I kept mulling over my ideas.

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In January of 2007 my mother came to visit us in Uruguay. When I realized only a month remained before her arrival I had no choice but to sit down and begin to write. A few intense weeks later I had a first rough draft. For five years I had been juggling the material; some fragments were already practically written in my head. On that visit my mother and I spent several days reading each other's manuscripts, critiquing one another, exchanging ideas.

In February of 2007 my father Robert, my sisters Sarah, Ximena, Ana and I spent a long weekend together in New York City. I already had a first draft of this book and had sent it to each of them prior to our getting together. That meeting had an intensity difficult to describe. The four of us found ourselves together for the first time in ten years. There was so much accumulated and so little time in which to express it. Reading the draft I'd sent became the catalyst for a flood of memories and emotions. Sarah talked about how, on the plane from México City to New York, she'd been reading the text and her seat mates had to be wondering what was going on with this woman who laughed and cried uncontrollably. Something that seemed immediately obvious to Robert as well as to Sarah and Ximena, but had escaped me completely, was that in more than a hundred pages there was almost nothing about our family or my childhood games with my sisters. I was stunned. I had spent months delving into and writing the memoir, yet that essential part of our lives had resisted coming to the surface. Even then, when faced with the evidence of its absence, I was unable to remember many details or anecdotes. Had I erased all that, or kept it hidden like some intimate and precious treasure? My own memories don't coincide with many of those my sisters have, what happened back then is disfigured by the passage of time and each of us sees the events through our individual experiences and sensibilities. Still, we retain the same general sense of our lives back then, the same nostalgia for a bygone era and shared history which, in broad strokes, is one and the same. We also love each other intensely, a love so strong it is almost painful, and which expressed itself over that weekend in one long hug: holding onto one another, silent, crying.

Sarah and Ximena couldn't understand that our "family emulations" didn't even appear in all those pages. They had been particularly traumatic for the two of them. And so I decided to mention them even though in that strange selective process that takes place in memory I had almost erased the experience. The only way I can begin to explain all that is that in our family my parents' extremism, including those criticism self-criticism sessions, coexisted with a great love which went a long way toward neutralizing that sort of craziness. This is how this book came into being, through dialogues with many different people who read the manuscript and gave me their impressions. Some of them are protagonists of one part of this story or another; others hadn't even been born when it took place.

I spent 2007 and 2008 polishing that first version of the book, and many people contributed to the process. At the end of 2008 my mother translated my text into English and in January of 2009 she again came to visit us in Uruguay. At that point she and I had a fascinating





experience: for several hours each day she would read the English text out loud and I would correct her translation. Listening to my story in another language enabled me to discover a number of repetitions and issues that seemed unclear. I was able to improve the Spanish version after working on the English one.

As I was writing this book life produced yet another surprise. At the end of 2008 the world sank into a crisis as serious as any we've known. What at first seemed a problem limited to a rash of mortgage defaults in the United States quickly spread to include badly bundled loans, suspect derivatives, and a breakdown of the entire credit system, expanding throughout other areas of the economy. This has now become a world-wide economic depression. Concepts that just a few months before seemed antiquated or absurd (state control of the economy, nationalization of the banks, etc.) suddenly seemed respectable options, and ideas that had dominated economic theory for the past twenty years no longer seemed so infallible. All of a sudden the "free market" may not be the "natural" way of organizing the economy. The notion that history can be explained through class struggle seems interesting once again. And even the president of the United States has publicly stated that labor unions aren't part of the problem but part of the solution. I think that crisis expresses the profound mismatch inherent to capitalist society, which optimizes profit and not the satisfaction of human needs. Its logic is destructive both to the internal equilibrium of society and to the equilibrium between human beings and nature. One has the sense that this may be the crisis that forces all humanity to recognize the need for a different type of social organization. But what do we, who dreamed of social revolution, have to offer in this dilemma? The experiments of the past century demonstrated a little of what a world centered on human need might look like, but they also proved unable to devise a sustainable alternative. In a situation like this, an alternative is necessary. These are among the most exciting moments in history. Crises are enormous opportunities to invent new and workable solutions. Young people today are the ones who must show us the way, and we all have the obligation of contributing the experiences of the past.

I am grateful to many people for their help with this book. My gratitude goes especially to Margaret Randall, Robert Cohen, Ximena Mondragón, Sarah Mondragón, Sergio Mondragón, Martín Randall, Igor Paklin, Igor León, Daniel Viñar, Marcelo Bertalmío, Rafael Grompone, Laura Carlevaro, Lía Randall, Daniel Randall, Arturo Arango, Pablo Carlevaro, Emilia Carlevaro, Andrés Elena, Vivian Elena, Alex Fleites, Gadiel Seroussi, Nicolás Duffau, Alvaro Giusto, Omar Gil, Jules Lobel, and Jane Norling. I also want to acknowledge the generosity of Jean Michel Morel and Guillermo Sapiro who several times invited me abroad to work. These trips make it possible for me to escape the pressure of everyday commitments and allow me to walk the streets of Paris, Barcelona or Minneapolis; they gave me the context and time to concentrate and write.

This book is organized in chapters which are built around the moments and spaces that most profoundly shaped my years in Cuba. They don't possess a clearly chronological struc-

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ture, although several make more sense if read in the order in which they appear. I have decided to refer to certain themes from different angles, sometimes by way of time travel both forward and back. I hope in this way to have presented a story in which everything falls into place.

As I worked on this project I was faced with a number of questions: should I write what I felt back then or analyze those times from today's perspective? I decided to place myself as much as possible in the times in which the story unfolds. I wanted to transmit the atmosphere and also what we believed so many years ago. There are many references to figures or movements that marked the 1960s and '70s. Insofar as possible I have retained the language of the times. I don't believe it's possible to describe what we felt back then in the "politically correct" language of today. By the same token time passes more rapidly than we imagine, and commonly understood concepts may no longer be understood as they once were. In a few short years words have come to mean something very different from their original definitions. In every historic period language is the vehicle through which the dominant ideology exerts its influence. Many friends who read this manuscript told me they felt I needed to define certain basic concepts. They said many readers simply wouldn't understand what I was saying. After giving this some thought I decided not to burden the book with too much of this sort of explanation but rather to invite those who are interested to consult other books that further explain different aspects of this history. I've included a section at the end with brief descriptions of some of the names and organizations mentioned throughout.

There is one concept, though, which I would like to clarify, and this is the concept of revolution. The Cuban Revolution is the protagonist of this book, but new generations have grown up with the language made popular by Ronald Reagan, a language that completely distorts the meaning of a great many words. Today we associate the concept of revolution much more with technological or scientific advances, or with the efforts of neo-conservatives to destroy the tools society developed in order to support the weakest among us. A revolution is the process through which the social structure undergoes profound change in a very short period of time. In the context of this book I use the definition most commonly used in the decade of the sixties of the last century, that is in reference to social revolution and more specifically the effort to destroy capitalism, a system based on class differences and the exploitation of the majority by a small group in power, and to replace it with a more just social organization aimed at satisfying human need and not simply producing profit for the few. In this context a revolutionary is someone who actively works for the revolution, often devoting all his or her energies toward that end, and a counterrevolutionary is someone who actively opposes the revolution. Struggle, in this context, is the act of making social revolution.

A second question I encountered while writing this book has to do with the depth with which I felt it necessary to explain certain aspects of the Cuban Revolution. Often one comes across concepts that are simply incomprehensible to today's readers. In such cases





I give a brief explanation, perhaps including some critique from today's point of view. It is difficult to do this impartially. It's been more than twenty years since I've lived in Cuba, and it's hard to be critical from the outside. As the years go by my respect for what the Cuban Revolution has been able to achieve grows exponentially. At the same time I am more and more convinced that mine was an extraordinary privilege: to have been there then.

A third issue concerns the tension between Cuba's story and the story of my life. I decided to approach this from various angles. I am the one telling this story: someone who has lived a particular life, product of a particular time and place. My vision of the Cuban experience is profoundly shaped by my personal experience. Cuba, back then, was at the center of a space that stretched far beyond its own borders. I inhabited that space. I witnessed something unprecedented and unique: a people constructing a world of justice and solidarity, a joyous population touching the sky with its fingertips.





BEFORE WE BEGIN

I want to begin by introducing some of the people central to this story, those already in my life when we arrived in Cuba.

My mother, Margaret Randall, was born in New York, but when she was still young her family went to live in New México. Family lore has it that they crossed the country by car and my grandparents fell in love with Albuquerque. In 1947 it was nothing more than a large town. The family was made up of my grandfather, who sold men's clothing and then worked as a music teacher in the public schools, my grandmother and their three children: my mother, her sister Ann and brother John. Their love for travel might well have influenced their descendants down through the generations; they would save all year and during the summer vacations visit some remote part of the world.

My mother was very young when she went back to New York. She knew she wanted to be a writer and that was the city with the Bohemian lifestyle she sought. She worked at a variety of jobs: as a waitress, a model for painters, a secretary. But above all, she was growing as a poet. In New York she came in contact with the avant-garde writers of the time. It was then that she decided to have a child, and chose Joel Oppenheimer as its father.

I was born in October of 1960. My mother was an incipient poet still feeling her way. She worked for an organization in support of the Spanish refugees from that country's Civil War. Joel was a published poet who spent a good part of his time at The Lions Head Tavern, in Greenwich Village. My mother was clear she wanted a child without a man in the picture, and as a result she and I had a very special connection. It was a connection that comes from being alone in the world, despite the many friends we always had.

It is hard to imagine what a baby a few months old perceives of the ambiance in which he is immersed. I have absorbed the stories my mother has told me and can almost imagine what our life was like back then. She was a young woman full of ideas and struggling with the responsibility for both our lives. This was when my mother began her political awakening and I accompanied her to her first demonstrations. She often spent nights at a poetry reading, art opening, or in a bar filled with alcohol and smoke. And there I was, beside her,





an empty metal film roller always clutched in my fist. That was my “Linus blanket” at the time. I was the darling of all those who peopled her community. From my small refuge I looked out at that world, breathing its air and hearing its music. My mother and I developed a communication that didn’t need words for expression. We became a sort of single being, moving together through more than 50 years.

Life in New York wasn’t easy for my mother. She was a single parent who hadn’t finished her university studies and had to work hard to fill two mouths and keep her literary aspirations alive. At a certain point she thought life might be easier elsewhere, and without thinking too much about it put us on a bus and off we went.

And so we arrived in México. It was 1961 and I was ten months old. My mother had a few contacts given to her by friends in New York. With her baby in arms she knocked at Arnaldo Orfila and Laurette Séjourné’s door. They received us with a warmth that would exist as long as they did. In a relatively short time my mother became part of our new country’s cultural life. She was only 25. When I think of her audacity I’m amazed.



Not long after this my mother met the poet Sergio Mondragón. They were married and a few years later my sisters Sarah and Ximena were born. We lived in a part of the city called Prado Churubusco, a couple of blocks from a river bordered by trees and green. Beyond the river was open country and in the distance the majestic volcanoes Popocatepetl and Ixtlacihuatl were drawn against the sky. I know I heard English as a baby, but Spanish quickly took its place. Sergio was Mexican. In the neighborhood I played in Spanish, at school I

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learned in Spanish, and Spanish became the language we spoke at home.

My mother and Sergio founded a bilingual literary magazine, *El Corno Emplumado* / *The Plumed Horn*, that soon made important connections between the literary communities of North and Latin America. My parents worked at home a lot; the magazine was truly a family enterprise. Our house bustled with activity. My parents' friends were always around: poets and painters from México, the United States and many Latin American or European countries who passed through the country.

My memories of those years are of a happy family. We lived in a large house with two maids who lived there with us; school was pleasant. Life seemed to move gently, along a pre-designated path, but filled with interesting events and surprising people. Each Wednesday we would accompany Laurette to Teotihuacán where she was excavating the Palace of the Butterflies. My best friend's mother was an astronomer and took us to her observatory.

In 1967 my mother and Sergio divorced. For a while we lived alone with my mother. People from all over continued to show up at the house, to stay for a day or a couple of weeks. One of these was Robert Cohen. He and my mother fell in love and so began his life with us. Not long after this my sister Ana was born.

Sarah, Ximena and I went to a school called Bartolomé Cossío. It had been founded by Spanish Republicans who had taken refuge in México and was based on the Freinet method—focused on developing each student's creativity. Most of my fellow students were the children of intellectuals. When the 1968 student movement began most of the parents participated in one way or another. Sergio and my mother did too. They became activists and the magazine also clearly defended the movement. A ferocious repression was unleashed. The magazine ceased to exist. Several of my parents' friends had to go into hiding or were arrested. Our life was turned upside down.





LEAVING MEXICO AND ARRIVING IN CUBA

It was 1969 and I was eight years old. A Canadian couple named Alice and Bob arrived at the house; they were probably in their early twenties. They had hitch-hiked their way from Canada and hoped to reach Patagonia. They stayed with us for a couple of weeks. Alice and Bob fascinated me from the moment we met. He knew how to make sandals: he used rubber from old tires for the soles and long leather strips that he attached with tools he carried in a bag. He taught me the rudiments of his craft. Before long I was asking my mother to let me travel south with them; I wanted to go as far as Panama. My mother thought about it and for once resisted the entirety of my plan. "You can go," she said, "but only as far as the Mexican-Guatemalan border."

I was bursting with energy. Right away we began the preparations for our journey. We filled a backpack with bare necessities and in a few days we were off. My mother drove us to the outskirts of the city where our adventure began. We were like a small family. Alice had long straight hair; together they were a handsome couple. At eight years of age I might have been a bit too big to pass myself off as their son. One of the first people to stop and give us a ride was a very rich man in a sports car. He took us to his ranch with its horse stables and invited us to a meal. For a few days this is how things went. Bob and Alice and I communicated with one another by using a few words and lots of gestures. They didn't speak Spanish and I knew almost no English. Sometimes we just walked along on the side of the road. Then a car would stop and take us a distance.



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We got to the area of the hallucinogenic mushroom, one of the stops Alice and Bob had in mind. I remember a hilly landscape. We entered a shack where there were a number of other people. Everyone was eating mushrooms and some seemed to be drunk. I wanted to taste the mushrooms. Alice and Bob told me just to wait in a corner of the shack; they said this was something for adults, not me. But I insisted and they finally let me have one small bite. Its taste is engraved in my memory: similar to that of any ordinary mushroom. The tiny morsel they let me have didn't affect me at all. We spent a few hours there. I watched as they laughed and cried, and then we left.

A couple of days later in a mountainous area we were walking along the highway and it began to get dark. Torrential rains from a few days before had provoked a landslide and the road was cut in two. A lot of cars were waiting, unable to get through. To our left the mountains rose up and to our right there was a river down below. It wasn't a good situation. We didn't really know what to do. People had gotten out of their cars and were standing around talking, trying to figure out how to deal with the problem.

I don't know how it was that some people appeared and offered to help us. They came from the other side of that mountain of mud and rock that cut the route. They were hippies and offered to let us sleep that night at their camp. One of the men was huge, with a full beard. He picked me up and carried me; with the help of ropes we were able to make it past the landslide. Later we followed him to a small waterfall where we washed, and then on to their camp: a collection of tents and small shacks deep in the mountains. There were lots of people there. Some were sitting with their legs crossed, meditating. Every once in a while someone completely naked would walk by; nobody seemed to care. Many of those people had long hair and beards. They were all very nice and kind.

They gave us food. The adults talked among themselves. I observed, listened, absorbing everything with all my pores open. The next morning, we got up and had breakfast with these new friends who had taken us in. They wanted to accompany us to a nearby village where we would be able to get a bus. But this didn't turn out to be possible. The whole camp was surrounded by armed men. Now I realize they must have been policemen but at the time they seemed like soldiers because of their uniforms and weapons.

Without much effort, because there was no resistance at all on the part of those who practiced peace and love, the armed men made us get into some buses with newspaper covering the windows so we wouldn't be seen. The trip back to México City took twelve hours: a fraction of the five days we had spent walking and hitch hiking with packs on our backs. They took us to what seemed to be a small jail. Each of us was given a thin mattress which we carried to the cells. In each cell there were a couple of bunk beds. We slept there that night and the next morning they let us all out into a patio. I was the only child among all those adults. Everyone treated me very well, with a kind of special consideration. They told me stories and someone gave me a toy made of bits of wood.

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I asked if I could call my mother on the phone. I tried to explain to those in charge that she lived in México City and that these people I was with were friends, not my parents. But they didn't believe me. Finally they brought me to an office where Alice was yelling something in English. She was furious. I remember her hair flying out in all directions and her impressive screams. I suppose that she was trying to explain that I wasn't their child and that they should let me go home to my mother. The police asked me to translate what she was saying but I couldn't. They didn't believe me when I told them I didn't speak English or they Spanish.

I think we were there some thirty-six hours in all. It's a number that is engraved in my mind along with many other statistics I've kept stored in my memory's pack. After a while they put the three of us in a car and we headed toward the airport. On the way, they stopped at my house. A police woman took me from the car and rang the bell. My mother came to the door and saw me there. The police woman had me by the hair. She told my mother she should cut my hair short and then she left. I ran upstairs to my room and began to sob; I'd been holding back the tears all that time. My friends were deported that very night. Alice telephoned from Canada to make sure I was alright and I never heard from them again.

This was June, 1969. One year earlier had been the great student movement of 1968 with its immense demonstrations, open air concerts, poetry, and occupied campuses where communal life and free love flowed. My long hair was a symbol of all that which had been destroyed in the massacre at Tlatelolco and which I had lived so intensely at my parents' side. Sergio as well as my mother had participated actively. Now the movement was preparing to commemorate its dead, and the government was taking some preventive measures. My story takes place in this context.

Back then long hair was important to my sense of identity. Sometimes I would walk through the neighborhood market and someone would whistle or say something, confusing me with a girl. I remember a poetry reading before masses of students, and nighttime meetings at the house in which my mother conspired with her friends. I can still see the feet of the corpses sticking out from under white sheets at the National Autonomous University of México's School of Medicine when the students took over the campus. We children were playing in the midst of it all and somehow happened to be there to see the stretchers.

The morning after the massacre my mother drove us through the streets surrounding Tlatelolco Plaza; we could breathe the tension in the air. One of my mother's comrades who survived by hiding among the dead made it to our house and told us his story. Nineteen-sixty-eight was an explosion of joy, poetry, and life. Then it was as if a lead curtain descended upon everything. Silence, fear, and repression took over. El Corno Emplumado was very affected by all this and eventually could no longer publish. Our lives changed completely. At this point Robert lived with us; my mother and Sergio had been separated for a while.

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And so the long hair that touched my shoulders every time I threw my head back had become a kind of symbol I carried with pride. A few hours after the police brought me home Robert took me to a neighborhood barber shop so they could cut my hair. It felt like defeat but was necessary at the time. At the house a lot had happened during my brief absence. Two men who had passed themselves off as being from México's Social Security Administration had knocked on the door saying they'd been told my mother was running a sweat shop without paying social security for her employees. My mother was sick in bed, so Robert received these intruders. They asked for my mother's passport and escaped with it in their hands. My parents tried to solicit new documentation but quickly realized this had all been a ruse in order to take her passport and immobilize her. Who knew what might happen next. Several friends had been arrested or forced into hiding. A few years before my mother had acquired Mexican nationality and now her change of citizenship had become a trap.

My parents began contacting everyone they could. My mother had visited Cuba twice over the previous two years and already had plans to move us there for a while, hoping to participate first hand in the revolutionary process. In the light of what had happened she and Robert decided to move these plans up and had begun packing what we would take with us. The Cuban embassy offered its help. My mother had been unable to communicate with me, believing me to be somewhere in the southern part of the country traveling with Alice and Bob. The original agreement was that when we reached the Guatemalan border they'd call, put me on a bus back, and she would pick me up at the México City terminal. While they waited to hear they were preparing our departure.

So when that police woman appeared at the door, holding me by the hair, in a certain sense it was a relief. Now we were together again, which was the most important thing. From then on we stayed together constantly. My mother was thirty-two at that time; she was the center of our family. Sarah was six, Ximena five, and Ana was an infant of three months—she'd been born in March. Robert had become a part of the family, and in spite of his scant twenty-three years had begun to play a father's role. I was eight.

During the next week or so we visited the Cuban embassy several times. It had a big garden inhabited by a small doe that looked like Bambi. I was fascinated by that doe. Finally, the day came when we would leave for Cuba. We all went together to the office where my mother was supposed to pick up her new passport. The idea was that we would go from there directly to the airport. We waited in the car while my mother was in that office obtaining what we assumed would be a routine renewal. After a while she emerged with the news that they weren't going to give her the passport after all. We headed home and as we approached our neighborhood could see that the whole area was staked out with police. We just kept on going then and never returned. We hid in the homes of various friends. I remember staying in each house just a few days. We children were forbidden to look out the windows or play outside to avoid being detected.

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I remember Laurette and Arnaldo's place, a large house that always seemed especially welcoming. Arnaldo in his own youth had taken part in the great 1918 student strike in Córdoba, Argentina; which had produced the concept of the Latin American University with its characteristic social commitment and autonomous governance exercised by professors, students, and alumni. In 1969 Arnaldo headed the Siglo XXI publishing house. He was one of the most important figures on the Mexican intellectual scene. Laurette was an archaeologist and spoke with a strong French accent. It wasn't until many years later that I realized her previous husband had been the Russian revolutionary Victor Serge. Laurette and Arnaldo always offered us chocolates. They were like older siblings to my mother and took us in without question.

We also hid out for a few days at Maru's house. She was another close family friend, who had also been my grade school English teacher. Her place was smaller but equally welcoming. Watching television there one night we saw man step for the first time onto the surface of the moon.

Meanwhile my mother and Robert were looking for a way out of the country. Many friends tried to help. Some of them spoke with important politicians but none of these were able to solve the problem. We knew we wouldn't be able to hide forever. My mother asked her parents to take us children in for a while, but their response was "you should have thought of your political involvement before deciding to have children, or of your children before becoming politically involved." Sergio offered to take us to his Zen master, a man he venerated and whom I had met on several occasions when I went with him to meditation. My mother refused. Finally she decided to send us to Cuba where the Revolution would care for us until she and Robert could find a way out of México.

After a month in hiding, Robert—who was able to move about freely—took us to the airport. I don't know how but he was able to accompany us onto the plane, buckle us into our seats, and kiss us goodbye. This is how we left México. We were on a Cubana aircraft, a little bit like being in Cuba itself. At the age of eight I felt responsible for the four of us. My sisters were still very young, including Ana who was an infant, so I was the oldest, the "one in charge." The plane's crew was in the know of course and treated us with great kindness. They invited us into the cockpit to see all the levers and buttons. The pilot sat Ana on his lap and she peed on his pants. The flight attendants gave us all sorts of special attention. Behind us in México were our home, our school, our family. There hadn't even been time to say goodbye to our friends or to Poppy Sergio. The worst part was not knowing if we would see our parents again.

Still, I don't remember this as a sad or bitter trip. At that time in my life I lived each moment intensely, as if it were a great adventure, and tried to absorb each detail. The plane landed in Havana. There a Cuban compañero was waiting for us and he brought us to a special clinic on 72nd Street in Miramar. It might seem strange that I refer to this man as a compañero

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when I can't even remember his name. But perhaps this is symbolic of the fact that we were crossing a kind of ideological/affective frontier. Entering Cuba everyone was a *compañero*, which was a way of saying a brother or friend who shared the same path of struggle. In the Cuba of those years one never heard *mister* or *missus*, only *compañero* and *compañera*.

It was July 25, 1969. The streets were filled with placards and decorated to celebrate July 26th, the day of the assault on Moncada Barracks in 1953 which marked the beginning of the Cuban Revolution. They kept us in the clinic for three days so they could check out our health. It was in an old house that once belonged to the aristocracy, with a beautiful garden filled with huge trees and stone benches. Ana had an intestinal condition that kept her there for several days. The clinic's assistant director was a woman named Hortensia. She fell in love with Ana and requested permission to take her home and care for her until her parents arrived. The permission was granted.

Sarah, Ximena and I were taken to a special summer camp at Santa María del Mar, east of Havana. Several beach houses were grouped together as a children's camp. Between one house and another were open fields filled with vegetation, military trenches, and some coastal fortifications. I would later discover that the entire island was prepared to resist



invasion so this sort of fortification was common. For us kids it was a magical place where we could play hide and seek and wage make believe battles. The houses had belonged to those who had gone into exile and they'd been confiscated by the Revolution. They weren't large or luxurious, just the summer homes of the middle class. At this camp I met boys and girls from many parts of the world, sons and daughters of revolutionaries who for one reason or another had had to send their children to Cuba. This was one of the many practical ways in which the Cuban Revolution expressed its solidarity: by opening its doors and providing a safe rearguard for the struggles going on in different parts of the world.





When we arrived my sisters and I carried the anguish of perhaps not seeing our parents again. We thought our problems were the worst, but were soon able to put them in perspective. At that camp we met children whose problems were truly enormous. I remember two little brothers who had come from Guinea Bissau, where the PAIGC was fighting for independence. One of them had a wooden leg; a land mine had blown his off. Another kid was covered with scar tissue where he'd been burned by napalm across his neck and chest. There were children from other African and Latin American countries. Several had lost their parents. And so our own problems dissolved in a kind of swamp of horrors.

Sarah and Ximena were in one of the girls' dormitories. Every day we'd get together to play, go down to the beach, or eat. There were all sorts of activities: chess championships, bike races, group games. The Cubans had organized a real vacationland of which my memories are pleasant rather than anguished or filled with fear. They had been able to create a really wonderful place for us all. The Africans and Cubans shared a great talent for music. Whenever a few of them got together beneath a tree it meant the creation of a combo with some old box and a few sticks, and the music would begin. I still remember one line of a song that went: "mi limón, mi limonero, entero me gusta a mí..."

At night I would look at the stars and it was as if I could talk to my mother. We had said we would communicate in this way and it allowed me to pretend to be strong during the day and let my anxiety out when I was alone at night. Who knows how many of those children did something similar? From time to time we would receive a brief but comforting telegram from my mother or from Robert: "We're okay. We love you." Time passed and we discovered many things that were new to us. Guao was a poisonous plant; people said if you had sensitive skin its shadow alone could give you a rash. Some of the kids painted their names on their forearms with the leaves of that plant. The letters were raised pus-filled pimples. Sarah and Ximena came down with impetigo and were taken to the camp clinic for a few days. I had never seen anyone with so many sores.

One day, as we were playing chess and ping pong the loudspeaker announced Ho Chi Minh's death. I remember the silence and the knot in my throat. Uncle Ho, as we called him, was a legendary figure, the leader of the Vietnamese people who at that time were fighting a war of aggression by the United States. We all admired him: a mixture of wisdom, his eternal smile and supreme modesty. He seemed like a fragile grandfather, yet he had stood up to the mightiest power on earth. All of our personal wars, imaginary and real, had a reference point in Vietnam and a symbol in Uncle Ho.

At this camp all the kids who had family or friends were given weekend passes. Of course very few of those there had this option, and for the month and few days we were there we didn't spend many weekends away. The few I remember were when Tania Díaz Castro, a friend of my mother and of Sergio, came for us and took us to her home. She was a journalist who worked for Bohemia Magazine. Her home was inviting, and she managed to provide

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us with some of the family warmth we so badly needed. Later we lost touch with her and many years later I read in the paper that she had been arrested for “counterrevolutionary activities.” I think she’s still in Cuba, continuing to fight for what she believes.

This is the only letter I was able to write to my parents. I transcribe it with the spelling and grammar of my eight years:

Dear Mommy and Robert: I hope you are well and Goyo fell from a bicycle and hurt my arm and tummy. Don't be sad, it wasn't serious. Ximena fell and she bleeds, it wasn't serious neither. And nothing happened to Sara. I haven't seen Anna because she is in a creche with friends. Saris and Ximena are in House 18 and I am in House 9 here at the summer camp that you told me about before we came. We are well, there are a lot of flying ants, they even get into your nose, they are very annoying, my sisters and I every morning we go to the beach and swim out about ten meters from the shore. I Goyo have been looking for a pen for three days but I haven't found one so I had to write this with crayons. So you can see with how much love I am writing this letter. Please come soon, every night I ask it of the stars. I have two friends, one from Guinea and the other from Cuba. I am writing to you with so much love and almost with tears in my eyes. Goyo, Saris, Ximena and Anna.²

While we were in Cuba my mother and Robert managed to escape México. Their journey took them across the border into the United States, my mother disguised, with false documents and for a brief part of the way in a refrigerated truck hidden among the sides of beef. Robert was able to travel legally to New York where he visited his family and then get to Cuba via Madrid. My mother took a bus north to Canada where she boarded a plane for France. Without leaving the airport she made a connection to Prague, where the Cubans were expecting her. At the time this was one of the places one could most easily pass “to the other side.” The western world and so-called “Socialist camp” were separated by a line that was difficult to traverse. The plan was for her to travel from Prague to Cuba, where we would be waiting. But there was only one flight a week between Prague and Havana back

2 “The original Spanish reads: “Querida mami y Robert—Espero que esten bien y Goyo me caí de una vicieta y me erí el vraso y la pansa. No te pongas triste pues no fue grave. Ximena se callo y le salió sangre tampoco fue grave. Y Sara no le pasó nada, a Anna no la e visto porque ella está en un círculo infantil con los amigos, Saris y Ximena en la Casa 18 de Internados y yo en la 9 de Internados de la escuela, que dijiste antes de venir, estamos bien aquí ai mucha hormiga volando que se te meten asta la naris, son mui molesta aquí y mis hermanas todos los días en la mañana vamos a la plalla yo y mis ermanas nos metemos al mar como 10 metros de la arena, yo goyo e estado tres días buscando plumon pero no encuentro y tube que aser la carta con colores. Así ves con que cariño te la escribo la carta. Por fabor ben pronto todas las noches se lo pido a las estrellas. Yo tengo dos amigos un de Jinea y otro de Cuba. Se las escribe con mucho amor y casi lágrimas en los ojos, Goyo Saris Ximena y Anna.”





then, and she was stuck in the former city for nineteen days before being able to get a seat on that flight. So Robert showed up first, and his arrival marked the beginning of the end of our anguished wait.

I don't remember the details of Robert's arrival. The Cuban government gave us a room at the Hotel Capri. This was a luxury hotel that before the Revolution had been the property and refuge of the mafia. Now it served the country's meager tourism and was also where they housed invited guests. We had a room and restaurant privileges there until they were able to find us an apartment or house. We ended up at the Capri for five months. During the time we lived in Cuba, we would visit in hotels like that one many friends who had also arrived as political refugees. In the same Hotel Capri Andrés Cultelli's family also lived for a few years; Cultelli was a Tupamaro leader, and his daughters would become good friends. Antonio Castro and Domingo León, Venezuelan revolutionaries who would later have an important presence in our lives, were at the Havana Libre. When they arrived in Cuba Laura Carlevaro and her family would be housed at the Hotel Deauville; Laura would later become my life companion. Each hotel had its group of refugees. We were at the Capri at the end of 1969, well before the great wave of Latin American refugees sought refuge on the island in the seventies. Without realizing it, we were among the first of what would be an important forced migration.

My mother arrived a week after Robert. I don't remember the physical details of our reunion: whether I caught sight of her when the elevator opened or if she surprised us by knocking on the door of our hotel room. My memory only holds the intense emotion of our finally being together again after two and a half months of separation, such fear and so many adventures. By this time, we were accustomed to revolutionary Cuba. My mother and Robert had been able to escape the repression in México and had traveled halfway round the world to join us. Our joy was enormous. Now we would begin a new life and wouldn't be apart again. It felt like everything we had experienced over the past several months had been some sort of initiation. Now we were part of what was being built in Cuba: the Revolution, Socialism, a whole new world.

The air we breathed was salty and humid, music was everywhere, the Cubans' joy was contagious. The walls of the city screamed revolutionary slogans to the four directions and in brilliant color: "The future belongs entirely to Socialism; Imperialism will be left with nothing more than crisis and defeat," "Men die but the party is immortal," "Homeland or death, we will win!" Che had been murdered in Bolivia less than two years before but throughout all of Latin America hundreds of combatants were following his example: Turcios Lima and Yon Sosa in Guatemala, Carlos Fonseca in Nicaragua, Hugo Blanco in Peru, Douglas Bravo in Venezuela, the Peredo brothers in Bolivia, Raul Sendic in Uruguay, Miguel Enríquez in Chile, Roberto Santucho in Argentina, Carlos Marighela in Brazil. Even in the very heart of the United States the Black Panthers, the Weathermen, and the Puerto Rican Independence fighters were active. We believed the wave of revolution was advancing implacably and we

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were part of that dynamic. Although numerous, our defeats seemed isolated and momentary. At the age of eight I was immersed in this world and my daily life reflected it.

As I've said, Ana³ had been cared for by Hortensia during the two and a half months it took my parents to join us. She adored my sister and took good care of her. By the time my mother arrived Ana had spent half her life with this woman and it would have been hard simply to take her back from one day to the next. For a while we made daily visits, each longer than the one before, in order to allow Ana to get used to us again. Finally, she returned to our family. But she would continue to visit Hortensia for many years.

My mother arrived in Cuba one day before my ninth birthday. By this time summer vacation was over and I was at boarding school where we lived from Sunday night through Friday. She came to visit one afternoon and brought a little cake which we ate together in a park across the street from my dorm. It was a tiny triangle with a couple of trees and a bus stop.

A few months later we were assigned our apartment, a beautiful place on Línea Street between M and N. It was a few blocks from the sea, in the neighborhood called Vedado. The apartment was really something: it occupied the whole ninth floor of a small building. There were five bedrooms and two baths as well as a small room that had once been another half bath. A large kitchen, living room and dining room, and a glassed-in terrace that looked out to sea completed the picture. When we moved in several neighbors embraced us warmly and with great openness. Alicia, who lived on the fourth floor, showed us her apartment. She opened a kitchen cabinet. There was nothing inside, not one can or package of food, only a little sign that read with pride: "empty but with dignity."

The Cubans were going through a very rough time. The fighting that had broken out in the Escambray and other mountainous areas of the country had ended only a few years earlier. The Revolution had established itself politically and militarily but the economic blockade was making trade more difficult and there was little in the stores. Each family had its ration book guaranteeing that everyone would receive a basic quota of food and clothing, soap and other basic necessities. Luxuries were inexistent. And many items were considered luxuries: from a wrist watch to a razor, from a piece of soap to an automobile. The general philosophy was aimed at achieving equality. When the government decided to offer something new on the ration book it was because there was enough for everyone. Throughout 1969 and 1970 there really were very few consumer goods.

Food was scarce and had been calculated so as to assure the minimum number of calories per person per day. That first year at school we received the same monotonous ration every day. Lunch or dinner was always rice, split peas, and fish—sometimes only canned sardines. For breakfast we had coffee with milk and a roll. I discovered that a neighboring school, specializing in training athletes, complemented each meal with a yogurt. This was a decisive factor in my making the decision to switch to that school the following year. It wasn't that

3 For many years now my sister has decided to call herself Ana. I have decided to respect her decision.





we went hungry, and I don't even think we minded the monotony of our diet that much, but the kids were curious about those delicacies they'd never tasted and knew existed from their parents' stories or from the movies. And so I became a storyteller. I often found myself surrounded by a circle of friends. With great detail I would describe the texture and try to evoke the taste of those things they had never had: butter, cheese, strawberries. At school that year I wrote a story about a banquet at the Rockefeller mansion with every luxurious detail spelled out. The menu consisted of rice, black beans and chicken.

In those years people from all parts of the world came to Cuba to collaborate with the Revolution. Technicians from the Soviet Union, East Germany, Bulgaria or Czechoslovakia. Comrades from all over Latin America and Europe. Engineers, agronomists, mathematicians, biologists, doctors. The Cubans decided to offer a special ration book to these foreigners. Their food was rationed too, but their



quotas gave them the right to things Cubans themselves didn't receive. The government didn't want to submit these people, who had given up so much in their solidarity with the Cuban Revolution, to the same sacrifices they assumed. When we arrived we were offered this foreigners ration book but my mother refused it. She wanted to follow the example of Roque Dalton, whose family had already been on the island for a while. Like them we asked for the same ration books all Cubans received. This was symbolic of how our family integrated itself into Cuban life. Our frequent contact with foreign visitors and the trips we made outside the country during the years we were there undoubtedly gave us certain privileges. We were able to obtain extra clothing or a television set. Still, I believe we lived as much as possible like an ordinary Cuban citizen. Like everyone else, and in spite of

the occasional extras, in our daily lives we too lacked many things, from soap to food. In a very few years I spoke with such a Cuban accent that several of my classmates doubted my sincerity when I said I was from the United States. I had to show them my passport to prove I wasn't lying.

Roque Dalton was very important in our lives. He was a very close friend of my mother, a great poet and a revolutionary who ended up becoming a legend, not only in the country of his birth, El Salvador, but throughout Latin America and especially in the intellectual com-

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munity of which Havana was the center at the time. The unity of thought and action he embodied was one of the things that most impressed us. At the beginning of the seventies he lived in Havana but within a couple of years he was gone. He trained clandestinely in Vietnam, then returned to his country. As a result of internal differences he was assassinated by members of his own organization in 1975. This crime affected us all profoundly. When we arrived in Cuba Roque's family was already living in an apartment in Vedado, not far from ours. His sons, Juan José, Roquito and Jorgito, were a little older than we were. We would spend time at their apartment and in a certain sense they were our welcoming committee.

Our rapid flight from México meant we hadn't been able to bring much with us. We kids couldn't take our toys. I'd always wanted a cap pistol but everything was rationed in Cuba at the time. Not only food and clothing but toys as well. On a single day each year every Cuban child had a right to buy three toys: one basic and two additional (the first distinguished itself by being more expensive). Days before the appointed time the store windows filled and one had to stand in long lines in order to be among the first to shop. Each child was assigned his or her neighborhood store. All the kids had a right to the same number of toys but not all the toys were the same. There might be thirty bicycles at each store, so you'd still be able to buy one basic toy but it might not be the longed-for bike. It was important to be first in line in order to have the best choice. To avoid problems, in the coming years all manner of methods were tried out: they experimented with giving out random numbers, alphabetically by name or numerically by telephone number, but matching justice to scarcity always proved difficult.

We'd arrived on July 25th and it would be a while before the next toy distribution. My mother mentioned this to Roque and almost immediately he asked his son if he didn't want to give me his pistol. He asked this with that tone of voice that is half question half command, and leaves a child no way out. That's how Roquito came to give me his cap pistol, a copy of a .45 caliber. Roque told me it was such a perfect copy I could use it to hijack an airplane. Only years later, when that pistol had lost bits and pieces to my childhood wars and Roque was long gone did I understand the significance of that gift; and I've kept it among my treasured possessions. Some years later Roquito confessed he'd hated me profoundly that day, as only a child in such a situation can. I think it was the following year that the Cubans switched the much-awaited toy sale to June 6th, International Children's Day. Maybe they wanted to choose a date as far away as possible from Christmas or the Three Kings.





BOARDING SCHOOL

When my mother arrived in Cuba I'd just begun my fourth year of elementary school. I don't know who decided what kind of program we would attend. The authorities had put us in boarding school, perhaps thinking it would be a while before our parents arrived. At the time the ideal educational model in Cuba was the boarding school (we called them *becas*): children stayed there from Sunday night to Friday and went home Friday afternoon to be with their families over the weekend. They gave us notebooks and pencils, and we had access to all necessary textbooks. Our meals and clothing were also free—uniforms as well as work clothes, including shoes—and we received an education designed with the best intentions in the world and with the available resources. Many Cuban children were *becados*, especially those who came from the poorest families or lived in remote areas. These boarding schools were collective spaces where the Revolution hoped to form the “new man”⁴ who would construct the new society. They also enabled their parents to “make love and revolution” while the State took responsibility for their children.

I always felt the Cuban Revolution's deep devotion to children. “Children are born to be happy” was a phrase one saw everywhere; it had become part of everyday language. And one had the impression that everyone was working to make that a reality. In a thousand different ways we received the message that children were the future and that all sacrifice would eventually benefit them. The *becas*, somewhat naïve but nonetheless efficient, were part of the practical side of this equation. Cuba's economy was in ruins⁵. There was almost nothing in the food markets, while at boarding school each child was assured food, clothing,

4 *In the 1970s the word man was still used to designate man and woman. I have respected this here. (Translator's note).*

5 *Cuba's economy was still almost entirely based on sugarcane. The word *zafra* was used to describe the sugar cane harvest, and in economic terms it was the most important word. In 1970 Fidel proposed carrying out the largest *zafra* in the country's history and produce ten million tons instead of the five or six it had managed up to that point. To this end every effort went into the harvest, to the detriment of every other part of the economy. It was a hot-headed plan that left the country exhausted, and still failed to reach its goal; although that year's eight and a half million tons was the highest on record. Everyone had put themselves out for the “*zafra de los diez millones*.”*





and study supplies. We enjoyed sports and learning, regular medical and dental attention, films, chess, and ping-pong. Soon, though, through that constant exercise of self-criticism that always characterized the Cuban revolutionary process, the policy-makers understood that it was very hard for a child of ten to be separated from his or her family that long. And they decided only to use the boarding school model from middle school on up. In the 1990s there was another evaluation and even this seemed too much; at that point a child had to be fifteen before he or she attended a *beca*. But when we arrived the process was just beginning and elementary school *becas* were still the norm.

It was in this context that when the 1969 summer vacation ended and with it the children's camp at Santa María del Mar the authorities placed us in boarding school. Ours was located in the aristocratic neighborhood of Miramar where many of the big houses had been abandoned by their owners or expropriated by the Revolution. Our school occupied several of these. Some were dormitories, others classrooms or administrative offices. My dorm was on the corner of Tenth Street and Ninth Avenue. A large garden surrounded a two-story mansion with its marble staircase and crystal chandelier in the living room. Each of its upstairs rooms had its quota of bunk beds. The garden had a number of big trees and a latticed brick wall through which we could watch the cars that passed. I remember catching sight of Fidel one day in the open jeep he used at the time. Another olive green jeep followed behind with his personal guard and a huge antenna that swayed in the breeze.

Many stories circulated about those houses: that their owners had hidden treasures in the walls before heading to The North⁶, hoping to retrieve them upon their return; that such and such a house on the next block was haunted by spirits and that was why it was boarded up; that in yet another the severed hand of a murdered man could sometimes be seen floating in the air . . . Frequently at night someone would begin telling these stories and everyone else would gather around to listen.

All of us children were *pioneros*, meaning members of Cuba's Pioneer Union: we wore the uniform and used the neckerchief with pride. Each morning, after breakfast, we'd line up in the patio and start the day with a ceremony at which we would answer the slogan "Pioneers for Communism" with the response "We will be like Che!" I had arrived with my long hair but at that school they cut it short. The rules were uniform and implacable: every boy had to use the prescribed cut: shaved all over except for a stupid tuft in front. *Malanguita* was the word they used to describe that ridiculous tuft. I don't know where they got the idea for that haircut. It reminded me of a Yankee soldier's cut. This may well have been one of the places where a subtle U.S. influence could still be felt, along with words like *parquear* or *jonrón* (for parking a car or to describe a home run in baseball). The first time I had to have my hair cut I protested in every way I knew. I told my story of being underground and our escape from México and the symbolism of my shoulder-length locks in that context. But there was nothing I could do. There I was suffering the clippers like all the other kids. I felt humiliated and never again wore my long hair.





Perhaps they cut our hair as a precaution against lice or perhaps it was just some meaningless rule. I can't help associating the practice with the fact that around the same time, in the streets of Cuba, they would cut young people's hair just because they thought it was too long, whether they were boarding school students or not. Throughout much of the rest of the world Hippies and their long locks were symbolic of rebelling against a system. In Cuba the authorities were fearful of the very same symbols of rebellion. And so I came up against one of the Cuban Revolution's contradictions, one inherent to all revolutions. Institutionalization necessarily turns the process itself into a set of rules some young people feel compelled to break.

Along with the *becas* there were other schools where children studied during the day and went home each night. At the time there weren't many of these but they did exist, giving people other options. Ana was very young; she never attended boarding school. After a few years Ximena refused to continue at the *beca* and also switched to a regular day school. My mother asked Sarah and me if we wanted to switch. Sarah knew she had the other option but by then she was in sixth grade and had her sights set on the Lenin: an elite middle and high school that had become the dream of many. So she decided to stay where she was. I didn't choose to change then either. Boarding school was the norm or at least it seemed that way to me. For a number of years, I didn't realize what I was giving up by not having time at home, and stayed in the *beca* for eight years. Sarah ended up boarding for her entire education, from first grade until she entered university.

Boarding school had its particular rhythm. Each day we had our classes and also a number of other activities. The Cubans had the idea, which had practically become dogma, of combining study with work. Along with history or math, manual labor was an integral part of a basic education. The dorms were collective and one had to comply with certain rules such as making one's bed or getting up and going to sleep at prescribed times. There was a good amount of free time in which to play or read. On Wednesday nights we had movies. Sometimes these were Russian war films or U.S. westerns. We would line up, two by two, and walk over to the large Chaplin Theater, which was later renovated and reopened as the Carlos Marx. As we went to the movies or some other activity we might cross paths with other groups of students, and on those outings I would often run into Sarah and Ximena. Sometimes I might visit them at their dorm or they would come to mine, and we'd have a chance to talk. I remember a friend with whom I often spent time in the garden. We explored the place for hours. One day, as he was munching on the black ants he would squish between his fingers, he mentioned that his mother was in prison for illegally occupied a vacant house. He said this easily, without the slightest embarrassment. The friendships one made at the *beca* were deep; the intimacy brought us close. Our enemies were dangerous for the same reason.

Sometimes I wet my bed. I remember the shame and anger I felt when I'd wake in the middle of the night, that warm and telltale wetness spreading beneath me. I would stealthily

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climb out of bed, trying not to wake the other kids, and go down to hang my sheet out to dry. In the morning I would be chagrined but I wasn't the only one in that predicament. There were always a few sheets hanging from the long lines strung across one corner of the garden, and more than one mattress drying in the sun. A woman lived in our dorm, in her own small room. We called her, and in general everyone who cared for us, aunt or uncle. There were no locked cabinets in which to keep one's things but we invented our secret places. I kept a private diary at the time, which I wrote in when I was alone and showed no one.

At the beginning of fifth grade I decided to change schools. I entered the EIDE, a training school for those interested in sports. It was only a few blocks from my old school. The idea was that young people with talent in different sports would attend this school prior to their professional training. We had to choose a sport. I asked to be admitted in swimming, and after showing what I could do was accepted. This school was close to the coast, between First and Fifth Avenues. The dining room was right on the water and the dormitories were arranged around the Cristino Naranjo, an old social club that had been very exclusive before the Revolution and now, like others, had been opened to the public. The main building had marble floors and great halls with crystal chandeliers that had once been the scene of sumptuous high society parties. Now hundreds of children ran across those marble floors to get to the locker rooms. There was a breakwater and several saltwater pools connected to the sea by a system of filters. Other installations included a gymnasium and tennis courts. The people who kept the place clean seemed to be those who had worked there before the Revolution. Only now it was a different sort of work, and we called them uncles as well. At this school cornmeal and a glass of malt were added to our daily snack.

We had classes for half a day and practiced our chosen sport the other half. Daily we swam for two or three hours. The training was pretty rigorous. Throughout the year there were a number of competitions. I only took part in one intramural meet and came in second because the kid who had won second place had been disqualified. My time wasn't good enough for me to go on to the next round. At the end of that first year they told me I wasn't really a swimmer, and offered to let me try another sport. I chose tennis, which I trained in all the next year with the same results. It was clear I wasn't going to be an athlete but by this time I had finished my primary education and had other plans for middle school.

I don't have a whole lot of memories of those early years at the becas of Miramar. I began attending them when I was almost nine and left when I was eleven. I do remember our tennis courts were next to the gym and in our free time we watched the gymnasts working out. I was smitten by a very tall very black young woman who practiced Olympic gymnastics. A few years later Aida became one of Cuba's best gymnasts and ended up representing the country internationally. I asked her to be my girlfriend but she turned me down.

One of the first big projects after the Cuban Revolution took power was the great literacy campaign: tens of thousands of young people were mobilized in 1961 to teach reading and writing to those adults who were illiterate. The idea was to make one huge initial effort,





eradicate illiteracy and then continue with follow-up programs. This produced a huge number of people on their way to a basic education. Hundreds of thousands were studying; children went to school during the day and adults took classes at night when they finished work. This wave continued and the need for classrooms, teachers and professors skyrocketed. At the same time during those early years many teachers and professors, members of the middle class, had fled to the United States. The initial solution to this complex problem was that the best teachers and professors who remained would teach the beginning teachers while these in turn taught younger students. Many spent half their days studying and the other half teaching; the pressing need allowed for no delay.

So most of my teachers at the beca were inexperienced young people, filled with good intentions and with a very rudimentary understanding of pedagogy. It wasn't unusual to be twelve or thirteen and have a teacher who was fifteen. My teachers tried to instill in me the spelling and handwriting I hadn't learned in México. My education there had been more sophisticated, involving more advanced pedagogical methods, focusing on individual expression rather than specific skills. Now my teachers tried their best but they hadn't had a great deal of training and had to deal both with the complex task of teaching and the difficulties of managing all those kids who lived on site. I look back now and I'm astonished. The general atmosphere was so all-inclusive and so filled with positive values that it allowed for experimentation with a variety of solutions without incurring any really serious problems. In the end, the results were mostly good. At least that's my impression in retrospect.

From time to time they'd punish a child, not an uncommon practice in other parts of the world back then. This punishment coexisted with the revolution's dictum that children deserved the best. In some strange way these two extremes canceled each other out. There was discipline, without which it would have been impossible to run a boarding school, but at the same time a genuine interest in the children. All in all I don't remember my time at the beca as particularly difficult.

Once in a while a teacher stood out in a negative way and it riled us all. One day I just couldn't deal any longer with the woman in charge of my dorm. In order to maintain discipline, she depended on a student of German origin who took advantage of his position to abuse the rest of us. He would mete out exaggerated punishments for any stupid infraction. For example, he might make one of us stand with our arms outstretched and a book in each hand. Sometimes, when he didn't know who had been responsible for a particular prank, he'd say: "Okay, the innocents will pay for the sinners" and the punishment would turn collective. This really pissed me off. One day, during one of these collective punishments, I ran from my school and didn't stop until I'd reached the home of some friends of my parents a couple of blocks away. I called home and they came to get me. The next day my mother brought me back to school and lodged a complaint with the director. I don't remember there being any reprisal for my escape, nor did I leave school like that again. Neither do I remember any further punishments.

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Sergio came to Cuba to see us just before traveling to Japan where he would live for two years in a Buddhist monastery. He visited me at the beca, and we took a walk through the tree-lined streets of Miramar. Except for special occasions like this one, I received few family visits. Most of the students saw their grandparents or parents on Wednesday nights when they would bring special treats. Maybe this is why I remember Sergio's visit so clearly. I asked him if it was true that masturbation burned neurons like one of my teachers had said. Sergio assured me that masturbation wasn't only natural but also healthful, and fortunately urged me to continue the practice. Later I looked it up in a book and took the book to school to show that teacher he'd been wrong. Who talked about intimate subjects like that? The "adults" who lived with us were very young teachers and our families were mostly absent. I don't know if it was on that visit or another that Sergio told me about his own experience in boarding school when he was young. His mother had died when he was a small child and his father, who didn't want him, sent him away to school. The reasons he had been sent away were very different from why I was at boarding school; still, we were able to share similar experiences. Sergio told me about how he had left school at the age of fourteen and escaped to México City.

Soon we fell into a routine. During the week Sarah, Ximena and I lived at the beca. Friday nights I would pick them up and we'd come home together. Our home was very different now from the one we had left in México. We no longer had servants who helped around the house, and we lacked many material things even though our apartment was nice, big and centrally located. We only had water one hour a day, during which time we would all run about frantically filling up every possible receptacle including the bathtub. That water would have to do us until the following day. Blackouts were frequent and we all got used to bathing with cold water.

My parents imposed certain rules. Housework was divided strictly and in as fair a way as possible. When I got home from school I had to wash my uniforms by hand; we didn't have a washing machine. My sisters also had to wash their clothes. Everything—washing the dishes, sweeping the floors—was divided collectively. It wasn't hard for me to get used to this new way of doing things, which seemed a natural extension of what we were all involved in: building a new society with our own hands. I look back and sometimes feel it was too much to expect a child of nine or ten to wash those big sheets. Once in a while my mother or Robert surprised us by washing our clothes for us; this was a special gift.

Every week we had a family meeting at which we'd collectively evaluate everyone's conduct. My mother made little diplomas for the person voted best at this or that. These diplomas were typewritten with little colored flowers in the corners. We called our weekly meeting "family emulation." It was a way of reproducing within the family one of the Revolution's social practices, and was based on criticism/self-criticism. I still have some of the diplomas I won at those meetings, and can read in my diary Sarah's and Ximena's furious explosions; they considered the whole idea a farce. I believe those meeting were symptomatic of the





times and of my parents' immaturity, their naiveté. Today I look back and it's hard for me to situate myself in that context, but I know it had a certain logic at the time, like a part of the landscape itself. It's true I was often the one who received the diploma for this or that. Now I understand how absurd it was to pretend that children and adults could be at the same level. Perhaps it was a way of organizing family life along the traditional power divide between adults and children, but adapted to that time and place.

Weekends also provided family time in more traditional ways. We would go out together for fried rice, or ice cream at Coppelia. These were our family rituals. Often we would attend poetry readings, plays or concerts. Sometimes we went to the movies. I remember seeing Billy the Kid with my mother at the theater at 23rd and 12th Streets. After the movie she told me Billy had been a real person and he'd lived in the southern part of New México. That was the first time I can remember feeling connected with the United States in a positive way, even with a certain pride. My mother and I began frequenting the Rampa Theater or the Cinemateca where we could see French and Italian films and those by Sanjinés or Wajda⁷.

Sunday was the worst day of the week. From the time we got up, our family time began to slip away. By two in the afternoon I was ironing my school uniform and preparing my backpack to return to the *beca*. At six I needed to be at the park where a bus would come by to pick me up. Those last hours were a slow agony. Sunday afternoons my chest always felt tight.



When I was in sixth grade I wanted to be a doctor, and true to form began investigating what interested me at the time. I don't know how I convinced a doctor we knew to take me to see an autopsy. She worked in Pinar del Río, the city in the state of the same name some 200 kilometers from Havana. After several attempts we managed to make a date. My mother as always gave me permission to go. On the agreed upon day I took a bus on my own and set off. This doctor met me at the terminal and we spent the day together. She took me to a hospital amphitheater and allowed me to observe the autopsy of a few months old baby who had died of an intestinal problem. From that distance it seemed like a doll. Later she took me to an anatomy pathology lab where I was able to examine some tissue under a microscope.

⁷ Jorge Sanjinés (Bolivia, 1936) is best known for *Blood of the Condor* (1969) and *Courage of the People* (1971). Some of his films are in Quechua, and were used in the struggle against his country's dictatorship. Andrzej Wajda (Poland, 1926) is best known for *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958) and *Man of Marble* (1977). His films challenged Soviet-inspired social realism.





I wasn't too impressed but I was proud of my adventure. That doctor gave me a tiny fetus, less than a centimeter long, floating in a bottle of formaldehyde. It was a trophy I took with me to school and showed all my friends. For years I kept that bottle among my most prized possessions. Much later I gave it to my sister-in-law Ana when she was studying medicine.

That first success encouraged me to continue. I got close to a Brazilian friend of my mother who was a forensic specialist. I told him about my previous experience and asked if he would take me with him to work. After some insistence, telling him I'd already seen one autopsy, I got him to agree. My parents gave their permission. The night before, I went to stay at this doctor's house so we could go to his work place early the following morning. The dinner conversation focused on the bodies he'd examined that day. He talked about a woman who'd received a gunshot wound to the esophagus. The bullet had made its way through her digestive system after her death. They'd found it in her intestines. As we ate, this man told the story with relish. I listened, speechless. In the morning we set out for the Institute of Legal Medicine. It was a small building in the middle of a vacant lot. Outside, a few kids played baseball. When we entered the room with the cadavers I suddenly felt anxious. There were thirteen that morning: several from traffic accidents, one fat man who had drowned, one who'd died of burns. We walked among the gurneys until he pointed out the body of a woman who would be the first autopsy of the day. I stretched out on an empty gurney while this doctor, less than a yard away, cut open her abdomen and began showing me the different organs. I could smell the formaldehyde. I was terrified, paralyzed. With great passion he continued to explain each detail. He cut the scalp and turned it inside out, exposing part of the cranium as if peeling an orange. Then he said: "You're looking a little pale. Why don't you go outside for some air?" I left and didn't come back. I had to wait for him the whole rest of the day in a small anteroom near the door. On the wall was a chart showing different kinds of knots used to choke a person to death, with a paragraph about each. Another chart depicted a series of bullets removed from different bodies, each deformed according to its angle of impact, also with brief explanatory notes. A young man waited with me in that small room. His family had chosen him to attend the autopsy of his brother, who had been killed in a motorcycle accident. I had nightmares for years. When I'd shower I'd see gurneys with corpses on them coming out of the walls. The stench of formaldehyde remained with me for a long long time, and my desire to become a doctor vanished.

My mother worked at The Book Institute and Robert at Radio Havana Cuba. Both of them wrote and were politically active, and our home continued to be a meeting place for many interesting people. At night we often had visitors. I loved being part of those adult conversations and always felt I was touching bits of history with my hands. Many of those who came to the house were revolutionaries who had come to Cuba from their respective battlefields. The newspapers would have an article about a guerrilla movement somewhere, or mention an action in one country or another. A short while later one of the protagonists would appear at our home and I could speak directly with him or her, listen to their stories.





I remember the comrades who began arriving from Brazil. Gabeira was a member of a group called MR8 (October 8th Revolutionary Movement). He had participated in kidnapping the U.S. Ambassador in Brazil. The successful action won the release of a large number of political prisoners, who arrived in Cuba along with the commando that had freed them. Several of these people became good friends. I remember going target shooting a couple of times with some of them. Among our frequent visitors I remember Ceferino and several other Mexicans who belonged to what was left of the guerrilla movements headed by Genaro Vázquez and Lucio Cabañas in the state of Guerrero. Sometimes they would invite us to eat snail soup, a rare delicacy. These were peasants with strong features who stoically shouldered their memories and seemed destined to remain in Cuba indefinitely, with little possibility of returning to México.

There were also a few Black Panthers. This was one of the most important revolutionary organizations among black people in the United States at the time. There were a few comrades who belonged to other groups whose names I no longer remember. George Jackson had recently been murdered, and Angela Davis was in prison. There was a huge campaign to free Angela. Cuba had an Association of North American Residents. From time to time a dozen or so of us would meet. Some members of the association were political refugees, others simple delinquents who'd hijacked a plane and sought asylum in Cuba. These latter were transitory guests who had taken advantage of a particular political juncture. For years the U.S. Government had carried out all manner of aggressive acts against the Revolution. If Cubans wanted to go to the United States they were denied legal entry, but all they had to do was hijack a plane and they were welcomed as heroes, their residency guaranteed. In that way the United States promoted the hijacking of planes and boats. Cuba's response was to play the same game. It publicly announced it would receive with open arms anyone who hijacked a U.S. aircraft and brought it to the island. Soon there were as many hijackings from north to south as there were from south to north, and the only recourse was negotiation. Both governments signed an immigration agreement stipulating that the United States would issue a limited number of legal visas and return all future hijackers. Cuba agreed to do the same. From that moment on there were many fewer hijackings. But the Cubans still had the original group of hijackers living on the island, some of whom were common criminals. They shared a house in Marianao where they lived in a sort of conditional freedom. Shortly after the agreement, the Cubans filled a plane with the least desirable and got rid of them. I think they sent them to Jamaica. But this was later. Early on we mingled with a number of them at the Association of North American Residents. It was a strange mix that went from Huey Newton, co-founder and leader of the Black Panthers, to a common criminal with political pretensions.

I never really knew much about Bill, a tall imposing African-American friend of my mother who lived with us for a while. At the time my mother and Robert practiced free love, and I later learned that Bill was my mother's lover. I never liked him much but didn't understand why. During the week I wasn't at home. Years later my sisters and I remembered those

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times and the conversation ended in tears. Ximena discovered that Sarah had always known about the relationship, and she couldn't believe it. I mention this because I think it reflects the spirit of those times. My parents lived their convictions fully. When they believed in free love they engaged in the practice. At the time this meant that my mother's lover lived in the apartment with us. Robert had his own adventures.

I must have been ten years old when I was listening to the radio and heard someone introduced as "the only Cuban astronomer." She was being interviewed live about the details of an eclipse that would soon take place. I raced down to the street and ran like crazy the six or seven blocks to the radio station. She was still there when I arrived. Her name was Adriana Esquirol, and she was delighted to meet this young boy who was interested in astronomy and had run all the way to the radio station enticed by her voice. We became good friends and for several years I would visit her regularly to view the stars from the observatory where she worked. I remember spending entire nights there in order to take in the spectacle of a storm of flying stars or an eclipse. Adriana came to care for me, and was unable to understand why years later I decided not to study astronomy. Robert had to talk to her and explain that I had a right to study whatever I wanted.

A block from our apartment was the National Puppet Theater, in a building called The FOCSA. Sarah, Ximena and I began to visit and made friends with the actors and staff. Soon we were regulars. We'd hang out at the workshop and make our own puppets. Around this time, I also made friends with a machinist; I can't remember how. He took me to his shop and let me work on a piece of metal and experience the wonder of transforming an apparently ordinary steel cylinder into a product of my own hands and imagination. It was just as it had been, but with soft curves.

In the early 1970s the Argentineans Corita Sadosky and her husband Daniel Goldstein appeared in our lives. She was a mathematician and he a biologist. I went with them several times to his laboratory at the University of Havana. He showed me what he was growing in glass Petri dishes, and I was fascinated by the world of biological research. One day Corita's parents came to visit: Manuel and Cora Sadosky. Manuel talked with me a lot and became a mentor who sharpened my ingenuity with mathematical problems and visual tricks. He gave me a book that made a deep impression on me: the life of the French mathematician Evaristo Galois. It was a romantic biography of that genius and his death in a duel at the age of twenty-one.

My life was filled with these interesting people who offered me their time and with whom I could talk. Often we'd share special moments: from observing an autopsy to using a metal lathe, from watching a rain of stars to describing the details of a guerrilla operation. These were people who stimulated me to read. I remember those as happy times, washed by an unstoppable river of experience. We felt that we were part of a great movement. We were in Cuba, and our job was to study during the week and do voluntary work on weekends.





Others were fighting for the Revolution in other parts of the world and we felt profoundly identified with them. Some were there to heal from wounds of one sort or another, or to rest in this “first free territory of America” as we dubbed the island. History seemed to move clearly in a single direction, and we followed its successes and failures in the local press. We were angry when something wasn’t done right or seemed arbitrary. We discussed tactics or strategy, but no one doubted history’s forward movement.

Even at the age of ten or eleven I read the newspaper every day. I followed the war in Vietnam closely. Every day one could read about a victory or defeat. The paper gave the news when a U.S. bomber was shot down and it was, for example, number 1,452. The North Vietnamese embassy was across the street from our home; from our window we saw the young Vietnamese women with their long black braids. I thought they were so beautiful. My mother began teaching English to Phuc, a Vietnamese comrade who worked at The Voice of Vietnam (a radio space the Cubans gave the Vietnamese so they could speak via short wave to the people of the United States). Sarah made a drawing about the war. In a gesture of solidarity, we three older kids crossed the street to offer it to the people at the embassy. From that moment on we were frequent guests there; one of the comrades gave us Vietnamese lessons. I was proud when I could count to ten in that language. I knew the names of all the battles and all the heroes by heart, like General Giap. In my head I followed the war’s advance. I was a child, but that war marked me as deeply as it did my parents.





EL QUINQUENIO GRIS

The Cuban Revolution had the virtue of following several lines simultaneously. These were tendencies that struggled with one another, generating competing balances of power in a dance in which no one was ever completely defeated. There they were, side by side, each maintaining its quota of power and expressive space. Even at times when one trend dominates the scene, its dominance was never unilateral and there were still places where people could express differences.

The wonderful creative and cultural explosion that accompanied the Cuban Revolution developed within this political reality. The atmosphere invited us to dream and to create. It produced music and film, painting and theater, poster design and poetry. The Revolution gave powerful impetus to creativity and art. That creative explosion was a part of the Revolution. We can almost say that it was an expression of the Revolution itself. And this, despite the fact that the artists sometimes faced limitations on their expressive freedom or were adversely affected by the bureaucrats.

Toward the end of the 1960s a dogmatic tendency gained control in the cultural arena. Its public face was Luis Pavón, who headed the National Culture Counsel. The period came to be known as el quinquenio gris (the five gray years). There was persecution of homosexuals and others who displayed western cultural influences. It was in this context that young people with long hair were grabbed up in the streets, their hair forcibly cut. This dogmatic sector dominated radio and television, and censored the likes of Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés (whose music it couldn't understand)⁸. Silvio went off to sing on a fishing boat, and rumor had it this had been a way of taking him out of circulation. Others said it was Silvio himself who had asked to be sent to sea. Pablo was placed for a time in a work camp, presumably for his reeducation. Silvio came back more revolutionary than when he'd left, and without betraying himself gave us that wonderful song in tribute to the boat he'd been

8 *Silvio Rodríguez, Pablo Milanés, Noël Nicola, and Sara Gonzáles were later known as the founders of La nueva trova or The New Song Movement, an iconic representation of the Cuban Revolution which influenced music and culture throughout the continent and world.*





on: “Playa Girón.” Pablo, too, remained faithful to the Revolution and to himself. They and other intellectuals showed us all that the Revolution had room for much more than those dogmatic minds believed.

Other areas of cultural life also created free spaces. Headed by Alfredo Guevara, ICAIC (The Cuban Institute of Film and Cinematic Industry) was one of these. ICAIC made room for *El Grupo de Experimentación Sonora* (The Experimental Sound Group), where Silvio Rodríguez, Pablo Milanés, Sara Gonzáles and Noel Nicola found refuge and were able to continue writing and singing their songs. Casa de las Américas was always a free space, backed by the enormous authority that its founding director, Haydée Santamaría, had earned for herself during the revolutionary war. In the small salon on Casa’s main floor I heard Silvio and others sing. The existence of these spaces of cultural freedom, even in the darkest periods, kept alive a creative community with its own ideas within the cultural context of the Revolution.

That period of cultural blindness lasted four or five years and ends when Armando Hart became Minister of Culture. After that things got better in the cultural world, but it hadn’t been the only area to suffer this sort of dogmatism. Throughout the Revolution periods of creativity and censorship have alternated, depending upon who held more power at the time. This phenomenon has had a very detrimental impact, including motivating a great deal of self-censorship. At the same time, the Cuban Revolution was always able to keep cultural freedom alive, even if it was restricted to the aforementioned institutions. The cyclical nature of this phenomena allowed the release of accumulated energy after a few years of darkness. The most dogmatic were never able to achieve the hegemony that did so much damage in Russia and elsewhere. This combination perhaps partly explains the extraordinary vitality of the Cuban Revolution’s artistic and cultural life. Perhaps this is one reason the Cuban Revolution has survived for so long.

I believe all genuine revolutions produce cultural upheaval. The break with old structures along with the overwhelming sense that something new is being created produces an explosion of creativity. Hidden talents suddenly emerge. Ordinary people, who otherwise might not have imagined they had it in them, become poets and artists. Suddenly art and culture are highly valued socially, and many can live from making art. In fact, it’s hard to be sure which comes first: this cultural explosion or the revolution itself. Revolutions are events for which it is difficult to assign specific dates; they themselves are expressions of cultural fervor. The revolution comes to power and changes in the social structure begin: sexual liberation, the new cinema, a new kind of poetry, and new songs are symbolic of the change. At the same time a new social structure consolidates itself, with a new group of people in power, laying down new rules. Little by little all that once signified rebellion becomes a hegemonic culture and people’s ability to express their most heartfelt contradictions is lost.

But that’s not all. Those who write this history are human beings. Even putting aside all the miserable self-interest, jealousies and opportunism, it is logical that some protagonists

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are more creative while others remain wary, some are mediocre and others brilliant. The process takes time, and for those on the inside it may be difficult to perceive the profound change that is taking place in microscopic increments. The cruelty of the struggle for power, or the brutality of war, often leaves little room for these free spaces to continue expanding. As particular situations unfold everyone takes sides. Seen from a distance one can discern a clear path, even if it couldn't be seen at the time.

How long did the creative periods in other revolutions last? The Russian Revolution had its Mayakovsky and its Eisenstein, its Kollantai and its Victor Serge. So many! And yet by the end of the 1920s, all these people were fading from view and Trotsky's defeat at the Communist Party Congress of 1927 marked the end of an era: the golden age had lasted a mere decade. In the French Revolution I don't think this creative period lasted much beyond 1800. Contrary to what happened in the French and Russian revolutions, in Cuba internal contradictions rarely produced one side's total annihilation. I don't know where the Cubans got the wisdom to keep all tendencies alive. One leader was defeated—meaning he or she lost a political battle—and was sent to work in a less influential position. They might have had to cut cane for a while, but this wasn't like being executed or sent to Siberia. Even at the times of greatest cultural mediocrity there were always spaces, such as ICAIC or Casa de las Américas, where people who were different could find refuge within the revolution. And their existence allowed many of us to continue to believe that this was our revolution. Did this have something to do with Fidel's personality, and with the fact that he did not die early on? It's probable that Fidel has something to do with both aspects of this process.

In those years we interpreted all the problems that affected everyday life as if they were circumstantial errors, attributable to the human weaknesses of those in power, a holdover from the past, or lack of experience. We felt that setting a certain limit on individual freedom might be necessary in order to achieve the overall goal of freedom and justice for all. We saw things like cutting people's hair or temporarily prohibiting Silvio Rodríguez' music as errors, committed by a few people who didn't really represent the Revolution. We believed we had to struggle against those mistakes, get the bureaucrats responsible for them to understand the error of their ways, show that we were as revolutionary as they, and that there was no single way of looking at the world. Little by little, we developed a way of thinking that allowed certain things we didn't approve of to exist in order to save what we saw as more important. The profoundly noxious fallout from this way of dealing with our contradictions was not clear to us at the time.





OUR BLOCK

In Cuba, Robert began working at Radio Havana and my mother at The Book Institute. We lived at the Hotel Capri for five months, until we moved into the apartment assigned to us by Robert's work place.

Our building was on Línea Street, three blocks from the sea where a promenade (the famous malecón) bordered and lent its special character to the city. Our neighborhood, Vedado, was centrally located and very pleasant. A few blocks away was the Rampa⁹ with its cinemas and restaurants. In a matter of minutes, we could walk to the National, Havana Libre or Capri hotels. Coppelía, the enormous ice cream parlor that occupied a full square block, was also very close; there one could enjoy a delicious ice cream, and it was also a popular meeting place for the young. On weekends the area teemed with people.

At carnival time the neighborhood was packed. As one got closer to the malecón the crowds became thicker and thicker. Beer flowed, and we often came across a drunk passed out in front of our building. From the open window in my room, I could hear the music floating up from the stalls erected along the seaside drive: "era la piragua, era la piragua, era la piragua de Guillermo Cubillo, era la piragua, era la piragua..." The chorus repeated itself for hours.

In our building each apartment occupied an entire floor. Ours was the ninth. Ambrosio Fornet and his family lived on the tenth. His two sons were more or less the same ages as us, and they possessed a treasure: the complete collection of Tintín¹⁰. I developed a close friendship with Tomasito and Iván, Tomás and Alicia's sons: our neighbors on the fourth floor. Tomás was an architect and Alicia a housewife. Several times they took me on vacations to the beach.

9 *La Rampa: Twenty-Third Street between K and the malecón. This major thoroughfare runs downhill toward the sea, and has an important number of entertainment spots. During my youth it was a favorite place for young people in Havana.*

10 *A popular Belgian comic book created by Herge, the pen name of Georges Remi.*





Mercy and Roberto lived on the second floor with their two daughters. He was a journalist and she an economist; both were Party members and long-time revolutionaries. They worked at the Center for the Study of the Americas, a sort of think tank under the auspices of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party. Mercy and Roberto were intelligent and sophisticated; they belonged to that group of professionals who contributed to defining the Party line. Mercy had been married to Juan Carretero, one of Che's contacts during the guerilla war in Bolivia. With Carretero, she had been involved in the support Cuba gave the Latin American revolutionary movements, coordinated by the Department of America of the Central Committee of the PCC. Doing this work had taken her to Chile during the period of the Popular Unity government.

At first I saw Mercy and Roberto as my mother's friends but at a certain point they began to appreciate me on my own merits. I would visit them and we'd spend hours talking about politics or history. They stimulated my interest and inconformity. I remember one special day when they led me down a long hall to the back of their apartment and opened the door to their "private library." That's where they kept their most precious books, the ones they didn't want in their living room and which might have led to someone accusing them of "ideological deviance." One of the great dramas of the twentieth century left was the notion that some ideas were considered official or true while others were threatening and wrong. This did a great deal of harm because it paralyzed our thought process and nullified profound critical reflection; in fact, the only sort of reflection that allows for the development of authentic revolutions. Many, like Mercy and Roberto, would rather be safe than sorry. From among these hidden books they pulled one out and handed it to me with great emotion. It was Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*, dedicated and signed by the entire Political Commission of Chile's Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR).

Trotsky was disparaged in the official history we learned from the Russian political manuals. Despite the central role he'd played in the October Revolution, in their pages he simply didn't exist. I think Mercy and Roberto introduced me to Isaac Deutscher. Reading him allowed me access to another way of seeing history. It too was partial, but much more critical, analytical, and provocative than most other books on the subject. I read Deutscher's *Stalin*, and a monograph that was a critical analysis of the October Revolution. At a time when I read all the books I could about the Russian Revolution they taught me other opinions existed on the left.

Years later Mercy ended her life, sometime after Osvaldo Dorticós also took his. Dorticós had been president of Cuba during the Revolution's first twenty years. Around that time, Haydée Santamaría also committed suicide. She was one of the Revolution's legendary figures. When I heard about Mercy's death I thought of Roberto, coming from the market every morning, his *javita*¹¹ filled with beer bottles. I remembered how concerned I'd been, knowing how much they drank. These suicides all came around the same time, and are con-

11 *Cuban word for reusable cloth or plastic grocery bag.*





fused in my memory with those of Beatriz and Laura Allende, Salvador Allende's daughter and sister respectively. Both were refugees in Cuba when they took their lives. I've always believed these suicides were somehow connected, maybe because all those people were important to the Revolution. Or maybe because the act of suicide was looked down upon, so they were "punished" by not being given the public tribute they might otherwise have received.¹²

Esther lived on the sixth floor. She was a sharp and sour woman, always on the lookout for material advantage, always gossiping about someone. Esther was a prototype of the busy-body who exists in almost any human group. One day during carnival her life changed dramatically. At that year's election for festival queen her daughter was chosen to be one of the luceros or attendants. That night we heard the chorus of motorcycle police sirens accompanying each happy winner home. We went out on our balcony to watch her triumphant entrance. But the really important thing that happened for Esther that night was that Commander Ramiro Valdés had taken an interest in her daughter. That was the beginning of their romance: a neighborhood girl with the famous revolutionary figure, a man many years her senior.

Ramiro was one of the Revolution's living legends. In the war of liberation he had fought alongside Che and was known for his courage. He was a member of the Party's Politburo and had been the country's Minister of the Interior for years: a hard-liner. The girl from the sixth floor and Ramiro Valdés ended up living together; perhaps they're still married. From the beginning of their romance Ramiro became a frequent presence in our building. He would drop by to see his mother-in-law. Once or twice I found myself riding up in the elevator with him. I remember the man, pistol in hand, alone, without his bodyguards, but taking his precautions just in case. The presence of Ramiro in Esther's life only increased her sense of entitlement and penchant for being annoying. I don't imagine Ramiro had much to do with any of this. But Esther never hesitated to drop his name.

Thousands of people fled Cuba when the Revolution took power, and their homes and land were confiscated and given to those who remained. Many houses became public offices. Others were turned into the boarding schools in Miramar where my sisters and I studied those first years. Others were turned over to work places as housing for their employees. That's how we came to possess our apartment. Like every other Cuban family, after the urban reform law that was approved at the beginning of the Revolution we paid a rent amounting to ten percent of the primary wage-earner's salary. When Robert left, the apartment was put in my mother's name and our rent was reduced to twenty-one pesos a month; her salary at the time was 210 pesos.

Years later another urban reform law went into effect. It signed the titles to houses and

¹² *Much like in the Catholic Church, where one's life belongs to God, Communists consider that their lives belong to the Party. In both cases, suicide is frowned upon.*





apartments over to those who had been renting them for twenty years. This is why thousands and thousands of Cuban homes now have several legal owners: those who left the country and hope to return one day to retrieve their former properties and those who have been living in them all these years, paying rent and finally having secured their property titles. When the rest of us left Cuba my sister Sarah stayed on in our apartment. After twenty years, and with the help of a large sum of money earned by my grandmother for her translations of José Martí,¹³ Sarah took advantage of this law. This is how the apartment came to belong to our family at the end of the decade of the eighties.

From time to time, a ragged dirty young man would knock on our door. One of those social misfits, authentically mentally ill. Rumor had it he'd once lived in our apartment. Sometimes when he came around we opened the door and talked to him, but we avoided this whenever possible. I never knew for sure who he was; he seemed like a ghost from some distant past. Could he really have been the previous owner's son? Someone who left the country at the beginning of the Revolution and whose home had been expropriated? If that were true, why hadn't he left with his parents? Crazy people are strange messengers. In Cuba there were few of them on the streets, far fewer than anywhere else I've lived. Havana's psychiatric hospital was one of the prides of the Revolution. It was said it treated its patients with dignity. People talked about how a veteran combatant from the countryside had transformed and humanized the institution. Still, once in a while you saw a mentally ill person on the streets.

Not far from our house El Caballero de París (the Parisian Knight) camped out. He was one of those ageless men, a singular swatch of long white hair, matted and stiff with filth, cascading down his back. He slept on piles of old newsprint and ate food given him by one or another of the cafeterias around 23rd and 12th. People said he possessed an elevated culture and spoke a number of languages. Every once in a while the authorities would pick him up, bathe him and attend to any health problems he might have. Then he would reappear, king of his favorite street corner. Today, somewhere in Old Havana there's a bronze statue of the man, and I've been told that one of its hands gleams from the thousands and thousands of living hands that reach out to touch it every day.

On our block, as on every block in Cuba, there was a Committee for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR). The CDR was basically a neighborhood organization. There was no law saying everyone had to belong, and there were some who ostensibly didn't. A few because they didn't support the Revolution and others because they just weren't interested. But most people did belong to *el comité*, as we called it. At the beginning of the Revolution it had been established to undertake a first line of defense: grass roots organizing at the neighborhood level. In time *el comité* assumed other tasks vital to a smooth-running society: it brought

13 My grandmother Elinor Randall spent many years translating José Martí into English. Her versions were published by Monthly Review Press, Temple University Press, and the English Language division of Havana's Editorial Martí, among others.





people together to keep the sidewalks clean and, with occasional stints of voluntary work, to beautify some small park or other public space. It took up collections of raw materials, sometimes blocked off the street for a neighborhood party, played an important role in the massive vaccination campaigns, and cared if some young guy neither worked nor went to school. The Committee was also responsible for blood donation. For a time ours was outstanding in this regard, thanks to my mother who gave her own blood whenever she could and also invited our many visitors to do the same. I often gave mine as well, alone or accompanied by my sisters.

A local CDR could be abusive or helpful, depending on who was active, and especially on its president. In some places the organization became the ideal refuge for those who liked to gossip or spent their time meddling in other people's business. There are people like this everywhere. The difference was that in Cuba such people had a degree of power, even if it was minimal, and misusing that power could be injurious to others. In other places the



Committee truly brought a neighborhood together. We were fortunate. Our CDR president was Maza. Before the Revolution he had worked in the sugar industry where he was a union man. An old Communist, he had named his daughter Krupskaia in honor of the Bolshevik revolutionary who was Lenin's wife. The thing was, Krupskaia was black as coal. Old Maza was an excellent person, forever unassuming and kind, and he imbued our CDR with a genuine spirit of cooperation. Ours was a nucleus of organization and planning, with no room for gossip or social climbers.

One day, in the early eighties, I heard that Maza had lung cancer and didn't have long to live. I ran into his wife, Helena, and offered my condolences. Her response was immediate and outraged: "Cancer, shmancer! My husband is fit as ever! Those damned doctors don't know what they're talking about!" The truth is, twenty years later I returned to Cuba and paid him

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a visit. There was Maza, a little bit older but with the same hoarse voice and broad smile.

At the regular CDR meetings we talked about the problems that affected all our lives: pot-holes in the street or complaints about how the local supermarket was being run. We also discussed national political issues. I remember one meeting in particular around the time foreign tourism was once again being promoted. At mid twentieth century, Cuba had been a recreational destination for tourists from the United States; the Revolution, among much else, had been a visceral reaction to the image of Cuba as a vice-centered whore house. Tourism in and of itself wasn't a bad thing. It was a resource capable of feeding many. But the most potent images of that 1950s tourism were those involving gambling, prostitution, and hordes of rowdy North Americans who came looking for rum and to bask in the sun of the island's many beaches. A number of the big hotels had been built by mafia bosses. Out of a population of five million, they say there'd been 100,000 prostitutes. With victory people reacted against all that degradation and abuse. The new government stamped out prostitution, nationalized the hotels, and millions of Cubans took possession of beaches they finally felt belonged to them.

Previously exclusive clubs became popular vacation spots, open to everyone. A special educational program was established to rehabilitate prostitutes. They acquired new skills and were able to begin over again in another part of the country. By the 1970s tourism had practically ceased to exist; the only foreigners were political refugees or technicians who had come to offer their solidarity. We witnessed one of the new society's most important achievements: the rebirth of a people humiliated by generations of being forced to serve wealthy tourists and who had won back their dignity. Cubans were proud of being able to spend their vacations at the beach or a week at a luxury hotel. Nicolas Guillén's poem "I Have" reflects this reality:

*When I see and know myself,
me, Juan with Nothing yesterday
and today Juan with Everything,
with everything today,
I blink and look once more,
see myself and ask
how it can be.*

*I have, let's see,
the pleasure of walking my country,
owner of all it produces,
looking real close at
what I didn't and couldn't have.
Now I can say harvest,*





*I can say mountain,
city,
army,
mine forever now, and yours, ours,
and the broad splendor
of lightning, flower, star.*

*I have, let's see,
I have the pleasure of entering,
me, peasant, worker, simple man,
the pleasure of entering
(it's just an example)
a bank and speaking with the boss,
not in English,
not in Sir,
but in compañero like they say in Spanish.*

*I have, let's see,
although Black
no one can stop me at the door
of a club or bar.
Or at the hotel reception
claim there's no vacancy,
no small room no great room
no modest room for me to rest.*

*I have, let's see,
there's no more Rural Guard
to grab and lock me in a cell,
or pick me up and kick me off my land
along this Royal Road.
I have land and like land I have sea,
not just country club,
not just high life,
not just tennis or yacht
but beach to beach and wave to wave,
great open blue democratic:
in short, the sea.*

*I have, let's see,
that I learned to read,
to count,*





*I have that I learned to write
and think
and laugh.*

*I have I really have
where I can work
and earn
what I need to eat.
I have, let's see,
all that I needed to have.¹⁴*

In the 1980s, Cuba began once again to open to tourism. The revolutionary leadership saw it could be an important source of income. And so a great collective discussion about the implicit dangers began throughout the country. There were obvious risks. When our CDR addressed the issue, there were maybe twenty people present. We gathered one afternoon in the front hallway of Maza's building. The majority rejected the idea of accepting tourism as a normal revenue-generating activity. The older people remembered their youth and expressed their fears that tourism would inevitably bring the return of prostitution and corruption of all sorts. Others weren't sure. I think it was Maza who finally said what we'd heard so often in similar circumstances: "Well, compañeros, the truth is this is complicated... but if our Commander in Chief is promoting it, he must have a reason. What do you say we trust him?"

Twenty years after those neighborhood discussions, tourism is Cuba's principle source of revenue. Millions visit the country every year. Foreign investment opened luxury hotels in several particularly beautiful parts of the island. And with tourism came the much-needed hard currency. But it also brought corruption, just as some at that long-ago meeting feared. Once again prostitutes stroll the malecón, and thousands of foreign men travel to Cuba to find a young girl to fulfill their fantasies. Once again some resorts are off-limits to ordinary citizens, and black Cubans are subjected to the renewed racism that prevents them from entering hotels or sunning themselves on beaches without provoking suspicion.¹⁵ Tipping, in our time so offensive to waiters and other service personnel that they would indignantly refuse the practice, has now become necessary income for many. Tourism has brought the resources that keep some of the Revolution's most symbolic achievements alive (health and education systems for all, for example) but has also meant the symbolic end of other equally important achievements. Somehow that poem by Guillén ceases to be entirely true.

14 Nicolás Guillén (*Camagüey, Cuba 1902-Havana, Cuba 1989*) was Afro-Cuban, a major poet and proponent of *poesía negra*, Black Poetry. For many years he was president of the Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba (UNEAC). This poem's original Spanish evokes the beat of the conga drum. English translation by Margaret Randall.

15 At the end of 2008, Cuba's new president Raul Castro lifted this restriction which was insulting and painfully representative of the changes that had taken place over the last twenty years.





One of the CDR's main responsibilities was the neighborhood patrol. Each night a group of cederistas did a two-hour stint. On our block our names came up about once a month. You wore a simple arm band with the letters CDR; that was all. Guard duty consisted of sitting on a wooden chair and keeping an eye on what was happening, or walking to keep from falling asleep. On the next block someone else was doing the same thing. This sort of guard duty was mostly symbolic, but provided an atmosphere of security. Crime was rare in those days. My sisters often stayed out late and no one thought anything of it.

One night in the early eighties I was patrolling my block. It was around two in the morning



and the street was empty. From time to time a car passed. All of a sudden a group of five or six young guys approached; they may have been drinking. They circled me, their attitude threatening. I barely had time to indicate that I was doing guard duty when I felt the first blow. I fought back as well as I could, conscious that if I let them push me to the ground they'd be able to beat me bloody. The whole attack lasted seconds, maybe a minute. I tried to hold them off; I just struck out in all directions without really knowing if I was connecting with anyone. Quickly a couple of comrades who were on duty on the next block arrived on the scene and my attackers ran off in several directions. As a parting shot they threw a couple of rocks. One hit me on the head, near my ear; the other grazed my arm.

The cederistas who had rescued me were able to catch two of the thugs. A police patrol car arrived on the scene right away. I explained what had happened, but since they hadn't witnessed the attack the police ordered us all into their patrol car. First they took us to a hospital where a doctor attended to my wounds and filed a report. From there we went to the precinct where everyone had to make a declaration. I told them what had happened. A few hours later I went home.

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Ximena had witnessed all this from our balcony but, immobilized by fear, was unable to call out. She had just told the rest of the family when she saw the patrol car leave with all of us inside. A few months later the case was heard in our local People's Court. The two guys who'd been captured wouldn't give the names of the others and ended up taking the rap. Their mothers were there begging for clemency. They pleaded with me to withdraw the charges. I thought about it, but decided I had a duty to see the thing through. I felt we needed to stop this sort of street crime that was becoming more common; I thought it was my civic responsibility. The hearing began and I testified about what had happened. The two boys were sentenced to six months. For a while I was afraid that when they got out of jail they might come looking for me. But I never saw them again. In our CDR people congratulated me. Maza still remembers the incident with a pride I don't quite understand.

In 2003 I returned to Cuba after being away for twenty years. I went to our old building wondering what I would find. I was very moved. Most of the old neighbors still lived there. I visited several and together we reminisced. Some of them still held the same dreams. Others made no effort to hide their discontent. They were surviving but had lost their illusions for a different kind of future. A number rent a room or two to tourists, and this allows them to get by. Before I left I stopped in the lobby and ran my hand over the stones on the wall by the elevator. I remembered one had been loose and that as children we used to hide secret messages behind it. I found the loose stone and pulled it out. With my fingers I explored the empty space. There was no message for me.





THE LENIN SCHOOL

Step by step the Cubans developed a diversified educational system. There were middle and high schools in the cities for regular day students and the so-called “schools in the countryside” that had multiplied throughout the rural areas. In some places there was one of these every mile or two, surrounded by fields where the students planted or harvested. The principle of the combination of work and study that permeated Cuban education in this case meant that the kids studied half days and spent the other half doing agricultural work. In general, these were three or four hour shifts; they weren’t exhausting, but aimed at teaching us discipline as well as certain skills. There were also sports schools, where talented young athletes trained toward a future in a particular sport, and art schools devoted to dance, music, and the visual arts. The country’s notorious old military camps had been converted into educational cities. Schools blossomed everywhere you looked.

As I was finishing sixth grade I heard about a “vocational” school called Vento.¹⁶ It was more rigorous academically; the idea was to give the better students an opportunity to develop their interests or vocations. Matriculation was very selective; a small number of slots were allocated by region and depended on one’s grades throughout elementary school. Sarah, who earned her spot a few years later, was the only student from her school to get in. I also managed to earn a place for myself. This would be the first year of my secondary education and I would continue to board at school. Vento also occupied a series of expropriated properties in the neighborhood called Marianao.

Entering this new school meant several changes to my daily routine. Now we had several professors rather than a single teacher, and manual labor was an everyday activity. I was assigned to a work detail that manufactured sports equipment. That first year I made basketball nets and baseballs. We fashioned the nets with heavy rope we passed through stiff needles that were easy to use, tying the knots as we went along. In our free time we would experiment with some new macramé stitch. The baseballs had rag centers that we squeezed as tightly as our small hands were able, while covering them in all directions with a fine

¹⁶ Cuba’s vocational schools didn’t teach the trades as they do in the U.S., but placed extra emphasis on allowing students to explore areas in which they were interested.





cord. A mold and wooden mallet allowed us to give each ball as round a form as possible, before covering it with a kind of skin. In the dorms the discipline was almost military. Sometimes we marched as we sang “Only crystal breaks, men die on their feet, and we Pioneers will go down like Che!”

Everyone was fascinated by a Cuban television series that was popular at the time. It was called “Commandos of Silence” and was based on the actions of the Tupamaros in Uruguay. The theme song was composed by Sara Gonzáles and interpreted by Silvio Rodríguez. As one of the combatants prepared to meet a contact or embark upon a guerrilla action of some kind, you heard Silvio’s voice singing: “A man gets out of bed, early in the morning, he puts on his shirt and goes to the window, a simple man...” Each episode told of a real action that had taken place in Uruguay not that long before.

That first year, while our future school was being built we studied at Vento. Our new school would be the Lenin: flagship of Cuban education. The Soviet Union donated the installations which included entire laboratories and all the furnishings. The Lenin was a veritable school city with room for 4,500 students. Hundreds of professors and staff also lived on site. There were a number of dorm buildings as well as impressive sports and cultural facilities; dozens of physics, chemistry, biology, and language labs; rooms with special acoustics where music would be taught; two fifty-meter Olympic swimming pools; a dive tank; basketball and volleyball courts; athletic tracks; three museums; several theaters; and a formidable gymnasium. The school was located near the new botanical garden, with its areas of native plants from every continent; and near Lenin Park with more than one thousand, one hundred and sixty acres of rolling hills, restaurants, playgrounds, and stands of palm and bamboo.

The Lenin School accepted students from seventh grade through the end of high school. It had dozens of interest circles: from spelunking to astronomy, chemistry, and television. Each of these had the latest equipment, so the kids could learn hands on. Those of us interested in journalism had our own newspaper, “Youth of Steel,” where we did all the writing, editing and publishing ourselves. Those interested in sailing had access to a sailboat which they could take out to sea, and the spelunkers had everything they needed to go on caving expeditions.

In order to comply with the educational principle of combining work and study, the school had a number of options: it was surrounded by fields of citrus trees, potatoes, tomatoes, and other vegetables, all cultivated and harvested by the students. Next to the educational installations there was also a full-scale industrial zone where students produced batteries, radios, telephone switchboards, and the first Cuban computer: the so-called CID-201-B.

Construction of the Lenin School was an important project, one Fidel himself followed closely. Once it was up and running, he also visited often, sometimes bringing some illustri-





ous guest to see the installations of which he was so justly proud. This was how I happened to see the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, who inaugurated the school on one of his visits to the island, and Francois Mitterrand, Socialist candidate to the French presidency at the time. All sorts of personalities visited us, including many artists and entertainers who traveled to Cuba to see the Revolution up close and offer their solidarity. We frequently had free concerts by world class singer-songwriters or musicians, among them Los Van Van, Iraquere, Paco de Lucía, Joan Manuel Serrat, and Roy Brown. As soon as these installations were finished we moved into them. Some of Cuba's best painters were still finishing the beautiful murals on the school's walls. It was a privilege to be able to watch them work, and later to live surrounded by those murals.

While I was in seventh grade, still at Vento, those of us who were destined for the Lenin helped build the school with our own hands. We assisted the bricklayers, collected stones, made long human chains to carry building materials from place to place, and painted. Each of us did what we could, always under the workers' supervision. Later we helped inaugurate the school and were its first class, all of which gave us great pride and a special feeling of belonging.

The Lenin was a monster, hard to manage. How would they be able to discipline 4,500 live-in students? A school of this size was already a problem: what about our adolescent hormones? This was also an expensive facility that had to be maintained. The swimming pools, for instance, were rimmed with tiles we weren't supposed to walk on wearing shoes. But crossing the swimming pool area was the quickest way of getting from the dorms to the classrooms so many of us went that way. Soon a guy appeared whose only job was making sure no one stepped on those tiles. We called him Olivito because of his olive drab uniform. This was a typical *güajiro*¹⁷ for whom the Revolution meant everything. He had probably learned to read and write as an adult, during the literacy campaign, and with great difficulty used a small notebook to list the names of anyone caught walking with shoes on those tiles. In that notebook, which he periodically turned into the school's administration, there were always a few Shakespeares. That sort of taunt may have marked the difference between the generation that made the Revolution and the first one to reap its advantages.

The school authorities tried everything to maintain the necessary discipline: from appealing to the conscience every revolutionary should have to introducing regulations that were almost militaristic. At one point they decided to issue ID cards we were supposed to carry at all times. Whenever they caught you doing something wrong, they'd mark your card. When you had a certain number of these marks you were called before a disciplinary committee. A professor once caught me talking intimately with Dulce, my girlfriend at the time. We were holding hands outside her dorm. The professor scolded us and ordered the girl to her room. I accompanied her to the foot of the stairs and kissed her goodbye. That was enough to earn me a mark on my card.

17 *A Cuban term for someone from the countryside.*





The buildings were four stories high with separate dormitories for males and females. There was a small sitting area with chairs and a TV on each floor, and beyond it a large rectangular space with beds organized into six rows of five bunks each. Each pair of facing rows formed an area that was like a room for ten people, even though there was no real physical separation. It was just that the bunks in rows two and three were very close together, just as those in rows four and five. One could circulate through the “halls” formed by rows one and two, three and four, or five and six. Each bunk had a cabinet next to it, with a space in which to hang some clothes and a small drawer for personal effects. At the end of each floor we had large bathrooms with a number of communal showers as well as several sinks and toilets. There was a special system by which the steam that came from the kitchens also heated the water in these bathrooms, producing hot water, a rare luxury in the Cuba of those years.

Only students slept in the dorms. The professors in charge of discipline appeared from time to time. An audio system played music or broadcast announcements. At six each morning we awoke to music and had a few minutes for morning exercises. When the lights went out at ten at night there was always someone who would continue talking to a friend. We would hear the chorus of snores from those already asleep. Some kids would escape to the bathroom to play dominoes, leaving one on guard in case a professor or staff member showed up. From time to time, when the school administrators were trying to impose some new disciplinary method, these small acts could have serious consequences. When they'd discover us talking after lights out, some idiot would invariably get us up at dawn, take us out into the patio, make us line up and ask who the guilty one had been. When no one owned up, there was that oft-heard phrase: “Okay, the innocents will pay for the sinners!” And they'd make us march up and down: “One, two, three, four: eating shit and ruining shoes!” This sort of disciplinary excess accumulated a certain amount of bad humor but may have taught us a thing or two. I would say it was more of an irritation than anything else.

We had pretty full schedules, enough to fill our days but still leave us some free time. We went to class four hours, and worked another three. The rest of the time we were on our own, and there were a lot of extra-curricular activities. We could go to the library to read, take part in chess or ping pong championships, practice a variety of sports, attend interest circles, simply play or sit in the sun and think. One year I worked in the citrus fields, weeding with a hoe or machete. For two years I was assigned jobs inside the school itself. First I was part of a detail that helped the plumbers keep the bathrooms in working order. Later I was responsible for cleaning a number of classrooms. The work was never excessive. The idea wasn't to exploit us but to teach the value of manual labor. I quickly learned I could finish my chores in an hour and use the rest of the time for whatever I wanted. I convinced my friends to do the same, and from then on we'd all finish early and go off to the library to read. That year my reading included adventure, horror, and police novels: Salgari, Verne, Simenon, Conan Doyle, Maurice Leblanc, and Poe.

The following year I was assigned to the kitchen that served one of the immense dining





rooms. It was a veritable industry, responsible for 3,000 meals. I helped the guy who helped the cook who was in charge of the rice. After a while each of us took charge of one giant vat that produced several hundred portions. Steam passed beneath the vat's false bottom before it continued on to the dormitory bathrooms. Friends of mine peeled potatoes or picked the tiny stones from uncooked rice or split peas.

Athletics were always big. Cuba was beginning to stand out as a world sports power. I remember the 1972 Olympics. Everyone watched them on television, as boxers such as Garbey, Correa, or Stevenson won world or Olympic titles. When Silvio Leonard ran the 100 meter sprint, everyone thrilled to his victories. Sometime after this, Cuba invited Japan's national volleyball team to spend a season on the island. They were the world champions at the time. For a few days they practiced in our gymnasium, forming the best Cuban players, and we would sneak a look every once in a while. Years later Cuba beat Japan for the world championship, initiating a long period of world supremacy in the sport.

These were the years of our sexual awakening, and we lived on a mixed campus. Revolutions have always had their periods of sexual freedom: conventions fall by the wayside and young people link the romanticism of building a new society to the pleasures of love and joy of living. I should add that this was also Cuba: land of tropical exuberance and ever-present music; free love was endemic to the seventies. At the same time, traditional attitudes continued to exist, some of them fairly antiquated. Parents expected the schools to be responsible for our conduct.

On Valentine's Day a young blond classmate named Vicky gave me a handkerchief and a bottle of cologne. The message was clear. I didn't really like her but that didn't matter; if a girl took the initiative you had to respond or risk being called *maricón*, *cherná*, or *pájaro*, three different designations for homosexual, all of which had profoundly negative connotations in the macho atmosphere of the times. I wasn't interested. I didn't like the girl. Why should I accept her advances? Vicky began a defamation campaign among her friends, which quickly spread throughout the school. The situation was soon unbearable and I had no choice but to be her "boyfriend" for a month. At twelve or thirteen this basically meant holding hands, an occasional kiss, and some touching. I soon broke up with her. I was left with the bitter taste of having been coerced.

Not long after this, I fell in love with Dulce. We talked for hours in the hallways of the school, and little by little grew close. The line between good friends and romance was getting harder to manage. Back then boys were expected to broach the subject. Girls waited. But I was reluctant to make my move because I didn't want to run the risk of losing a friendship that meant so much.

Every Sunday, as I rode the bus back to school, I thought about a possible strategy. Poppy Robert gave me advice, but when the time came my legs felt weak and my stomach would begin to ache. Finally, I had to have a talk with my own body; angrily I told it enough of

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stomach aches and weak knees. That night when I got to school I talked to Dulce. I don't remember exactly what I said but my intention was clear and so was her answer: a great smile spread across her round face. It turned out she lived a few blocks from our house. I invited her to the Yara Cinema, and we'd spend an hour and a half ignoring the film, delighting in our discovery of one another. She invited me to her house and introduced me to her parents. Her father was an old Communist. I don't know how the subject of Argentina's People's Armed Forces (ERP) came up. The old man criticized the ERP's allegiance to Trotsky, while I defended a guerrilla organization I deeply admired. The importance of politics was such that at the age of thirteen I found myself arguing about the Argentinean ERP with my "father-in-law!" Our romance lasted three months. With Dulce I experienced my first real kisses, my first caresses. I can't remember why we broke up. That conversation with her father may have had something to do with it.

Children can be brutal. Group behavior differs greatly from that of individuals, and the basest instincts often surface. A sadistic competition may take place, just to see who can be the most ironic or abusive. I could never understand this. I just wanted to live and let live, and developed my own ways of defending myself. I knew how to tell stories, make friends, avoid getting mixed up with dangerous people. There were certain codes of conduct one learned to respect: not to rat on others, not to be two-faced, to act coherently.

So I didn't have any major problems. But at the same time I was bothered by something I considered a terrible failure on my part: I couldn't bear how some kids were mistreated, but my own cowardice or weakness kept me from coming to their defense. Manuel was a pudgy and awkward kid, just the type who attracts such abuse. I think each dorm had at least one like him, somehow designated for the mockery and sadism of others. Manuel was an excellent artist. With a few strokes of a pen he was able to capture a person's essence. I admired this and we became friends.

In Chile, at the end of 1974, Miguel Enríquez was killed in combat. His role as the leader of the anti-Pinochet Resistance made him beloved by us all. I cut his picture out of the newspaper and talked Manuel into using it as the basis for an oil painting. For several days, perhaps weeks, he worked on the portrait. We spent a lot of time together in the painting studio. Finally he'd finished what I thought was a very good likeness, and we presented it to the MIR comrades with all the pomp we could muster.

Manuel and I spent a lot of time together. I think my way of supporting him was by sharing conversation and projects. But in the dorm I wasn't capable of openly coming to his defense when the other kids hit or made fun of him. A few of my friends and I told him that if he stood up for himself we would help. But when the beatings began he just stood there, passively. I justified our cowardice to myself with the stupid explanation that if he wasn't capable of lifting a hand in his own defense, why should I get mixed up in it and risk being beaten?





Once I told some professors about what was going on. They came to the dorm and made a little speech about revolutionary conduct and the wrongness of mistreating others, but didn't take it any farther. Later that night we were alone once more. I suffered because of how his classmates were treating him, and also because of my own cowardice, which I still couldn't name. Manuel left the school at the end of that year. Maybe it was for the best. I ran into him years later on a bus and he seemed happy. He was at the National Art School by then. Many years later I found him on Google. He's a painter and lives with his family in Canada.

A couple of years before this I'd had another important experience. One day we were in the swimming pool and a student started playing around, pushing another student's head under water. I couldn't understand why he would do such a thing. How could someone get a kick out of making another person suffer? I asked him, and said it didn't seem to me to be a "revolutionary attitude."

"What are you saying," he asked, offended, "that I'm not a revolutionary?" I don't remember the details of the conversation, but the interesting thing is that he listened, and I was able to convince him that it really wasn't revolutionary behavior. I argued that a revolutionary is, above all, a humanist, someone who suffers when there's injustice of any kind, someone capable of rebelling to the point of giving his life if necessary.

From that moment on, this kid and I became friends. We began a kind of race against time. For me it was important to "save" my new friend. I don't really know what he wanted from the relationship. Little by little he began acting differently, cut class less often, and was involved in fewer fights. I, in turn, got into a bit of trouble in my effort to get closer to him. I had taken him on as a personal challenge; I felt I was involved in a job of human recuperation. Shortly before, I had read *Pedagogical Poem* by Anton Makarenko in which he writes about saving dozens of young delinquents in the 1920s, most of them orphans from Russia's Civil War. This kid and I hung out together all the time, even visiting one another on weekends. Soon his old friends became jealous. They began teasing him and threatening me. One day he couldn't stand it any longer and attacked me from behind. We ended up beating up on each other, rolling around on the floor, surrounded by a group of kids shouting their support of one or the other. That ended my "social work" experience. Years later I heard he had gone crazy in his dorm and started insulting Fidel. This was unheard of at the time, more because of the great esteem in which we held the leader than any sort of repression that might ensue—though that was also a possibility. The relationship between the Cubans and Fidel was similar to what one might have with one's father: he was adored and hated simultaneously. His attitudes and actions inspired admiration and pride, although their consequences were sometimes painful. We reserved the right to criticize him harshly, but closed ranks if he was attacked. We always attributed the Revolution's errors to middle-management types, never to el Comandante. One could criticize anything or anyone but "The Horse," as we called Fidel. And anyone who did criticize him risked collective





rejection from his or her comrades. I don't know what became of that kid after that. Years later I learned that he was in Ethiopia, on an internationalist mission.

I began writing poetry around this time, and kept a personal journal. Despite the collective nature of my life, I always found time to be alone where no one could bother me. My poems were strings of slogans. There were bad, but some of them expressed—awkwardly but honestly—what our lives were like.

There Are Customs that are These Moments

*Sometimes walking through my dorm I come upon a compact group
of people,
comrades, it's so beautiful to be there
in that immense group of five or six friends singing
their bodies half unclothed
showing the joy one feels
after a full day of work.*

*There's almost always one boy in the middle
playing the guitar and leading the song
the rest join in on the chorus
smiling at one another
or beating out the rhythm on a can.*

*Sometimes the focus isn't a singer
but a story someone tells
or another's tale of love.
That's life's most honest time
sincerity inundates everyone
and there, because we live together
or know one another so well
without realizing it we tell each other everything,
give our opinions without hesitation.*

A few of us found the time to get together and share our literary creations. I remember Gustavo Fernández Larrea who would one day become a really good short story writer. Some of his stories were about elitism at school, or the differences between discourse and reality. We were all beginning to be conscious of social contradictions.

I spent a lot of time at "Youth of Steel." We were proud of our paper. As I've said, we did everything from writing the articles to taking the photographs, designing the layout, and printing the final product. It wasn't a great paper but allowed us to experiment and learn.





No one ever censored what we wrote, but we weren't overly critical in any case. We were all immersed in the same life, and our criticisms, when we made them, tended to be about minor issues like the quality of the food.

At the paper I made friendships that lasted for years. I especially remember the editor, Raul. In the summer of 1975 he and four other friends and I decided to make a bicycle trip around the island. It took us a whole year to get ready. We trained, gathered provisions and collected contacts. We finally decided on a route that covered half the island: Havana, Guamá, Playa Girón, Cienfuegos, Trinidad, Sancti Spíritus, Villa Clara, Matanzas, and back to Havana. The trip took thirteen days. We found places to stay almost everywhere, sometimes at a classmate's home, sometimes at the local Communist Youth House. We pedaled every bit of the way and arrived happy and tired somewhere each night. It was a beautiful experience. I was the youngest of the six. When I would fall behind the strongest among us would come back and ride with me. A few years later I heard he went crazy.

Raul continued to be a good friend. His family lived outside Havana so our house was a kind of second home. Sometimes he would visit on weekends. My mother and he became very close; she was an adult he could confide in. A few years later Raul entered the University of Havana and studied to be a veterinarian. He was a young revolutionary: conscious and honest.

It was around this time that Fidel launched the campaign against student fraud. In his clear and careful style, he explained at length that a student who copies cheats himself as well as others; a professional who earns a degree by cheating is a fraud. The campaign urged everyone to reflect upon the problem and route it out. Not long afterwards, the Communist Consciousness assemblies began taking place. Each group of students participated in a criticism/self-criticism session aimed at encouraging transparency. The assembly had the power to hand down sanctions against those found guilty. The prize for those groups that successfully routed out student fraud was that they would take their exams without supervision: a vote of confidence in the collective.

This kind of assembly was double-edged. On the one hand, it contributed to creating consciousness and was a powerful tool of social control aimed at promoting the highest values. On the other, it was fertile terrain for opportunists, always ready to take advantage of a situation and sometimes able to manipulate a meeting of this kind. The assembly had a great deal of power because its decisions were irrevocable; only the assembly itself could overturn them. This made it even more dangerous. In the context of the campaign against student fraud, the first assemblies were held by class, then by year, department, and finally school.

One day Raul arrived at the house in deep distress. He fell into my mother's arms and began to sob. My mother didn't know what to do. She thought Raul might have come out to himself as a homosexual and was afraid to go public (in the homophobic atmosphere of the

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times this would have been a huge problem). Or maybe it was something else entirely. After a while Raul calmed down and told her what was on his mind. For years he had been copying his school work. No one but he knew this but now his conscience was tormenting him. In those conditions how could he possibly lead his department's assembly? As secretary of the Union of Young Communists, he was the one in charge. My mother and he talked for hours.

The assembly was the following week. Raul sat at the front of the hall. And suddenly everything changed. Before calling on anyone else, and to everyone's shock, he confessed that he himself had cheated and didn't feel he deserved to lead the assembly. I think stories like this one express both the beauty and horror of the Revolution, which often go hand in hand. Raul was a simple person, sincere, profoundly good: a pure product of the Revolution. But that assembly had found the scapegoat it needed for its own success. By using him, it avoided having to deal with who knows how many others who even then must have been shaking in their seats. Fortunately, Raul was not expelled from the university. But they kicked him out of the Union of Young Communists. I think the UJC lost one of its most valuable members. By then we were at different campuses and I only saw him once in a while, when he dropped by the house. I know he graduated and went to work in Pinar del Río.

The Lenin School was an elite institution meant to form the country's future leaders. It was a strange mix: on the one hand excellent physical installations and surely the best education Cuba had to offer at the time. On the other, there was always that sense that you were one of a chosen few. Entrance depended primarily on grades, although it was clear that in some cases other things were taken into consideration. All one had to do was to look at the parking lot when parents' meetings were called, to understand there was an important number of sons and daughters of leadership and professional people. Some of them probably made use of their family connections, or maybe this was simply a natural product of cultural difference. There were sons and daughters of poor families from the most remote parts of the country, as well as the pampered offspring of the privileged, who were often also the most abusive and most likely to go unpunished.

Among the students were two of Fidel's sons, always accompanied by a couple of bodyguards. At the same time, I remember a student whose father was in prison precisely for having made an attempt on Fidel's life. At trial his sentence had been commuted from death to thirty years. This political prisoner's son went to the Lenin and was just one more member of the student body.

When I turned fifteen I suffered a crisis and began to seriously question whether or not I wanted to stay at the school. I didn't like its elitism. I hated the rampant sadism and the fact that the most popular kids were sons and daughters of privilege, and therefore immune to punishment. I might also have simply wanted to stop living at school and get back the family life I missed. It was hard for me to express exactly how I felt. I also might have feared that





if I left the beca to go to a normal high school it meant I was a quitter. I didn't really know exactly why I wanted out, but I did know that I felt asphyxiated at the Lenin. I decided to leave.

And so, at the end of tenth grade, I asked to be transferred to the Destacamento Pedagógico. This was an institution aimed at remedying the lack of teachers at the secondary level. Instead of going through high school like everyone else, it was possible to enter the Destacamento in eleventh grade and immediately start studying to be a middle school teacher. In five years you got your degree, at the same time as you were contributing on one of the many fronts in desperate need of talent.

When I chose this path, was I making a revolutionary sacrifice or fleeing the Lenin the only way I could without losing face? Many people tried to talk me out of my decision. My mother was called to the school and asked how she could allow me to give up the marvelous opportunity of studying only two more years and then having a choice of university careers, in exchange for a mid-level job of this kind. Wasn't I making a hasty choice? But I'd made up my mind and, as always, my mother supported my decision.





ASSEMBLIES

Cuba had unique rules when it came to organizing its Communist Party (which functioned as the Revolution's leadership body). It wasn't a Party "of the masses," as in the other Socialist countries, but of "militants"; and its moral example was supposed to be expressed in the daily attitudes and actions of its members. In order to belong to the Party one had to fulfill three conditions: want to join, be accepted, and be approved by the collective—work place, military unit or school—to which one belonged. The first two requisites were logical, and similar to those for Party membership elsewhere in the world. The interesting condition was the third, which allowed for a certain amount of outside input. It worked as a sort of veto, in theory and often also in practice. It was in this context that I had an experience that affected me deeply.

Once every year an assembly took place, at which the collective selected those it considered "outstanding youth." Membership in the Union of Young Communists (UJC) depended on having first been chosen at this assembly. This was the mechanism through which one could fulfill the third condition. I was a good student, believed I was a revolutionary and, like many others, wanted to belong to the Communist Youth. It was one of the highest honors to which one could aspire. At school, the UJC's base committee also wanted me. And so, along with other candidates, I'd been attended a series of meetings called "Preparation for Membership." I eagerly awaited the assembly and it finally came. I think it was at the beginning of 1974. I was thirteen.

Someone proposed my name and the discussion got underway. A UJC member spoke favorably about me, from a previously agreed-upon script meant to promote Young Communist candidates. But then another hand went up and someone spoke against me. He accused me of smugness, of looking down on others and believing myself superior. I froze. When the vote came, I was rejected by the majority. I felt as if the world had fallen down around my head. I was furious. What did it all mean?

Some of my friends advised me to wait and try again the following year. I pondered and pondered the situation. After a while I came to understand that my critics had been right.





I did feel superior. From that point on, I began to work hard to overcome this problem, a very personal sort of struggle which continues to this day. That assembly proved important in my life. I've felt this ever since. I suffered a great deal, but learned to search for a truth hidden in the most painful of criticisms. This was to prove a significant crossroads in my life. If I had become a member of the UJC back then, I would have asked for Cuban citizenship and lived my life as a Cuban revolutionary. But when I failed at that assembly, I never again tried to join the Cuban Party; and my life took a turn that led me down other roads in other parts of the world.

When I think back to this experience, what surfaces are two interesting aspects of how things were done in the Cuba of those years. One is the idea we had of what it was to be a revolutionary. The other is the way everyone, Party member or not, was brought into a decision-making process of that importance.



The main idea was that the Party be composed of the best people. This meant being a good human being, self-sacrificing, generous, a hard worker. It wasn't necessary for one to know Marxist theory in all its complexity. Because people expected Party members to practice what they preached, human qualities were more important. It was possible, even if it didn't happen very often, for the administrator of a factory or director of a school not to hold Party membership. But the secretary of the Party nucleus or UJC committee had to be deserving of everyone's respect. He or she might be a white- or blue-collar worker; education or profession didn't matter that much either. The party's power was diffuse; it had to provide a certain moral example. When people wanted to denounce corruption, they didn't go to the State but to the Party. The Party then investigated the complaint and took it to the proper authorities. This was a method that generally worked. It was as if the people were the eyes and ears of the Party, which in turn controlled the operation of the State. Needless to say, corruption and opportunism also existed. But it always seemed clear to me that the best

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people belonged to the Party, and that Cubans had developed a mechanism that may in fact partially explain the Cuban Revolution's longevity.

This system was based on a series of ingredients: the Revolution's moral strength, a general agreement that the political process was nurtured by values shared by the majority, and the fact that generosity, solidarity, altruism and working for the common good were considered positive values; and flourished in an atmosphere that encouraged them. Selfishness and opportunism were there as well, of course, but people considered these to be negative and rejected them. A member of the Party or Young Communists had to possess the positive values, or at least pretend to possess them. At the same time, the constant threat of imperialist aggression (evidenced by the blockade and the periodic attacks that served as reminders) made prioritizing unity a matter of life and death. In this context it was dangerous to dissent.

To dissent "from within the Revolution," as Silvio Rodríguez did in his songs, or Tomás Gutiérrez Alea in his films, was risky. These two men took the challenge and earned the right, and in its treatment of them the Revolution, to its credit and in spite of everything, created a space for such dissent. But if someone "crossed over to the other side," they risked a lot. Who decided where the line was? It depended upon the moment. And so a general consensus was very important. People felt this was their Revolution; it was their process that might be endangered. What this meant was that a dissident wasn't only up against an authoritarian State, but had to face the general public as well. And the latter might judge him even more severely than the former.

Through bodies such as the assemblies to elect future Party or Young Communist members, one truly had the sense of being part of the process, not a mere victim of others' decisions. Fidel reinforced this idea. His speeches were lengthy reflections, out-loud musings, in which he analyzed the problems we faced and looked for collective solutions. In the years about which I write, all kinds of issues were discussed, from the smallest to the most important.

I remember the discussion about school uniforms, the design of which was greatly influenced by the students who would wear them. We argued about everything from the color and type of fabric to the uniform style itself. The girls insisted their skirts be of a certain length—I can't remember whether above or below the knee—and so they were. But by the time the new uniforms were distributed a new style had become fashionable. It wasn't easy to juggle fashion with democratic participation in a time of scarcity.

For a whole year we discussed the new Family Code, regulating issues such as marriage and childcare. It was a progressive law in terms of how it dealt with some very intimate matters, and promoted equal distribution of housework between men and women. People respected Fidel, and he publicly supported these sections of the new law. Still, many resisted this kind of radical change.





There's a documentary film from this period—I think it was made by Idelfonso Ramos—that shows the complexity of those discussions. Ideas that emerged in assemblies held at work places, schools, or neighborhoods, were passed on up through other assemblies at the regional and provincial levels, until they appeared as modifications to laws that had been drafted by committees of experts who tried to achieve a certain balance. I think those thousands of participatory gatherings were more important than all the new laws put together. They were an intensive course of study for an entire citizenry. The Family Code was approved after more than a year of in-depth discussion. When, years later, Laura and I were married, the judge read four articles from that Code as part of the formal ceremony. Four articles of a law we'd all had a part in writing.

I always had the sense that we were all making the Revolution together. From time to time we might stand back, like a blind man groping, but we engaged in critical analysis as we went along, and would correct our aim. It was a collective effort, in defeat as well as in victory.

During these years we also held assemblies to discuss Cuba's new Constitution, which was finally approved through a referendum and became law in 1975. From 1959 to 1975, Cuba had been administered by a "revolutionary government" that handled both legislative and executive powers. This was the most creative and transformational period, but also the one most plagued by arbitrary decisions. In 1975 the Revolution "institutionalized" itself, a contradiction in terms. Perhaps that year marked the end of the Revolution as such; that is to say of a process capable of truly profound economic and social change.

The new Constitution formally declared Cuba a Socialist Republic, and created a unique legislative structure: Peoples Power, whose job was to institutionalize participatory democracy. There had to be at least two candidates, and these were initially nominated in neighborhood meetings. Delegates in each circumscription were then elected through universal secret ballot. The system was indirect: the local assembly chose delegates from among its members to serve on the provincial assembly, and the provincial assembly chose delegates to the National Assembly of Peoples Power from among its own ranks. The National Assembly was the legislative power. It in turn elected the president of the Republic.

At the local level these Peoples Power delegates held an important degree of power. The economy was almost entirely in State hands, so they oversaw local industries, the commercial network, schools, clinics, and a few other entities. The system forced the delegates to periodic accountability to those who had voted for them, and the local assembly had the prerogative of removing them from office by a simple show of hands if it felt they weren't representing them correctly. In cases where this happened, new local elections were called.

This political system included some very interesting elements aimed at promoting citizen participation, while at the same time jealously guarding its obsession with control. Was this

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obsession a response to the constant attacks against the Revolution, or was it inherent to the movement that had waged the war of liberation? In retrospect one can see the same contradictions in how both the Party and Peoples Power were designed. The system developed interesting ideas about promoting grassroots power, but also some important limitations that became clearer as time went by. The delegates' extreme vulnerability limited their real independence, just as indirect representation facilitated Party control. I now believe both these characteristics were part of the original design. It was a way of guaranteeing Party dominance and making sure the system wouldn't slip from its hands. But this was precisely its weakness. In order to grow in a healthy way, the system needed effective grassroots input which invariably contradicts the role assumed by the Party.

I don't think it's possible to analyze the cycle of twentieth century revolutions without thinking differently about power itself, and without incorporating certain contributions from Anarchist thought. It may have been the Anarchists who most clearly perceived the dangers inherent in a top-down exercise of power, although I don't find that they proposed any real solutions to the problem. On the other hand, Marxism underestimated the power issue.

I think the twentieth century showed that it was possible to defeat capitalism. But the generations to come will have to find a way to build a new society that can last. I remember those first Peoples Power elections in 1976. Candidates put an eight by ten photo along with a page-long biographical sketch up on each neighborhood's public bulletin board. On election day the polling places were guarded by the young Pioneers, proudly wearing their uniforms and neckerchiefs. Enthusiastic voters stood in long lines in order to cast their ballots.

The mother of one of my friends was elected delegate to Peoples Power at the neighborhood level. This enhanced her importance. A range of establishments, including super markets and stores, came under her control. One day her daughter went food shopping and when she got home her mother realized she had an extra quart of milk. They, like every other family with more than five members and no children less than seven years of age, had a right to one quart every other day. This wasn't their day. Clearly there'd been a mistake. She sent her daughter back to the store to return the additional bottle. At the store they told her not to worry about such a trivial thing. The mother finally had to go personally to return the "favor." She was always alert in order to avoid these small acts of corruption that might pave the way to larger ones.





TRAVEL AND PARENTS

In 1973, when I was almost thirteen, my parents decided that Sarah and I would spend the summer in the United States and México. My mother, who still didn't have a passport, could only travel with provisional papers issued by Cuba, and to countries that would honor them. This is how she visited Vietnam during the U.S. War of aggression, Peru during the Velasco Alvarado government, and Chile when Popular Unity was in power. This would be the first time Sarah and I would leave Cuba since our abrupt flight from México, and we would be going alone. In New York we would visit Robert's family, in Albuquerque my mother's, and in México we'd see Sergio and some of the many friends we'd left behind.

My sister and I were very excited as we prepared our shared adventure. We began by making a list of places and people we wanted to see. In my young mind I had filed some personal records: the number of times I'd flown in a plane, the countries I'd been to, the monuments I'd seen. For this trip I had my plans: I wanted to visit the Empire State building and Statue of Liberty, Greenwich Village and Harlem. I was eager to see firsthand so many things I'd read and heard about. My mother asked if I wanted to meet my father. I said yes, and put him on the list.

At the end of the decade of the fifties the woman who would become my mother was a young poet who survived as she could in New York City. She decided to have a child. She didn't really want a husband or family, but a child for her alone. She looked around and chose Joel Oppenheimer, I think maybe because he was a good poet and a good person, although I'm not really sure. She got pregnant and later told Joel she was going to have a baby, but not to worry because she was doing this on her own. Joel took it badly, and they stopped seeing one another. I later learned that at that moment in his life he was still suffering the loss of two sons his ex-wife had taken when she left him. I was born in a public hospital in Manhattan. Joel came to see me once, and we hadn't seen each other since. A few months later my mother moved to México. There she met the poet Sergio Mondragón and married him. And that began the only lie I can remember my mother ever telling me: I grew up believing Sergio was my father.

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My sisters Sarah and Ximena were born. We were a happy family. Sergio treated me like he treated his daughters. I have beautiful, harmonious, memories of my childhood in México. A nice atmosphere. Walks along the Churubusco River, which at that time still ran above ground near where we lived. Visits to a children's park. Family picnics. Several trips to Cuetzálan, an indigenous village in the state of Puebla that still had little contact with the modern world. One long trip in a little Volkswagen to the west coast of the United States. It was the model they called Beetle, and I passed the time playing with a tiny toy car in the space behind the back seat.

We lived at Triángulo 121, Colonia Prado Churubusco, in a two-story house with a small garden. Eventually we built two studios on the roof. We had a succession of pets: birds,



turtles, rabbits whose cage I promised to keep clean but who ended up expiring in their own filth. We even had a goat that ate part of the block wall at the back of the house. For fifteen days we had a tarantula who lived with us in a glass bowl on a table in the living room. And we had several dogs. I especially remember Sofia, a cinnamon colored Great Dane who was my best friend.

Our house was on a street that ended about ten meters down the block in a *llano*¹⁸ with its wood and cardboard shacks, typical of Mexican poverty. We played barefoot on the street with the neighborhood kids.

We were good friends with the children of "the widow," as we called the woman who had a small convenience shop next door. The women who lived in the *llano* sometimes came running to the house to ask my mother to deliver someone's baby. She would accompany them back to their shacks, her amateur midwife's kit in hand. Sometimes I would go with her.

Sergio and my mother founded El Corno Emplumado / The Plumed Horn, and did most of the work themselves. I remember our living room floor piled high with copies of the journal, trips to the post office to send the packages to many parts of the world, and long afternoons and evenings with all sorts of artists who came to visit.

The first floor of our house had a large kitchen where we ate and a living room from which

18 *Llano was the Mexican word for shantytown.*





one could look out through floor-to-ceiling windows into the front garden. When I was a child that garden seemed huge to me. On my 1973 return I realized how small it was. A single tree stood in the middle. One day I put on a doll's parachute, ridiculously small for my size, and jumped from that tree; fortunately I wasn't hurt. The walls of our home were covered with paintings and drawings, almost all of them originals, which the artists had given to my parents. The bedrooms were on the second floor: one for my parents, another for the three children, another for guests—which was almost always full—and the maid's room where Concha and Elena slept. They did almost all the housework.

My memories of our life in México are filled with calm, and don't resemble our years in Cuba at all. Sergio is a poet, a man who exudes tranquility. At the time he was leaning more and more toward Buddhist mysticism. At a certain point my mother's and his paths parted. It seemed a gradual process to us; we hardly noticed until the moment of separation. One day they called us to the table and told us they were getting a divorce. It was a tremendous shock.

Although I seem to have erased this from my memory, my mother tells me that's when they also told me Sergio wasn't my biological father. That's how

I discovered the existence of Joel. And so I had to deal at one and the same time with my parents' separation and the news that I had two fathers. Later I came to understand that the notion of fatherhood is complex, and that biology is only one aspect, but then I was only seven. I ran out into the garden and took refuge in my dog Sofia's house. I cried and she accompanied me all that day.

Sergio went to live a few blocks away, and we visited him regularly. Sarah, Ximena and I would head out, holding hands. Sergio was our father and would continue to be our father always.



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Sometime after this, my mother gave Sofía away. This was another blow. I think it was really Sergio who loved animals. My mother explained that keeping the dog was very expensive; she consumed a lot of meat, so she gave her to some friends who lived far away, on the other side of huge México City. A few days later she reappeared. She'd escaped and miraculously found her way back through all the traffic and millions of smells of the millions of inhabitants of that city. Our friends in the neighborhood came running to tell us that the hungry dog looking for meat at the stand on the corner was our Sofía! I welcomed her with open arms, but my joy didn't last a day. My mother returned her to her new owners and I never saw her again.

My mother told us she wouldn't live with another man unless we approved of him. We put her promise to the test, and the first time she asked us about a man with whom she had gone out to dinner, we said definitely no. That was that. We liked thinking we had something to do with her decision.

Time passed. Our house continued to receive many visitors. Sometimes for an afternoon, sometimes a couple of weeks. One day two young North Americans arrived. They were traveling around the world and, like so many, stayed with us for a while. We thought nothing of it. After two weeks they left. A short time later my mother picked us up at school. She was very excited. We got in the car, and then and there set off for Acapulco. "Remember that guy who visited a while back? He has a little house on the beach and invited us to spend a few days with him." We were overjoyed. There was a swimming pool and a view of the ocean that spread out vast and blue from cliffs just below the property. When we arrived, we children noticed they put us in one bedroom and they disappeared into another. We weren't that surprised. Over the next few days we had a great time playing in the pool and on the beach. When my mother asked us what we thought of her new boyfriend, our response was a resounding yes. And that's how Robert entered our family. He spoke no Spanish and his "travels in the footsteps of Che" ended there, attracted by the love of a woman nine years his senior.

We returned to México City and began living like a family again. Robert became Poppy Robert and Sergio Poppy Sergio. Robert was quick to integrate himself into our family dynamic. He learned Spanish and found work. It didn't take long for my mother to become pregnant with Ana, and then came 1968 and the student movement, 1969 and our time underground, and finally our escape to Cuba and the beginning of a new life there. I don't think Robert imagined the turn his life would take when he decided to stay on in México after only just starting his trip around the world. His friend Gordon Bishop continued alone. After a few months, in Indonesia, he met a princess and married her. He would have an extraordinary life, filled with adventure and tragedy. Years later I visited him and his princess in New York. They welcomed me into their tiny apartment, filled with beautifully painted fabrics, incense, and cushions on the floor.





But back to 1973. It had been four years since our arrival in Cuba, and Sarah and I were getting ready to travel outside the country for the first time. We were about to see our families again, those far-away families that surfaced sporadically in our lives.

Travel was difficult back then, especially to the United States. Few Latin American countries still had relations with Cuba, so there weren't many airline connections. On this trip we had to fly first to Lima, Peru. My mother had arranged for the Cuban ambassador there to meet our plane and take care of us during a layover of several hours. I think it was Antonio Núñez Jiménez. He was very kind to us. During our brief stay in Lima, Núñez Jiménez took us to his home. I distinctly remember two shrunken heads, products of the Jíbaro Indians, that hung like ornaments in his study. Sarah gorged herself on apples, something she hadn't been able to do in years. At the appropriate time my mother's friend delivered us to the plane that would finally take us to the U.S.

There was a change of planes in Miami. I was the one in charge of this adventure, and clutched a bag with both our travel documents. Under no conditions was I supposed to lose track of that bag. The image of the United States I had been able to form at the time was of a brutal and aggressive society, brimming with delinquents and assassins. And now there we were, Sarah who was ten and me at thirteen, sitting in the gate area waiting for our next flight. I remember pressing that bag of documents against my chest, Sarah's hand clutched tightly in my own, and looking fearfully in all directions. I told my sister not to talk too much, as I was sure our conversation was being taped by the hidden microphones I figured must be everywhere. Sarah suddenly announced she had to go to the bathroom. "*Coño*,¹⁹ Sarah, can't you wait?" "No, I'm already going..." I accompanied my sister to the door of the women's restroom, afraid to let go of her hand. What if she disappeared? She went in, but came out again almost immediately, an anguished look on her face: "You have to put a coin in a slot so the stall door will open!" "Impossible! How can that be?" In Cuba having to pay to pee was unheard of. Plus, we didn't have any coins. We went to the men's room, and looked around to see if by chance there might be a stall with an open door. We heard something, and a huge black man came out of one of the cubicles²⁰. Kind and generous, he held the door. Sarah went in while I waited, the black man's broad smile draining the tension from my body. With that single gesture he had shown us that life outside Cuba was more humane and nuanced than we'd thought.

That trip was important for many reasons. We got to know Robert's parents, Irving and Sylvia, who welcomed us into their apartment with its warm carpets; and gave us that simple love of grandparents we'd never really known. We had met them before, but now were able

¹⁹ *Coño* is a Cuban word that appears in almost every conversation. Depending upon its intonation, it can be an exclamation without any particular meaning or one denoting surprise, anger, admiration, fear, or joy.

²⁰ I have chosen to retain the language of the times. In the seventies the term African-American wasn't yet in use.





to get closer and know them better. They showered us with attentions. My grandmother had lost one leg to cancer many years before. When we entered her bedroom to say good morning, I caught sight of her wooden leg leaning against the wall. I was shocked, but her smiles and hugs quickly put me at ease.

I remember an anecdote from a later visit that paints an accurate picture of Grandma Sylvia. One of Robert's friends found out she had cancer. Robert and I went to see her and found her in bed, depressed and afraid. Everyone was telling her to follow her doctor's orders: take her medication and rest. Grandma Sylvia showed up then. By this time, she was an expert in matters relating to cancer; she had survived yet a second bout of the disease and had lost a lung. Sylvia told Robert's friend to live life, to get up, not shut herself in: "If you're going to die," she said, "take advantage of the time you have left and live it to the fullest. If you live, so much the better." That was my grandma.

We spent time with George, Robert's brother who went everywhere with his camera slung over his shoulder, and his partner Susan. Through experiences such as visiting an alternative daycare center where Susan worked, we came to know other aspects of U.S. society. With George and Susan, we explored New York, that city that began to attract me so and which in some strange way I feel is mine.



On that first trip we also went to Albuquerque to see our maternal grandparents, John and Ellie, and our Uncle Johnny, Aunt Joanna, and their son Shanti. My uncle took us to leaflet outside a jeans factory where the workers were on strike. He was a member of a small leftist party, and became a sort of role model for me. Not only was he a disciplined militant but also a very good human being. In time I met many other U.S. American leftists but in my mind Johnny continued to be a prime example of that sort of purity. I thought a lot about why there seemed to be so many more people like him in the U.S. Left than in other places, and concluded that this must somehow be related to the fact that it was very unlikely they would ever take power.

Our return was through México where we visited Sergio. This journey was a sort of reconnection with our former lives, all we'd left behind in that other world. It also enabled us to discover a different reality from the one Cuban propaganda described. We learned about another United States, with its rebels, its dissidents, the ordinary people who inhabited its





streets and parks, or just lived their lives. This was all very important, but there are several episodes from this trip that marked my life forever.

Meeting my biological father, Joel Oppenheimer, was one of these. Robert's parents located Joel and arrange a meeting. Joel was a well-known poet who had a regular column in *The Village Voice*. They called the paper and got in touch with him. There are images from that first contact that are still absolutely clear in my memory. Joel came to our meeting with his oldest son, Nick, who was doing his military service at the time and wore his Marine uniform. This was a shock because I came from Cuba where the U.S. military uniform was symbolic of aggression and death. Nick was probably on leave and, on his way back to his base, had decided to accompany his father to that meeting that might have been difficult for him.



Joel didn't speak Spanish, or I English. Uncle George, Sarah, and Grandma Sylvia came with me. Our visit couldn't have lasted more than an hour. I hardly remember what we said; mostly we just looked at one another.

What must Joel have thought as he gazed upon this son of his who was now almost thirteen? What must I have thought? We managed a few words. He invited me to lunch and bought me some clothes and an ice cream, and I think that was about it. I had finally "met" Joel. But did that mean I knew him? In any case I now had a face to go with the name: a scrubby beard, ample smile, and huge nose just like mine.

From then on I traveled to New York every year or two in the summers. And each time I visited Joel. The second was with Sarah and Ximena, and he invited us to spend the day with him. We visited his apartment in Greenwich Village, and he took us to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. On my third trip, in the summer of 1976, I arrived in the city and called, but he had gone to a small fishing village in northern Maine, where he was teaching at a liberal arts college. He said he would pay my trip up to see him, and a few days later I was in a little plane flying over a beautiful landscape of pine forests dotted with lakes and small towns.

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Joel met my plane, accompanied by his two younger sons, Nat and Lem. He had a pocket dictionary from which he had taught them a single Spanish word: hermano, brother. We spent a marvelous few days together. I think it was on that visit that we really began to know one another. Joel was passionate about sports, and the Montreal Olympic Games happened to be that week. We spent a lot of time in front of the television set. We watched Nadia Comaneci win her perfect tens; it was the first time in history that a gymnast had done that in Olympic competition. We watched Stevenson, the Cuban boxer, win his second heavy-weight gold medal. We saw the great Cuban athlete Juantorena run like a gazelle, winning both the 400 and 800 meter races: another first.

We tried to talk to one another. Joel asked me about Cuba and the Revolution. I tried to explain certain political ideas in my impossible English and with the help of useless gestures. I asked him about his ideas and he told me he was an Anarchist. This was a great discovery to me; I had never met an Anarchist before. In the official history I'd learned at school, Anarchists were depicted as useless in the best of circumstances and counterrevolutionary in the worst. And so I learned a bit more about the complexity of the world. Little by little I began to love Joel. From that trip I still have some photos, and a Swiss Army knife he bought me which became a constant companion: one more in my store of personal treasures.

From that time on I began to consider Joel a good friend. I already had Poppy Sergio and Poppy Robert, and in my head there was no room for more fathers. Years later Laura and I visited Joel together. By this time, he had married Teresa, a woman of our age who we liked a lot. Each time we visited I discovered something new that made me like Joel more. His life seemed tranquil compared with the revolutionary whirlwind that enveloped those who visited my family in Cuba.

Years later, in Paris, our first child, Lía Margarita, was born. Joel was delighted. She was the first female in his family in three generations. By this time, he was very ill. Five years earlier cancer had taken one of his lungs, and now the disease had metastasized to his cerebellum. He didn't have much time left. Lía was ten months old when we took her to see him in Henniker, New Hampshire, a small town with a liberal arts college where he'd been teaching. Joel and Teresa lived in a wooden house on the outskirts of town, near a lake. He was very weak, barely able to get out of bed. Sometimes he took a few steps and sat in a rocking chair. He was only fifty-eight, but had lived intensely in the bohemian style of the times. We knew this would be our last visit. Joel was radiant with Lía seated on his lap, overjoyed to have been able to meet her. We spent long hours in great happiness, despite the silent and sure presence of death.

There were some things I desperately needed to know, and I understood this was my last chance. Laura encouraged me to talk to Joel. And so I asked: "What happened all those years? Why didn't you ever try to contact me?" Joel looked at me, a gentle expression on his face. He asked Teresa to bring him a box from the bookcase and opened it to show me





what was inside. There were dozens of photographs, all of them of me: from the time I was an infant, when I was just beginning to walk, as a young child. Each time someone he knew had visited us that person had brought Joel a photograph, taken openly or covertly. Joel had followed me from afar. “But why didn’t you make contact?” I insisted. “I didn’t know what your mother had told you,” he explained, “I didn’t know, and didn’t want to impose myself. I knew things would fall into place at some point.”

That visit continued its tranquil course. We picked blueberries in a nearby field. Joel gave me a few pages of genealogical data. He told me the first Oppenheimer was a German who had come to the United States as a mercenary with the British during the War of Independence. He’d taken advantage of the opportunity in order to gain his Atlantic passage, and then escaped to the mountains where he married an Indian woman. I loved the story and wanted to believe it was true.

A month later, in Paris, I got a call in the early hours of the morning. Teresa had telephoned my mother and asked her to get in touch with me so I could call Joel, who wanted



to say goodbye. In a tired, thin, almost inaudible voice he said he had loved me, that he wasn’t suffering, he’d been glad to know me, and said goodbye. I knew I would never hear that voice again, and the next morning I cried like I hadn’t in years. That’s how I discovered that Joel, too, had been my father, just as Sergio and Robert were. I had only seen Joel a few times, maybe fifteen or twenty in all, but in them he had taught me some of

the things a father can teach a son: how to stand tall in life and when faced with death, how to find joy in simple things, a certain coherence. Lía saw me cry that morning and consoled me with her tiny hands.

My brothers later told me about Joel’s last night. He had called his family to his bedside. His wife Teresa was there, as well as his sons Nick, Dan, Nat and Lem. The only one missing was me. He asked them to call me on the phone, and we said goodbye. Then he asked them to play a tape he had made for the occasion. On that tape—in a voice cracked by fever—he told some stories from his childhood, memories of his own father, the first time he saw a woman





naked through the keyhole in a door. The tape was only about twenty minutes long. When it ran out, everyone was silent. They knew Joel had died. He had said his goodbyes in his own way, gently and with grace. Another of his lessons.

During that first trip in 1973, when we got to México I looked for Concha and Helena. My childhood had been inextricably linked to those sisters who had lived and worked in our home, and to their mother, Serafina, who washed our clothes. They took care of practically everything having to do with keeping our lives running smoothly. I remember them cooking our food and serving it at the kitchen table, making the sign of the cross over us when they put us to bed, taking us to church from time to time. They knew we were atheists but couldn't bear the thought of our going to hell. We had a very good relationship. Their younger brother and I were friends and often played barefoot together in the neighborhood.

One of the best memories of my childhood was when Concha got married and invited us to her wedding. It was in a small village in a remote mountain area. We went in a light aircraft which I'll always associate with adventure in my mind. I didn't think we'd ever be able to land on the tiny airstrip on that mountaintop. The village celebrated for several days. There was music and fireworks and a whole series of bamboo structures that had been built by expert peasant hands. They had fashioned shields and swords for the kids, and we used them in rival bands engaged in make-believe wars. Those were two or three days of pure magic.

Years later the repression snatched us up, and we never saw Concha or Helena again. We had to go into hiding, and then to Cuba. My world changed completely. Suddenly that was the past, and in my new world having household help was shameful. We learned to do everything ourselves. I can still see little Ana washing her clothes by hand, and me doing the same. In my memory the switch from having maids to doing our own housework was neither abrupt nor dramatic. It was natural in that time and place.



I believe we had a particularly good and respectful relationship with Concha and Helena. But the issue of power was always there. They were the workers and we the bosses. They looked Indian and we were *güeros*.²¹ When I lived in Cuba I promised myself I would never

²¹ *Güero is a word used in Mexico for those who have white skin. By extension it refers to all foreigners.*





again have anyone working in my home. It seemed to create a situation in which injustice was built in, and I felt a certain shame that at one time in my life I had lived with household help.

Now I was back in México for the first time after our hurried exit. It was as if centuries had passed. I had left at the age of eight; now I was thirteen. Concha and Elena and I had lost touch, but Sergio had continued to visit them once in a while, and when I asked took me to their house. They lived in one of those shantytowns that are so common in around México City. When we arrived, there was Helena, her mother, and another family member. The boy who had been my childhood friend had drowned in a flood, years before. They didn't even know where Concha was. What had happened to them after we'd disappeared so abruptly? They two had been victimized by the repression. The police destroyed their wood and cardboard shack. They stole what little money they had. Fortunately, they knew nothing about where we had gone; they had no information at all. I looked around their humble house and saw they had photographs of us on the walls. They remembered us fondly. I didn't know what to say; I think I cried. They hugged us and offered tortillas and quesadillas.²²

My best friend as a child was Juan Cristián. His mother was an astronomer and often invited us to go with her to the observatory. Our friendship was one of those you believe will last forever: every week one of us would spend the night at the other's house. We shared our dreams and toys. Our precipitous escape from México prevented my having been able to say goodbye. This had remained a thorn in my heart. For years I wrote him letters that were never answered. On this my first time back I wanted to see him. So many ties had been broken, and this was one of the most important. I called and went to his house. His mother was there and told me that he was away on vacation and I wouldn't be able to see him. She invited me to go with her to explore a meteor crater. It was a long trip, maybe even a couple of days. She and I went in the car by ourselves. A tape played Carmina Burana over and over again. That music is forever associated in my mind with the arid and endless landscape of that outing. My store of adventures grew, but I didn't get to see my friend.

Years later I visited México again. Now we were sixteen. After eight years I didn't think Juan Cristián and I would have anything in common, so had only reserved a few hours for him at the end of the visit. By then his mother had died. When we met and began to talk we discovered with astonishment that our lives had followed parallel paths: we liked the same music, had the same ideas, were passionate over the same political issues. I found out that his mother had prevented our correspondence to "avoid problems." It moved me to know that, in spite of this, our friendship continued to exist. From then on, whenever I was in México we saw one another. He and Marcos, another friend from my childhood, also visited me in Cuba.

On that 1973 trip I was also able to talk at length with Sergio. Since we'd left México our lives

²² *Tortillas are flat rounds of cornmeal or wheat; corn tortillas are most popular in Mexico. Quesadillas are tortillas folded around a bit of cheese and heated on a griddle.*





had gone in very different directions, or at least this is what I believed. Sergio had become much more involved with Zen Buddhism. He had spent a couple of years at a monastery in Japan, and had come home filled with new ideas about how to help his fellow humans. He wanted to teach the peasants how to cultivate soy, use acupuncture and meditation. It all seemed very petite bourgeois to me, and I told him so. I thought those were things that might help people live better, but couldn't really change their social conditions. Furthermore, I instinctively rejected religion. I berated Sergio for not fighting for the socialist revolution, arms in hand, and my reproaches were filled with dogmatic language, rife with slogans.

I had only been in Cuba for a few short years and already I was a product of its ambiance. Added to that was my infantile immaturity. Sergio was always patient with me. He stored my attacks in his bag of hurts and let time take its course. He visited us in Cuba. He welcomed us in México. He still suffered the open wound of our impetuous flight, which my mother and Robert had undertaken without consulting him. I had my own reproaches. I especially criticized what I perceived as a difference in the ways he treated Sarah and Ximena. Our relationship was a mixture of tension and love. I would bring up this or that; he would suffer my attacks with patience and simply keep on loving me.

The truth was, after we left for Cuba I had assumed a father's role, and did the best I could. Naturally I made a lot of mistakes. I judged Sergio on issues that really belonged to my mother and him. When Robert left Cuba for the United States I again criticized things that were none of my concern. I was hard on my sisters. I confused sibling love with the authority of a fictitious father figure, my attempt to support my mother, a lack of life experience, and all the other limitations of my situation. I often tried to fill the role of "man of the house," and it wasn't until many years later that I learned this was impossible. By then it was too late. I understood all this when I myself became an adult. We had all grown, and the beca had taken much of the time my sisters and I might have shared: playing or fighting. Weekends had been consumed in voluntary work, great political events, and one or another balling out from me. My sisters called me The General. I loved them enormously, and was only doing what I thought was right, but it didn't work. I still get a knot in my throat every time I think of this aspect of our relationship.

On that first trip back to México, Sergio took me to the places we had always visited together: Teotihuacán, the Museum of Anthropology, Coyoacán. Most of the time we were just together, as father and son. He told me about the work he was beginning to do among a group of peasants. He and other comrades had founded a community where they spent a good deal of time living in the countryside. They were doing important organizational and educational work. Sergio was in charge of the community newspaper. Looking back, I can only admire what they were trying to do. Life has shown me there are a thousand different ways to contribute to social change and make life better for people. There was one of these, a good one.





Looking back, we can see that most of the socialist experiments failed. The Sandinista Revolution lasted ten years before it went under. Its death wasn't only due to the horrors of imperialist aggression, but to its own errors as well. The Zapatistas in México are now showing us another way, which has a lot in common with what Sergio, Fito (for many years my sister Ximena's partner), and their other friends did back then. Only we didn't understand that at the time, and were pedantic enough to believe we possessed the "only truth." Years later, on another visit, Sergio showed me some of the letters I had written him back then. I am ashamed to reread them, filled as they are with slogans and reproaches. In spite of all this I never stopped loving Sergio and we remain close. Something very profound connects us, something that resisted the corrosive nature of my infantile dogmatism.

There were other summers and other travels. Little by little I matured, and being exposed to difference had a lot to do with that. In Cuba I liked saying that I was from the United States and in the United States that I was Cuban. It was hard to convince people of the former, because I spoke like any Cuban, but eventually I did. In the U.S. the claim immediately provoked an interesting dialog. People usually assumed I was a Cuban from Miami, and began criticizing Fidel. Then I would say, as naturally as possible, that no, I lived in Cuba and was visiting. Their eyes would get big and we'd begin to talk. I took the opportunity to speak about the Cuba I knew. I tried to share the complex truth I was living. I remember on one visit taking a train from Miami to New York. I used the same trick I always did, and ended up talking about Cuba for several hours with a group of other passengers. I enjoyed thinking that in my own way I was doing political work, a kind of educational outreach.

As an American citizen, the time came when I had to register for military service. Under no condition did I want to serve in the empire's armed forces, but at the same time I didn't want a gratuitous problem. After the disaster of Vietnam, the draft had ceased to exist, but one still had to register when one reached a certain age, and there was always the possibility that one might be called up. My mother advised me to consult with a lawyer friend of hers, and on one of my trips to New York I went to see him. He received me in his office in a building in Manhattan. I explained my situation. He suggested I register like anyone else, and said it was very unlikely I would be called. But if I was, he said, I should answer yes to the question of whether or not I was a Communist. He thought that answer, and the fact that I lived in Cuba, would be enough to keep me out. I wasn't too eager to be labeled a Communist, particularly since I had never been a member of a Communist party, but it didn't turn out to be necessary. I registered and was never called.

My 1976 trip wasn't only important because of those days I spent with Joel, Nat and Lem on the visit that marked the real beginning of our relationship. On that trip, in New York, I also met a group of militants from the Argentinean People's Revolutionary Army (ERP) who were trying to build solidarity for the victims of that country's dictatorship. I was particularly impressed by Madeline, a North American with dark eyes with whom I fell madly in love. She was twenty-five, and her partner, the Argentinean filmmaker and revolutionary





Raymundo Glaizer, had disappeared in the vortex of death that had swallowed so many during those years.

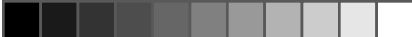
Glaizer's films are powerful and beautiful to watch. They transmit the energy and vision we shared back then. Madeline devoted herself to the campaign to find Glaizer, who was a well-known intellectual and one among the thousands of disappeared. Glaizer's invisible presence added to our considerable age difference, and contributed to the total madness of my crush. But hormones are hormones. I was like a rag doll in her presence. Madeline was full of energy, and her smile captivated me completely, just as her body and long black hair did. I was in love, and she surely knew that. There's a photograph taken by my Uncle George, showing us on a bus in Manhattan. That photo is like a piece of evidence.

We spent days together on that visit which couldn't have lasted more than a few. I read all the political material the group gave me. I learned about the ERP's history, and couldn't take my eyes off Madeline. One night we agreed I would visit her at her apartment. My grandparents were furious with the "depraved cradle-robber." They were worried about where this might lead. Filled with fear, not only about our meeting but because this was the first time I would be taking the subway alone at night, I went to her apartment. We had a nice time listening to music. I didn't dare kiss her. I don't know what she had in mind. I was her plaything, inexperienced and docile, afraid to do anything that might ruin our friendship. It was an impossible love. The next time I went to New York things were different. A distance had been established. Maybe she had another partner or simply understood that she shouldn't have toyed with my emotions as she had. I didn't see her again for many years. While I lived in Cuba her picture was on the wall in my room. She looked at me from a couple of beautiful portraits taken by Uncle George. She had been very important to my sexual awakening, although we had never even touched. Once in a while I would hear about her. She married an Italian. I met others who had loved her, perhaps more successfully than I.

Many years later I learned that Madeline was going to Argentina for the first time since Glaizer's disappearance. By now I lived in Uruguay with Laura and our three children, and had a job that took me to Argentina every month or so. I arranged to be in Buenos Aires when she would be there and asked if we could meet. This was another pending account that called loudly from my past. She invited me to come to a gathering some friends had arranged for her one Saturday night. I spent the day working and anticipating our imminent meeting. I was sick with fever and dizziness. At the appointed time I went to the gathering. I arrived in a cab, went up to the apartment, and when I rang she opened. She was a mature woman now, even a bit tired, yet with the same generous smile. That night we reminisced. I told her the story from my point of view, and we embraced. I returned to Montevideo calmer and happier. I told Laura how the episode had ended.

In 1976 Robert returned to the United States. This was another great rupture in our lives. My mother always chose marvelous partners, so each new father was great, but we suffered





even more with the separation. The circle was closing itself again. The silence was heavy. Tears ran down my cheeks and throat. I close my eyes and see the image of my father in his room putting books into boxes. He moved to live with his friend Ramos, a filmmaker who lived in a small house he had built himself about 15 blocks from ours. We visited him there many times. After the separation, Robert decided to go back to the U.S. Ana and I accompanied him that summer. Robert had to get used to another sort of life. He seemed full of energy, his optimism running over. Perhaps this was his way of hiding the bitterness he felt. He showed me his city, his new family, his projects. He left Cuba because he no longer had a place with us, and also in order to do political work in the heart of the empire. When he left I wrote a poem that describes something of what I felt. Hidden among the slogans one can read the love.

POPPY.

*Your leaving excites every particle of my body,
it makes me happy and sad,
my pride grows,
I know what you are fighting for and support you,
when you triumph
the people will love love and hate hate.
At the same time
my love cries from the depths of me
Coño! Don't go!
If I keep on writing the above
I will call myself selfish,
but no, I must understand,
it's not so easy to separate,
perhaps for a long time.
We were together, now we are apart,
it's a brutal change and I know you understand.
What connects us will be fighting for the same thing
wherever we are.
For the rest,
may your love of others and of life give you the joy and courage
to continue on together.*

Robert and I always had a kind of telepathic communication. With a single gesture we knew what the other was thinking. We'd walk all night long in that city that never sleeps. Sometimes we'd buy a copy of The New York Times fresh off the presses. It was three in the morning and I was always surprised by the fact that life never stopped in that city: the taxis, the people in the streets, the cafés where we would stop at that late hour for a cup of coffee and a sweet, the steam escaping from the grates in the sidewalks as if the city was a sleeping beast

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whose breath came out in little puffs. We would notice women walking by and, like two friends, admire their appearance. The truth is there's not much of an age difference between us; Robert is only fourteen years older than me. That summer we traveled together as far as Albuquerque. This was Robert's farewell to my mother's parents and, in a certain sense, his farewell to our family. I retain an image of him, Ana, and me hugging, looking out at the world from the Sandia Mountains, singing Cuban songs, shouting out our love and pain.

Robert became a far-off presence. He was always there, but we rarely saw one another. He almost never wrote, and my own letters often contained furious economic reproaches. He made another life, met Rachel, they married, and their son Dan was born. On one visit I went with him to the National Lawyers Guild office where he worked on projects in support of Puerto Rican independence. On another I accompanied him to the United Nations, where he represented the news agency Nueva Nicaragua and did lots of different things. Once I helped him write a hurried article in his tiny office in that legendary building. Our times together were always beautiful and happy. Robert has the rare ability to be present with a word or gesture at exactly the right moment, and that's the way it's always been between us. All these years, in spite of the distances, his inability to write, and a certain exasperating neglect, he always shows up full of life and optimism at the opportune moment.

I continued to visit my fathers every summer or two. It was a sort of pilgrimage that now took me regularly to see Joel, Robert, and Sergio. As time passed, I learned to construct a special and different relationship with each. We let go of all that was extraneous. Maybe we found the essence of what linked us. I was even able to help mend the relationships between my mother and each of them. Perhaps this was the beginning of my role as bridge builder. I have been able to bring people together, heal wounds. I sometimes felt Nazim Hikmet whispering in my ear a line or two from his poem that says: "As a boy I wanted to be a postman / knock on the door of some house in the middle of the storm / and deliver the long-awaited telegram..." It was one of the poems Robert taught me to love.





THE PEDAGOGICAL DETACHMENT

The Pedagogical Detachment was what the Cubans set up to handle teacher training for the great wave of students who kept appearing on the horizon.

Cuban education was organized in cycles: elementary school which went through sixth grade; middle school which included seventh, eighth and ninth; and the three years of high school called pre-university, or simply pre, which prepared students to go on to a higher education. Instead of high school, after middle school one could enter a school for skilled technicians. Beginning with eleventh grade, members of the Pedagogical Detachment followed a different course of study. Instead of continuing their general pre-university, they began training to be middle school teachers. Half the day they took classes, the other half they taught sixth and seventh grade students. In five years they'd earned a teacher's certificate.

By the end of tenth grade, I had read a great deal. I was very interested in Latin American history, devoured the daily paper and avidly followed world news. When I decided to enter the Pedagogical Detachment, I didn't hesitate in choosing to be a history teacher.

For whatever reason the group with which I entered the Detachment didn't teach that first year. They sent us to Río Seco II, which was an escuela en el campo / school in the countryside, about sixty kilometers south of Havana. A school in the countryside was a particular type of school where the students lived during their entire school year, studied four hours each day and did another three or four of agricultural work. This sort of place was built with middle school students in mind. They put us there in spite of the fact that we were studying to be teachers. There were 500 of us, of both sexes, half intending to teach history, the other half English. The installations were typical of that type of school: two dormitory buildings and one of classrooms, along with one single-story building with a dining hall and a couple of sports installations. The whole place was surrounded by several acres of bananas, where we worked since we weren't yet teaching.

Reality soon set in, and I realized that the Detachment was a way of supplementing the





lack of teachers but also a place for kids who weren't going to be able to go to the university and could complete a shorter course of study that would allow them to work in a field where they were needed. There were a number of kids whose ages betrayed the fact that they'd repeated several grades, or hadn't done well in their studies. Some were simply young delinquents. It seemed that Río Seco II was filled with lumpen. I couldn't understand how anyone was going to be able to turn this human material into teachers, and my romantic illusions about the Pedagogical Detachment and my participation in this "revolutionary trench" quickly dissipated.

There were big differences between this school and the Lenin. The dormitories were similar, but here there were no interest circles, museums or swimming pools. At the same time, comparing this atmosphere with the one I'd left behind at the Lenin, I could see that these kids might not be as smart but most seemed more genuine. There were some rather primitive codes of conduct, "a friend was a friend," and one didn't see the sort of hypocrisy or sham typical of some of the privileged kids I'd known at my previous school. There were two big groups. The "pepillos" were made up of those studying to be English teachers. These were kids who admired North American culture, listened to rock music, dressed in jeans, and tried in every way possible to imitate a U.S. lifestyle. They thought they were sophisticated, and some spoke openly about wanting to "go to Yuma" as if it was their dream. The "guapos," on the other hand, were studying to be history teachers and were mostly tough guys: they kept their white shoes highly polished and starched their shirts (or rather washed them in rice water and pressed them beneath their thin mattresses as a substitute for ironing). These kids liked Cuban music and fought over any stupidity. They valued courage above all else. I imagined they lived by a similar code as those in prison or a group of common criminals: honor, bravery, and punishment in cases of betrayal or weakness.

My situation was unique. I was a history student, so I lived in the dorm with the "guapos" and was naturally assumed to be one of them. I didn't share their values or their style, but never fought with anyone. On the other hand, my national origin earned me the admiration of the English students, who saw me as belonging to that world about which they'd always dreamed.

One Sunday night, at the beginning of the year, I was riding the bus back to school. A leader from among the tough kids sat down next to me; he was a big muscular black guy. "Do you know Bill?" he asked. I told him I did, and he broke into a broad grin. He took a piece of candy from his pocket and gave it to me. "The friends of my friends are my friends," he said. "This candy seals our friendship. If you have a problem, just come to me." This seemed weird, but apparently knowing Bill was some sort of protection.

I learned to survive at that school. One Sunday night, after spending the weekend at home, I boarded the bus again. There was only one free seat, in the back. I went and sat there. A big guy, a few rows in front, stood up and shouted: "Get out of that seat; I'm saving it for

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my friend.” I wasn’t about to get up. What was this about reserved seats? One of the tough guys was trying to show his power. I knew it was a delicate situation but didn’t back down. I told him I wasn’t going to move, that the seat had been empty and I had as much right to it as anyone. The other kids stared at me with fear in their eyes and advised me to give up the seat and not bring problems upon myself. The guy continued to threaten, demanding that I get up, but I stayed where I was. The trip took an hour. It felt a lot longer, as I imagined what awaited me. Finally we arrived at the school and got off the bus. We went to our dorms. I lived in the same dorm as that guy who had challenged me. Pretty soon a group of kids came looking for me: “So and so is waiting for you in the bathroom, to resolve the problem.” There was the guy from the bus, accompanied by two witnesses. A machete stood in the corner. They closed the bathroom door. I was scared. I knew the rules, and that the three of them wouldn’t attack me. Those kids only fought one on one, as if in a duel. But he was much bigger than I was and knew how to fight, one of those guys who spends a lot of time on body-building. I really didn’t know how to fight; it wasn’t my thing. He put his face close to mine and shouted: “Hit me, come on, hit me!” I responded with a calm that surprised me. I said I had no intention of hitting him because I had no reason to. That threw him off. Once again he told me to hit him, and once again I refused. I said he should do whatever he wanted. I don’t know what part of their code demanded I be the one to hit first. Maybe he thought he’d won the fight because I refused to hit him, I don’t know. He let me go without touching a hair on my head. I left trembling, without understanding what had just taken place. But in some strange way I was sure I had gained some degree of respect with my unimaginable attitude.

The values that dominated at that school were incredible. Revolutionary fervor was relative among many of those who studied English. Among those of us studying history, being “revolutionary” meant being tough. But what did this really mean? Once, during work in the fields, we stopped to rest for a while and started talking. This time the discussion revolved around the historic leaders of the Cuban Revolution. There was no doubt that everyone admired Fidel, Raul, and Che. The question was who was “the best?” Some claimed the real strongmen were Camilo, Che, and Fidel. Those were *cojonudos*, they said, the guys who weren’t afraid of anyone. Not like Martí, who the first day he went into battle “went down like an imbecile.” The word *cojonudo* meant someone with big balls, indicative of bravery and courage. Opinions were primitive at best, and deeply rooted in the mentality of these kids: personal valor and a certain machismo along with other attributes like generosity or intelligence. At times like this I participated in the discussion, and had the feeling that my opinions—which I thought more sophisticated than the norm—influenced the others.

Listening to this sort of discussion, I often pondered something that even then seemed interesting to me: the Revolution was supposed to change old values but continued to use those old values as mobilizing tools. An antiquated mindset ended up defining many of the most critical moments. Chauvinism and machismo were holdovers they tried to combat, even as they appealed to those same qualities to bring people into line. In his speeches Fidel

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repeated again and again that the true internationalist must be selfless, that Cuba was giving back to the peoples of the world the solidarity from which it had benefited. The figure of Che was put forward as “pure,” a completely unselfish and generous man. This idealism left its mark on us. But then came the moment of truth. How many young Cubans went to fight in Angola or Ethiopia out of machismo or *cubanía*²³ rather than as a real reflection of the selflessness so often held up as the ideal? In discussions like these one could see the tip of the iceberg. Sometimes the subject of the wars in Angola or in Ethiopia would come up (tens of thousands of Cubans were fighting in Africa while we sat in the shade of banana trees, talking) and there was always someone who would point out that “Cuban soldiers have balls, not like those primitive, ignorant Africans who don’t even know what nationhood is.” Chauvinism and racism were right there beneath the surface, ready to rear their ugly heads.

No few students copied their exams. I had made a rule for myself: I didn’t copy and preferred that others not copy from me, but I wasn’t going to rat on anyone. It irritated me when I heard someone whispering an answer. I preferred that the results of my tests reflected my own work. It was okay if you had your own rules of conduct, and you were expected to follow them, but it was unforgivable if you went to a professor about something somebody else was doing. The dictum was live and let live. And so the silent majority, among whom I found myself, could make it through all right. But sometimes you found yourself involved in something against your will. It wasn’t unusual for someone to steal all the breakfast bread, early in the morning, right off the truck that delivered it. If that someone slept in your dorm you’d wake up with a fresh roll beside your bed. If the thief was from another dorm you wouldn’t be having breakfast that day. The only option was to eat your roll and keep quiet, or go hungry. No one would have thought of going to the administration about something like that.

There were only two foreigners at Río Seco II. One was a young boy from Guinea Bissau. He had taken part in the PAIGC’s struggle for his country’s independence and been sent to Cuba so he could study to be a teacher and learn about Cuba’s educational system. The other was me. We became friends. This kid had survived a guerrilla war back home, and the last thing he’d expected from the Cuba he admired so much was the atmosphere in which he found himself. He soon confessed to me that he wanted to go back home as soon as possible.

I took refuge in my inner life. I remembered that assembly two years before, when they’d accused me of believing myself better than others, and realized that I did in fact feel different from, and superior to, most of my schoolmates. I couldn’t help but view the whole situation with a certain condescension. The whole place seemed surreal. I decided to try to learn some history and survive. I began dedicating myself to organizing a solidarity movement with the Chilean Resistance at some of the nearby middle schools. Every mile or two there

²³ *Cubanía defines a unique, somewhat nationalistic quality many Cubans believe they possess. It is considered a positive attribute.*





was a school in the countryside. From an architectural point of view they all seemed to have been cut from the same mold, but the others were filled with secondary students, not members of the Pedagogical Detachment. I began to visit them and found receptive ears. Soon I had set up Chilean solidarity committees at several nearby schools, and before I knew it had a small network. We organized cultural activities and round table discussions, and each committee had a little bulletin board with news about the Chilean Resistance. This political work made me proud, and it saved my life.

At fifteen, I was one of the youngest students at Río Seco II. Many were twenty or even older. The fights were frequent and violent. Sometimes machetes appeared. I even saw a gun there once, something I hadn't seen to that point throughout all my experience at Cuban schools. The police came regularly to arrest someone. Once the heads of the two bands fought each other, a fight that ended in blood. The police arrived and both were taken off to prison. The principal called us all into the school theater then and told us those two students would not be readmitted. If he let them back, he said, he wouldn't be able to guarantee our safety. The gang leaders' friends made a decision and we soon learned what it was: we would declare ourselves on a hunger strike and, beginning the following day, no one would go to the dining room until the two were allowed to return. That very day I escaped to a nearby school and didn't come back until a few days later when the whole thing had blown over.

This might seem to have been an implacably horrible atmosphere, yet in my memory it really isn't. The truth is we were children. We played, saw films on Wednesday nights, studied (I remember a particular course on ancient Egypt in which we went from one dynasty to the next), and worked in agriculture. The banana fields were special. The leaves were so big you could make one of them into a bed and take a midday nap. Many used those nests to lay down with their girlfriends or boyfriends. Sexuality began to be a natural part of our everyday lives. One day a friend explained in detail what it was like to have oral sex with a girl; he'd just practiced in a nearby field. On another occasion I woke early in the morning to find the bunk next to mine completely covered by a sheet. I couldn't believe it. I could tell who the girl was by the sounds she was making. There she was in the middle of that dorm with sixty boys! I closed my eyes and tried to go back to sleep, but couldn't. I listened to that spectacle that was taking place practically in my face, and in the silence of the night felt I could see with my ears. Of course none of this was permitted, but when night fell the movement from one dorm to another began. Kids went from place to place by walking along a narrow ledge that jutted out beneath the windows, four stories above ground. One day the principal called us into the theater again. He had brought a nurse to explain how to use condoms. This was 1976, and we were in Cuba.

A mile or so from us a group of prisoners had built a new school in the countryside. One more, architecturally identical to the rest. For a few months the place was surrounded by barbed wire, and there were elevated towers with a policeman who kept guard. We were in the banana fields, and through the wire fence could see the prisoners working. When they

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finished the building they took the wire away and almost everybody left. The new school was beautiful. Two prisoners stayed on as caretakers until the new school year would begin a few months later. No one guarded them. The two had orders to remain on site, and every day follow the path to our school where they picked up their food, and then went back the way they'd come. After a while we began to talk, especially with one of them whose name I no longer remember. He was serving a twenty-five-year sentence, but never revealed the nature of his crime. One day he gave me a book about Camilo Torres, and told us we should be grateful for the Revolution: "Everything they're doing is for you," he said. It was incredible to be hearing those words from a prisoner. I always imagined he was a political prisoner. Was he someone who had simply made a mistake, or been accused of treason? It was clear he had his own set of principles, and was faithful to them. This was the sort of thing that could happen in Cuba back then: prisoners guarding a school on their own, without escaping. Maybe they figured they had it good, considering the circumstances. No one bothered them there and they could relax. Sometimes their families came to visit. If they tried to escape, they would surely be found and it would be worse.

As the year went on, I realized this wasn't the Pedagogical Detachment I'd expected. For reasons I didn't understand, I had landed in a place with a high concentration of social problems, violence and stress. At the end of the year all I really wanted was to get out. I decided to leave the program and return to the normal educational system, try to get a university degree, and direct my life differently. This wasn't easy. I had pledged myself to the Detachment, and now I would be giving up. But I'd made my decision. I had already begun to work with the Chilean MIR, and my future was now indelibly linked to Latin America. I needed a college degree that would allow me to work outside Cuba one day, and it was clear the Detachment wouldn't do. And so I asked to be allowed to return to the normal course of study. For this I had to go to an office at the Ministry of Education, where a friend of my mother's received me and I was given the necessary transfer. The following September I would begin at Saul Delgado High School, also known as the Pre of Vedado.





VEDADO HIGH SCHOOL

By the end of 1977 I'd left the Pedagogical Detachment and this also meant the end of my boarding school experience. Since my arrival in Cuba I'd spent eight years in becas. I'd learned a lot and in many ways gotten used to their codes and rhythms. But when Robert and my mother separated and he left the house, I suddenly discovered how much I needed family. In a sense it was already too late. Never again would we all live together in the same place. I'd lost the opportunity of sharing everyday life with him and it hurt. I realized time passed much too quickly, and that in a few years my mother and sisters would also be gone. I decided to leave the beca, then, and move home. From the moment I quit the Lenin, I think I was leaving boarding school; perhaps unconsciously and via a somewhat convoluted route.

The Saúl Delgado Pre-University Institute, the school to which I had access because of our neighborhood, occupied a full city block just off 23rd Street. The classrooms and laboratories were arranged around a large interior patio. The building, which had obviously been built before the Revolution, predated those schools in the countryside. A park with tall trees and a fountain in the center separated it from 23rd Street with its traffic, shops, and theaters. It was centrally-located and filled with the bustle of kids entering and leaving class.

During the year I was at the Pedagogical Detachment I'd taken some normal high school classes but not others. Instead, I'd studied a few specialized courses in history or pedagogy. The Detachment's curriculum was designed for future history teachers. Returning to the regular system, I had two options: I could either do eleventh grade over or take a series of exams that would qualify me as if I had passed all the subjects. I decided on the second because I didn't want to "lose" the year. But I only had summer vacation in which to prepare. I would have to do a whole year's worth of coursework in two months, and on my own. I made a very strict study plan. At Saúl Delgado, the director received me warmly and put me in touch with a girl who'd made very good grades the year before. She agreed to help. She lent me her beautifully kept notebooks and was even willing to spend some time explaining what I didn't understand. I think this was when I really learned to study. I got up at five each morning and took advantage of the day's early silence. I progressed methodically, reading, solving problems, with a discipline that surprised me. When I took the exams, I

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passed them all. I was radiant. In September I would be able to begin my final year of high school.

The atmosphere at Saúl Delgado was completely different from the beca. There was a great deal of freedom. No one woke me with a bell at six a.m. or rolled a coin across the sheets to see if my bed was correctly made. I had to deal with everything on my own: prepare my meals, make sure I was always on time, travel from our apartment to school every day. The teachers at this high school were older than those at the becas. Some were even elderly, as they are everywhere in the world, but for me it was something new to have elderly teachers.

Our classes were in the morning. Afterwards we would leave school and walk home along Vedado's tree-lined streets. Sometimes I would stop at the second-hand bookshop on the corner of L, or have an ice cream at Coppelia. In the afternoons I usually had some sort of activity: maybe a political meeting or just a date with friends. At night we might go to the movies or theater: once a week, or more often if there was a festival at the cinemateca. Havana always had a great many cultural activities. Films and plays cost a peso, and there were lots of film cycles with good movies: Bergman, Hitchcock, and Eisenstein, among others. There were commercial films from Europe (I remember those of Pierre Richard and Louis de Funes, among the comedies) and not very many from the United States because of the blockade. The ever ingenious Cubans made it possible for the public to keep up with the latest films from the States. They simply made contraband copies and showed them on television. That's how we got to see *The Godfather* and others: everyone together watching the same movie on some hot Sunday afternoon.

There was a lot of theater: the Escambray Theater Group, Teatro Estudio, the Berthold Brecht Theater. And there were all kinds of music, from incredibly inexpensive concerts at the National or Carlos Marx theaters to free concerts in Almendares Park or at the Casa de las Américas. We listened to Silvio Rodríguez, Pablo Milanés, Sara Gonzáles, Noel Nicola, Pedro Luis Ferrer, Leo Brouwer, the Van Van, and Iraquere.

When I think about that year what I least remember are my classes. I was awakening to a political life that filled me completely, and my hormones were boiling at the same time. Cultural life, political activism, and girls all belonged to a single ambiance only that time of life possesses. I moved in several different circles: the community of Latin American young people, sons and daughters of political refugees, some of whom were affiliated with the Chilean MIR; my Cuban friends at school; and the poets and photographers who were my mother's friends and spent time at our house.

The Chilean Solidarity Committee was where that country's embassy had been before the coup, not far from my high school. Sometimes I had a meeting there. I became friendly with a group of Latin Americans who attended my school or another high school, the Guiteras, just a few blocks away. There were the Uruguayans José Enrique and Gonzalo, and the Chil-

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eans Pancho and Javier. We were all good friends. We began to organize a group of young Latin Americans in order to undertake solidarity activities.

The principle of combining work and study was carried out very differently at Saúl Delgado than at the beca. Instead of working half days, like we did at the schools in the countryside, we spent forty-five days a year working in agriculture. That was called escuela al campo. During that time we did eight-hour shifts. For us it was a real adventure. There are things I associate with School in the Countryside, like the nightly bonfires, the songs, never bathing, and just having a great time.

As we were getting ready for those forty-five days, we did everything we could to make sure that the group of Latin Americans from both high schools ended up at the same agricultural camp. We said we were a group and wanted to continue doing political work together as well as working in the fields. We got permission and off we went, in what we called the Roque Dalton Brigade. Gonzalo's mother made us a flag with the brigade's name. Of course we organized one or another political/cultural activity on Latin America to do justice to our name, but mostly we had fun.

We went to the tobacco fields of Pinar del Río, which were blanketed with dew in the early mornings. Every so often a tall house of wood and straw appeared through the mist. That's where we had to bring the tobacco leaves we'd cut with such care. Others hung them from long poles where they remained until cured. We were only supposed to cut certain leaves. My job was to cut the largest, those growing closest to the ground. The dew soaked our feet and sweat covered the rest of our bodies. It was delicate work that required doubling over for hours on end. After a shift beneath the hot sun we were tired.

On our way back to camp, though, we still had energy to play guerrilla war, hiding among the trees; and at night we gathered around a fire to talk, sing, and just be together. Those whose girlfriends or boyfriends were with them there took advantage of the total freedom we enjoyed. Some only saw them when they came to visit. On weekends many Cuban mothers brought food to share with their sons and daughters. My mother never came to see me there but I was used to that. I remember going to visit Noelle, my girlfriend at the time, when she was doing her forty-five days in the fields. Our romance only lasted a couple of months.

When that year ended, we had to choose our university majors. Each of us was supposed to write ten career choices on a special form, in decreasing order of interest. There were some twenty different universities and institutions of higher learning in the country at the time, and a planned economy made it possible to know how many professionals would be needed in each area in the coming years. The authorities estimated the number of students who could be expected to graduate according to the statistics for "academic mortality," and based on this they decided on the quotas for each institution. After that they assigned students to

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each profession or institution of their choice according to their stated preferences and high school grade average.

Throughout my life I'd been interested in studying many things. I'd wanted to be an archaeologist (perhaps since the time my mother and I accompanied Laurette on her excavations at Teotihuacán and I played among the ruins). I'd wanted to study medicine back when I begged to be allowed to witness those autopsies. For many years I was attracted to astronomy, first because of Juan Cristián's mother and later because of my contact with Adriana Esquirol. Now I liked history and political economy, and was passionate about Latin America.

My grades were very good in both history and mathematics, so I didn't know if I should choose history or engineering. I finally decided on the latter. I thought it would give me more useful tools with which to collaborate with the Revolution wherever I ended up, and that I would always be able to study history later on my own. In retrospect, and at almost fifty, I think I made a mistake. I have done well in engineering, but history has always been my passion, and I think I might have been a better historian than engineer. I now believe you should always go with your heart if you want to give your best.

I remember filling out that damned form where we had to list our preferences. I wrote down engineering in telecommunications, engineering in automatic control, and electrical engineering, in that order. I didn't list anything else. I refused even to consider the fact that I might not be given my first choice. I handed in the form, and a few weeks went by. One day I received my answer. I had been accepted in telecommunications at the José Antonio Echeverría Higher Polytechnic Institute. That had been my first choice. There had been a quota of twelve students from the city of Havana, and I was number eleven. I had earned a 96.11 grade average out of 100 throughout my high school career.





THE LATIN AMERICANS

The Cuban Revolution was consolidating itself and this was something we felt in our daily lives. Material conditions continued to get better all the time, and one felt that one was helping to build something solid. Still, there was a sense of isolation, and it was clear to everyone that in the long term the Revolution's survival depended on other revolutions taking power all over the continent. At the same time, the social justice benefits and the very joy of life we experienced stood in sharp contrast to the misery and repression so prevalent elsewhere; and which we knew about from the many Latin Americans who traveled to Cuba as well as from the media. It didn't matter that the reality throughout the continent was more complex; this was the image we had.

The Cuban press was bad. The main newspaper, Granma, consisted of only six pages, but was almost entirely given over to covering revolutionary successes throughout the world and, when it couldn't help it, mentioning a failure or two. As far as the national reality was concerned, the paper offered a boring litany of revolutionary achievements. For example, it might have an article about how the day before the workers in such and such a province had set a new record for the number of quarts of milk produced, or tons of potatoes harvested. Sometimes an important document appeared, to help us better understand our current situation: this might be a speech by Fidel or a Party press release.

During those years there were active guerrilla movements everywhere. Most had Cuba's solidarity, or at least its sympathy. We thought of these men and women as our brothers and sisters in struggle. Official aid might be political or diplomatic, or include the training of troops and sharing of intelligence or arms. Cuba's solidarity expressed itself in a thousand overt and covert ways.

Cuba was "the first free territory of America." We deeply believed the characterization, and this had its consequences. When a member of one of the revolutionary groups operating on the continent was wounded, he or she could count on getting medical attention on the island. If the movement failed, they knew Cuba would be their refuge. Many comrades sent

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their children to the island; they knew it was a safe place. Our parents had done this with us. The streets of Havana were filled with militants from all over the continent. Some of them stayed months, others years. Some, like us, became integrated into Cuban society. Others, there for relatively short periods of time, lived in communal houses, sometimes clandestinely. At the end of the seventies, for example, one could find many Central Americans, victims of land mines, roaming Miramar on crutches. Cubans, and those like ourselves who identified with Cuba's ideology, looked at these people with admiration and gave them everything we could. Considering the scarcity of the times, we didn't have much, but this made it even more meaningful.

The revolutionary struggles taking place in the different Latin American countries began revealing their problems or limitations. From this rearguard position, each national struggle seemed to be part of a larger, global picture. We lost sight of each context and unique culture. In our discussions about strategies and tactics, we were overly influenced by the



partiality of the information we possessed. Each experience provided a grain of sand in the debate. Intellectuals elaborated theses on the *foco* theory²⁴, or the relationship between military strategy and grass roots organization. They wrote books and took part in meetings

24 *The foco theory proposed that a small guerrilla army was capable of organizing people to wage revolutionary war. Che Guevara put it into practice and theoreticians such as the Frenchman Régis Debray wrote about it.*





hosted by the Organization of Solidarity with the Peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America (OSPAAAL). Ordinary people simply felt sympathy and admiration for those young people who were fighting throughout the continent.

In his speeches Fidel was able to explain the profound relationships among all these different phenomena, and taught us internationalism as the supreme value, “the highest level to which a revolutionary might aspire.” And so I, like many of my friends, dreamed of one day becoming an internationalist combatant who would participate in this epic.

Every once in a while one of Fidel’s speeches put things in perspective. He spoke for hours, explaining, weaving his ideas to tens of thousands of silent listeners who filled Revolutionary Square for the occasion. Fidel had the ability to dialog with multitudes. You stood there in the crowd and had the feeling he was speaking directly to you. His language was accessible but never simplistic. He constructed rational arguments, and seemed to wait until we all understood what he was saying before moving on to something else. Little by little it came clear. His speeches might touch on the internal problems we had to deal with every day: the economic situation, bureaucracy, or corruption. Or he might talk about international affairs.

In The First Declaration of Havana Fidel had thrown out the following phrase: “This great humanity has said enough, and has begun to walk; and its giant steps will not stop until it has won its true and definitive independence.” We felt that we were part of that great tidal wave. One day Che disappeared from public view. Later Fidel read his farewell letter before a silent multitude. A couple of years later he gave us the details of Che’s death. Still later they recuperated his diary and severed hands, and Fidel spoke again. I was one among many in the plaza that day. I’ll never forget the silence heavy with pain shared by hundreds of thousands of people. At that moment of extraordinary emotion thousands of us swallowed our tears and promised ourselves we would try to follow Che’s example.

On another occasion we listened as he explained what was going on in Angola, a country that had been attacked by South Africa’s apartheid regime, and his conviction that Cuba should come to the aid of the African people. He said it would be a return of the Cuban people to their own roots. Few Cubans didn’t have the blood of slaves in their veins. Now was the time to join the struggle against apartheid and for African independence. And we listened to him again when, accompanied by the victorious comandantes Sandinistas, he told us about their revolution in Nicaragua. Fidel spoke of the revolutionary change that had been initiated on the tiny Caribbean island of Grenada. Each of these struggles had a place in the great global jigsaw puzzle. And we had a place, a small place. Each of us, if we wanted, could be part of that human effort to change the world for the better.

At the beginning of the seventies, the string of victorious peoples’ struggles in Latin America (among them the Allende government in Chile) stretched to include a few takeovers by

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nationalistic military men who, in one way or another, became part of the great progressive current. There was Velasco Alvarado in Peru, who initiated an agrarian reform and declared Quechua an official national language. There was Omar Torrijos in Panama, who ousted the United States from the canal (a long held dream throughout the continent). Argentina's dictatorship had been defeated by an unprecedented popular uprising. Soon that country would enjoy a few brief months under Cámpora, and a pre-revolutionary euphoria. People filled the streets of Buenos Aires and freed the political prisoners.

Salvador Allende and the Popular Unity government came to power through democratic elections in Chile. That was unbelievable; it hadn't seemed possible. Theory held that if one really wanted to change the social structures, the bourgeoisie would resist with everything it had, including terrorism and all-out war. Peaceful revolution had seemed out of the question. Experience throughout the history of the continent had shown that the ruling class had always destroyed every attempt at genuine transformation. One had only to remember what had happened in Guatemala in 1954 and Brazil in 1964 where democratically elected progressive governments had been overturned by bloody military coups.

But then Allende came along, showing the world that it was possible for a movement with a socialist agenda to attain the government through an electoral process. Or at least that's what we thought. We followed each phase of that process closely: the nationalizations, the land reform, the employers' strikes. Fidel spent a number of days in Chile, giving speeches to huge numbers of people all up and down that narrow country; and when he returned he shared his impressions with his own people. He told us marvelous things were happening there, and that we should support them with everything we had. I remember the campaign to send a boatload full of sugar; we gladly gave up part of our own ration so we could send it to our Chilean brothers and sisters.

Then came September 11, 1973, and the dream disintegrated. The Chilean coup. For days we were mute. Everyone was glued to the news: those stories of horror. That defeat went a long way toward dampening the illusion that a country might achieve change through peaceful means, and reduced once more the idea of a larger "free territory of America." So many hopes died in Chile! We wept. I was almost thirteen at the time. And there was Fidel, in the plaza once again, explaining the disaster, telling stories of terror and calling on us all to express our solidarity with the Chilean Resistance. The dark decade of the seventies had begun. Shortly before, we had witnessed the military coup in Bolivia and Uruguay and Argentina would soon follow.

Chilean refugees arrived by the thousands. And then Argentineans, Uruguayans, Bolivians, and Brazilians. The human waves followed each coup, each defeat. The Cubans naturally offered the newcomers everything they could. Their generosity was matched only by their joy in living, although for someone coming from somewhere else the material scarcities were obvious.





There is a story I believe reflects this contradiction well, but it requires some explanation. Cuba's population had grown from five to ten million in only a few years. It seems that when people are happy they have children. At the same time, the government was trying to develop economic policies centered on human wellbeing instead of profit, but for there were no recipes available for that. It experimented with all sorts of solutions in an effort to find a middle way: between material incentives (salary linked to production, with its logical earning differentials), which was efficient but "made men into wolves," and moral incentives (voluntary work, social recognition, a narrowing earning differential) aimed at contributing to the formation of that "new man" about whom Che had spoken. He had warned, after visiting Eastern Europe, of the dangers inherent to the economic orientation that prevailed there.

Some ideas worked better than others, but in general there was a high degree of voluntarism. Soon housing began to be a critical problem. The country's few resources were being spent on schools, highways, and hospitals; but no money was going into repairing existent homes, nor was there the capacity to build a massive number of new ones. A big problem was the lack of labor power. Unemployment was almost nonexistent, and no one wanted to work in construction.

Fidel was always traveling the country; he would show up unexpectedly, anywhere at all, jump from his jeep and engage in animated conversation. On one of these surprise visits the people at a particular workplace started talking with him about the housing problem. One of them proposed a solution: the micro brigades. It was a simple idea. Each work place would select a group of twenty-five employees. While these people built an apartment building that could solve the housing problem for a number of their colleagues, all the other workers would take on their jobs along with their own. In this way, everyone would be making an extra effort: those who volunteered for construction and those who remained at the workplace. The State would provide the technical expertise and materials. This is how the micro brigade movement began. Thousands of them sprang up, each consisting of twenty-five people. Of that number, only nineteen worked on the apartment building itself; the other six were allocated to the brigades that built the roads, day care centers, schools, super markets and the rest of the infrastructure each new neighborhood required.

People had the clear sense that these buildings belonged to them, something they expressed in all sorts of ways: they would work overtime on weekends, at night, at all possible hours. The sooner they completed the project, the sooner they could move in. The finished apartments were distributed through assemblies, and were given to those who had worked the hardest and had the greatest need. Those who earned their apartment in this way paid five percent of their salary for the next twenty years, and would then be given title to the property.

Years later I heard of a man who had worked on one of those micro brigades. He was a

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short strong black man, who composed poetry despite the fact that he barely knew how to write. Each time his brigade finished a building, they proposed he receive one of the new apartments. They all valued his work and dedication. He always refused, arguing that other comrades with families needed lodging more than he did. He had finished a number of buildings, but continued to live in squalor. His “house” was a tiny room in Old Havana with barely enough space for a bed and table. People like this man made me love the Cuban Revolution.

In the midst of great enthusiasm, the micro brigade model went nationwide. One day, in a general assembly, the members of the brigades voted to increase their work day to ten hours, without additional compensation, as a way of contributing more to the Revolution. As a symbol of this sort of sacrifice they decided to paint on their white helmets the Tupamaro five-pointed star with a T in the middle.²⁵ I don’t know what a Uruguayan worker would have thought if someone had told him that in Cuba to be a Tupamaro meant working ten hours and being paid for eight. Cuba was swept by construction fever. Everywhere you looked you saw those white helmets with their Tupamaro stars. And new neighborhoods of apartments were springing up everywhere. This was modest housing, but functional and built with love.

But back to my original story. Latin American refugees—we called them los latinos—kept on coming. At the beginning they were just a few individuals, like Roque Dalton and his family or like us. Then they began coming in greater numbers. Between 1973 and 1976 several thousand arrived. Many deplaned directly from prison or after having spent months in an embassy that had offered them asylum. Once in a while, a group of comrades was liberated thanks to a successful political kidnapping or prison escape. These people were fleeing the dictatorships that had begun to cast their deathly shadows across the continent. The largest group was from Chile. Just as we had rejoiced when it seemed a new road to social change was possible, now we did everything in our power to receive those brothers and sisters with open arms. The Cubans then decided that each micro brigade building should set aside one apartment for a family of Latin American refugees. Once again, the Cubans gave generously what they had, just as when we’d sent that boatload of sugar to Chile and later when so many gave their lives in Angola, Ethiopia, Grenada or Nicaragua.

And so, large numbers of Latin Americans began living in Alamar, the new city to the east of Havana, built by the now expert hands of those microbrigadistas. Some of the refugees weren’t used to Cuba’s modest conditions. They’d come from wealthy families. Maybe they’d always had hot water and domestic help. The four- or five-hundred square-foot apartments, in buildings with neither elevators nor hot water, resembled lower-class housing on other parts of the continent. What so many Cuban families aspired to must have seemed a miserable handout to some of those who arrived from outside the country.

25 *The armed struggle organization in Uruguay was called Tupamaros.*





One day a group of Chileans organized a protest outside the Hotel Presidente to manifest their dissatisfaction with what they'd been given. The Cubans didn't understand. An angry murmur swelled from throat to throat: "Who do they think they are? We give them what we have and they scorn it." Cuba put those refugees on a plane and deported them. I think they sent them to Europe. They may well have found better material conditions where they landed but I don't believe they could have found human warmth comparable to what they'd received in Cuba.

The vast majority of Chileans and Latin Americans acclimatized easily. We were veterans. When that great wave appeared, we'd been in the country for several years. Many of the newcomers visited my parents, and their children became our friends. We might meet doing voluntary work organized by the Cuban Institute of Friendship with the Peoples (ICAP), the organization that attended to our needs. Or perhaps at one of the *peñas*²⁶ that were held, complete with Chilean *empanadas*²⁷ and live music and poetry.



During the Popular Unity government my mother went to Chile for a couple of weeks. She made long-lasting friendships, visited many different places, talked to people and filled herself with the spirit of what was happening. When she came home she shared her impressions with us. Following the coup, when the Chilean refugees arrived

in Cuba, many of them came to visit. Some were crucial in my life.

Jaime Wheelock and Gladys Zalaquett were two of these. He was a Nicaraguan and she was Chilean; both were Sandinistas. They lived at the Hotel Nacional and visited us often, becoming good friends. In long conversations, they explained their world view and suggested books for me to read. I asked to join the Sandinistas, but they gently refused, pointing out that I was still young and needed to study first. I admired Jaime and Gladys a great deal. Years later he would become one of the nine comandantes of the Sandinista Directorate, and the Minister of Agriculture who designed Nicaragua's land reform. Back then he was just another foot soldier studying his country's economic structure.

26 Cultural gatherings, with music and sometimes poetry, often impromptu.

27 Small pocket of meat- and potato-filled dough, either fried or baked.





Hernán arrived around that time. He belonged to Chile's Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR). A childhood bout with polio had left him with one withered arm. He and I also spent hours talking. He suggested I read *State and Revolution* by Lenin, through which he explained the Popular Unity's defeat. Hernán used the Chilean experience to teach me that the bourgeoisie never hesitates to employ its full power to resist social change. Miguel Enríquez had remained to lead the Resistance in Chile. We all read the news avidly. Comrade after comrade died in battle. One day we got news of Miguel's death. Hernán and I went to the Yara Theater to watch the ICAIC newsreel which that week was completely devoted to the terrible loss. Sometime later one of Havana's big new hospitals was named for Miguel,

and Armando Hart gave a speech in which he declared him one of the continent's most important revolutionary leaders.



Among the refugees arriving from Chile was the Bolivian filmmaker Jorge Sanjinés and his family. They too showed up at our house. From the moment I saw her, I was totally smitten by his daughter Paula. There's a photograph of that visit, the two families in our living room, in which I'm looking at her longingly. Paula had a strange combination of green eyes and slightly indigenous features. Her sleek hair evoked the tones of Andean flutes. I was a goner. A few days later I went looking for her, but didn't have her address. I knew only that she lived in Alamar, like so many other refugees, in one of the hundreds of micro brigade buildings. There I was, walking through streets bordered by dozens of identical apartment blocks, searching fruitlessly. Later I saw her at one of our usual gatherings, and our paths crossed on several

other occasions. She never gave me the time of day. It was one of those platonic loves so typical of adolescence.

One day I was invited along with other young Latin Americans to a meeting at the Cuban Committee of Solidarity with Chile. We were a dozen or so from different parts of the continent: Mexicans, Chileans, Brazilians. The Chilean MIR had called the meeting. They proposed that we organize ourselves to work in solidarity with their struggle. These were the words I'd been waiting to hear. For years I'd seen comrades come and go. Almost all of them told heroic stories. Some left without saying goodbye, like Roque Dalton who had been murdered in El Salvador just months before this meeting I'd anticipated for so long.





By this time there was a solid community of Latin American refugees. We would come together in all sorts of venues. Among those of my generation were Che's nephews and nieces, what was left of Santucho's family, Sendic's and Roque's children, and the Peredos' offspring, among others whose family names might not be as well-known but were also those of revolutionary combatants. We played and grew up together, and each of us in one way or another felt a clear personal destiny. I remember thinking there wouldn't be a battle left to wage when I got old enough to participate, and that I wouldn't have the opportunity of taking part in the great epic of my time. One day I cried in my mother's arms, bemoaning the fact that it would all be over before I grew up. She comforted me, explaining there were years of struggle left, that I shouldn't worry.

Now we were sitting together in that room, convoked by the comrades of Miguel Enríquez, Luciano Cruz, Bautista Van Showen and Dagoberto Pérez among many other almost mythical members of the MIR. I was filled with joy and didn't hesitate for a moment. Our leaders were maybe two years older than most of us: Hugo, Agueda, Alejandro. They were young but seemed wise to me, in spite of the fact that they themselves were probably just beginning their political work at the time. Mostly, they impressed me as really good people.

The first task I was given was to gather all the information I could about Manuel Cabieses, the MIR leader and editor of Punto Final magazine who was imprisoned in Chile and for whose freedom we were organizing an international campaign at the time. I worked seriously and with enormous pride. We had all grown up in the context of the Latin American revolution, and we'd been frustrated at not being able to contribute in some way. Our parents, siblings, aunts, uncles and friends had been imprisoned, tortured or assassinated. We felt part of that great wave advancing toward the creation of a new world, and at the same time we were its victims. Every one of us had his or her own personal reason, a particular rupture or contained rage. The MIR made it possible for us to come together, study, channel our energies and feel useful. We quickly became a very united and carefree group, combining idealism and seriousness. With responsibility we undertook the small tasks we were given, and they made us feel happy and more fulfilled.

Alejandro was one of the young Chileans who led our group. He quickly became my best friend. For a couple of years, we shared our lives intensely: both our political histories and amorous adventures. Until one day he disappeared like so many others, to prepare to "go to the front," that mysterious place that was always on our minds. These departures were natural and occurred with a certain frequency. Someone disappeared and none of the rest of us asked questions. We assumed they were training somewhere and would then travel clandestinely to occupy their assigned positions.

Each day I became more involved. We launched all sorts of solidarity activities. There were peñas to raise funds. We made bulletin boards and put on cultural programs at schools and work places. We studied everything from the Marxist classics to copies of *El Rebelde*, the Chilean clandestine paper that brought us news from the Resistance. In this context I

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was able to study Marxism with a more open mind. We read Lenin and Marx and our discussions were passionate. We avoided the Soviet manuals which we saw as deadly boring and dogmatic. When we would ask one of our elders a question, the answer often came accompanied by lived experience and iconoclastic ways of thinking. We were up on what was going on in Argentina, Uruguay, Nicaragua, Puerto Rico. We had one foot in Cuba and the other in the rest of Latin America.

And we would come across other Latin Americans at parties, peñas, voluntary work or at school. There were the Guevaras: a whole clan of siblings and cousins. Among them were the Chávez-Guevaras, whose kids and I were friends. One of them used to pass on to me materials from the Guevarista Youth Movement that the Revolutionary Army of the People (ERP) of Argentina was trying to organize at the time.

In 1978 Cuba hosted the World Festival of Youth and Students. Tens of thousands of young people came from all over the world. There were huge parties where the beer flowed like water. Thousands of these young people were housed at the Lenin School and at others that were closed during summer vacation. There was endless music, debate, discussion. It was a unique opportunity to get to know the experiences of so many brothers and sisters and their respective struggles. One could converse with a Saharan or Palestinian, a Vietnamese or Chilean, a Nicaraguan or someone from the United States. Among the thousands of visitors were several old friends, including Poppy Robert. This was a chance to spend some time with him and renew our family life, at least for a few days. Robert got hold of a car and we spent a couple of days with him at Varadero Beach. Hotel California, by The Eagles, was playing on the car radio. I continue to associate that song with our laughter and the wind against our faces as Robert drove.

Ideological control was difficult with so much partying and so many thousands of delegates of different political lines who suddenly inundated the country. I remember that the Cubans had people gathering up what they considered to be subversive tracts, like Marshal Tito's self-management ideas distributed by the Yugoslavians, or Qaddafi's Green Book which the Libyans handed out left and right. It was in this context that I had a bitter experience, one that shines a more complex light on my image of the Cuban Revolution.

A few weeks before the festival, I was called to the Party's provincial office. I arrived with no idea of what the meeting was about. A pair of bureaucrats ushered me into a tiny room and proceeded to tell me I couldn't continue to organize those solidarity committees on my own. I explained what they were. I didn't understand where the problem could be. I said all I was doing was promoting expressions of revolutionary consciousness. They in turn said they weren't going to accept divisive efforts influenced by Trotsky. I didn't understand what they were talking about. They said that in Cuba there was a single political Party. I kept trying to argue my point. They weren't aggressive but firm, and asked me for a complete report about what I had done. I went home. I still thought this was some sad mistake, and

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that's how I referred to it in my report, in which I explained with pride what I had done over the previous months at all those schools in the countryside, around Arroyo Seco, where I was studying at the Destacamento Pedagógico. Soon after they called me in again, to tell me they had read my report and stood by their original position: I would have to stop what I was doing. I told my MIR comrades what had happened and they may have interceded on my behalf, I don't know. In any case I was never again called to task, but that's when my activities at the schools ended. From then on I worked only within the MIR.

Around this time a Uruguayan named José Enrique and some other friends decided to start a group of folk and political music: Grupo Itacumbú. They were five guys who played guitars, charangos and percussion, and they didn't have a place to practice. I offered my house. They would show up a couple of times a week and fill the apartment with their music. Those were delicious afternoons. Musical chords and laughter permeated the air.



It was through these friends that I met Laura. José Enrique invited her to one of their rehearsals and told her how to get to my house. The doorbell rang, I went to open it, and there stood Laura with a friend. I invited them in, and the musicians arrived a few minutes later. I had seen Laura before but this was the first time I really noticed her. A while later there was a party at Alamar and she asked me to dance. I didn't know how and was embarrassed. My sisters were great dancers; there wasn't a Saturday night they weren't at some party. But I was shyer in this respect. I liked going out with friends or talking at home, but wasn't into parties that much. Laura was already at the university, and knew I was about to enter the School of Engineering: "You have to learn to dance if you want to go to the university," she said, "if you want, I'll teach you." I didn't end up dancing with Laura that night. I knew I

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would be a pathetic dancer, but perhaps my lack of skill wasn't the most important thing just then. Little by little Laura captivated me.

Sometime after this, the Chileans organized a *peña*. This was a common activity. They'd invite a few musicians to get things going, and a group of comrades would sell empanadas and refreshments. This *peña* was also in Alamar and we all headed there. At a certain point I offered Laura half an empanada. She was there beside me with her beautiful eyes, black hair, and smile. A gentle but irresistible force drew me to her side. We began to see one another a couple of times a week.

I discovered a strange mix of qualities in Laura. It wasn't simply that I liked her smile and her eyes, or the curve of her throat. Laura attracted me physically but she also had other qualities that weren't common. She radiated joy. She shared my values and hopes, but life



had taught her to be discreet and natural. She was able to be happy and express that happiness like any young person, but not lose herself in trivialities. She had a simple generosity. Everything seemed easy with her. And yet she was a strong woman. She knew what she wanted and wasn't submissive. I also liked that about her. A few days later I found myself calling her "my love," and she stopped me short. She told me what we had wasn't yet love, that love was something you constructed. We came to know one another better and fell in love. Each of us continued to have our own friends and we liked it like that. Ours wasn't love at first sight, nor did we know then that it would be definitive. We simply went on developing our relationship and became integrated as if we were one.





Laura was Uruguayan, a daughter of exile like so many others. She thrilled to the same music as I did, dreamed the same dreams. She was beautiful and fresh like a flower opening in the spring. I was convinced that my own future was set. When the time came I would go off to fight for the Revolution on whatever part of the continent. This wasn't up for discussion, nor did it seem unusual. Many of our friends had already left and others would follow. And so we just concentrated on living each day to the fullest, without thinking too much about the future.

That summer of 1978 we went off to work with the International Friendship Youth Brigade at Moa, a spot at the easternmost tip of the island where thousands of workers were building a giant nickel processing plant and we were happy. In September I started studying engineering in telecommunications at the CUJAE. Laura was studying architecture at the same school. I began calling her *la flaca*.²⁸ We spent hours together, enjoying the little things. I would often wait for her at Ampere Square, across from the School of Architecture. We would share the lunch I had prepared that morning and brought from home: a mixture of rice and beans, sometimes a bit of lettuce. Two eggs turned it all into a solid mass, and those "bricks," as we called them, saved our lives when we weren't able to sneak into the school dining facility.

Laura began sleeping over at the house, in my room which was my refuge. We were intensely happy. She never asked me to take down my photos of Madeline (that platonic adolescent crush). Now those photos bore mute witness to our love. Ana, who was nine, spied on us through a little hole in the door that I unsuccessfully tried to cover with a beret. Sarah would come home on weekends and start getting dressed for one of her innumerable parties. Ximena hung out with her friends. Now more than ever our house was a gathering place. Poets and photographers showed up at any hour and seemed a part of the landscape.

By this time Antonio Castro, a Colombian who had grown up in Venezuela, was living with my mother. He played the *cuatro*²⁹, and filled the house with those Venezuelan melodies that still move me when I hear them. He also wrote poems and cultivated flowers in an impossible garden he'd constructed on our front porch. My mother wrote constantly; I could hear the rapid and seemingly endless sound of her typewriter keys. She was so fast I imagined her able to trap thought in real time and transfer it to paper. Each of us was a natural part of that collective dance. Imperceptibly Laura began to be part of my life, our life.

At the same time, Laura introduced me to her world. Her family embraced me immediately and completely. Her sister Ana became a good friend. Her father was another of those extraordinary figures who became such important influences in my life. Pablo was exiled in Cuba following years of university activism in Uruguay. He had been a student leader, then a professor and finally Dean of the School of Medicine. I was impressed with his vast

28 *An endearment, whose literal meaning is "the thin one."*

29 *A small four-stringed instrument that provides the rhythm line in much Colombian and Venezuelan music.*





culture, amazing capacity as a thinker and speaker, and above all by his excellent human qualities. We shared a love of science and politics. He advised me regarding my studies and in time became one of my most important mentors.

Hand in hand with Laura I got to know the Uruguayan community in Cuba. Wonderful people who received me as one of their own. The Elena family was outstanding in this respect. Judith and Ricardo Elena lived in Alamar, in one of those micro brigade apartments for Latin American refugees. Ricardo was a Tupamaro who'd spent time in a Chilean prison before managing to go into exile with Judith and their children: Vivian, Andrés and Mariana. Theirs was a very warm family. Although they shared our ideology and political sentiments, their home life was more traditional. We spent many weekends with them. Judith would dish up some homemade ravioli or another of her other exquisite meals and as if by magic create a very loving atmosphere.

In 1980 Pablo, his wife and their two younger children went to live in México. Laura and her sister Ana stayed in Cuba. Around the same time, my mother and my own sister Ana left for Nicaragua. Laura and I became the adults. My sisters Sarah and Ximena lived with us, but all of a sudden it was as if our generation was on its own. It was then that the Elena household became our new family. With them we found warmth, people we could talk to, love, and company. The truth was, my sisters as well as I needed a more "normal" family. We needed time apart from the "great events," whether revolution or poetry. My sisters sometimes also visited Judith and Ricardo. They too were looking for that space that had been missing at home, and each of them found it in her own way, with several different families that provided the atmosphere they needed. Judith and Ricardo did this for me, and became an important part of my life.

In the summer of 1979 I visited the United States. There I felt a deep nostalgia for my *flaquita*, and realized I was in love as never before. I spent hours at Robert's apartment in New York, listening to a tape with the music of Numa Moraes or Daniel Viglietti. My father understood what I was going through, and we talked as we've always been able to. Before I left he gave me a book, *The Joy of Sex*. It was an illustrated edition that Laura and I read together and later passed on to other friends.

Little by little we began building our own history, resisting all the bets that had been wagered that first night at Gonzalo's unfurnished apartment. Together we discovered love. Together we began the rest of our lives, the rest of our life. We had that rare privilege of having lived in Cuba during those years. It was a privilege that keeps on surprising me: to have been there in that place at that precise moment! How many moments like that exist in human history, moments in which an entire people takes its destiny in hand and collectively gives life to its dreams? Maybe five or six, maybe less. We were fortunate to have been there, to have experienced that. And we shared the same beliefs, the same decisions. When I told her I would





be going off to fight and she was free to make her own life, not to wait for me, she kissed me and didn't say a word. And when I asked her to follow me on my crazy path, she followed.



She always retained that singular lucidity so many women have, the ability to see beyond appearances. As I write this it's been thirty years since that night when I dared touch her arm and kiss her neck and broke the barrier of sound and all the barriers there are. Today we have three children and a backpack of histories. I look back at all the beauty we've made to-

gether, and feel privileged and happy. Who would have predicted, that night at Gonzalo's, that those caresses would have led to all this?





MY ROOM

Our apartment was large. The front elevator was in a small foyer from which the front door opened into a spacious living room. Beyond the living room was a closed-in terrace whose aluminum window frames and glass panes were in poor condition due to salt deposits from the sea air, but which protected us from wind and storms. From this terrace one could look down at the malecón and blue sea, a vastness that both connected us to and separated us from the outside world. Across the street we could see the North Vietnamese embassy and behind it the offices of the U.S. Interests Section.³⁰ To the right were the ruins of what had once been the Monument to the Maine.³¹ Its two columns had once supported the imperial eagle. In the euphoria following the revolutionary takeover people tore down that bronze bird; its wings were later found in pieces in another part of the city. Now only twisted steel spikes crowned those columns. The monument remained like that for years. Did it stand for something different now, or was it just one more piece of this baroque city being eaten away by tenacious salt air? Our terrace was always covered with salt residue. The levers that once operated the windows had long since forgotten how to do their job.

The living room had an old but comfortable sofa and a couple of overstuffed chairs. Next to it was the dining room, with a large wooden table; and to one side a good-sized kitchen. From there you could go out onto the service porch with its stone wash sink and clotheslines. Off this porch were the back elevator, and a tiny room where the maid would have slept in earlier times. For years Sarah used this as her bedroom, or rather she used it on weekends when she was home from school. It was somewhat removed from the rest of the apartment and a bit more private.

A long hall connected the front of the house with the back bedrooms. It ran from the living room past a small space that must have been an office or television room at one time but

30 After the United States broke diplomatic relations with Cuba, its affairs were carried out through an Interests Section in its old embassy building, now also housing the Swiss embassy.

31 United States battleship sent to Havana harbor in January, 1898, during Cuba's war of independence from Spain. A month later the ship was blown up, by a mine or other device. Two hundred fifty two men lost their lives. The incident provided the U.S. with the pretext it needed to enter the war, snatching Cuba's independence and initiating the long era of U.S. control.





was my bedroom for a number of years. Halfway down the hall was the gray bathroom with its shower and two doors: one opening into the hall and the other into Robert's studio. This was another large room, also with two doors: one leading from the gray bathroom and the other to the main hall, almost where it ended at the rear of the apartment. There my mother's bedroom was on one side and the room Ximena and Ana shared on the other; as well as a second bathroom which was pink and had a tub.

I remember the day Robert left the house. My mother's and his separation was yet another derailment, the end of one more cycle. The silence was heavy. Tears rose in our cheeks and in our throats. I close my eyes and can see my father in his study, packing his books in boxes. I inherited Robert's studio, and when I left the *beca* it became my room.

Books lined one of the walls. In a closet I kept my most precious treasures: a ring made from the fuselage of a Yankee plane shot down over Vietnam, several archaeological pieces given to me by Laurette, the toy pistol that had been a gift from Roque, the human fetus preserved in formaldehyde from that doctor who took me to see the autopsy in Pinar del Río, a manuscript of a poetry book from a Bolivian comrade who gave it to me when he returned to his country to fight. Gradually the walls of that room were covered with the photographs of those I admired: Miguel Enríquez, Fidel, Che, George Jackson, Albert Einstein. And photos of the women I'd loved.

In my room I had the privacy I needed to converse with friends or have sex with my girlfriends. It was there that I was with a woman for the first time; we were together a couple of months. That afternoon we were alone and the window shades were open, letting in the breeze and sun. We got completely naked and lay down. We touched. We kissed. I didn't dare make love to her; I didn't have a condom, or maybe I just didn't dare. She was disappointed, and we broke up soon after.

In that same room and with those same window shades open to the world, surrounded by those same books and with our music playing, not much later Laura and I discovered what it was to make love. We spent many happy days and nights there. Little by little we explored the many private places of that new universe. Each of us led the other by the hand. We'd put Paco Ibañez or Silvio Rodríguez on the tape deck, to accompany us and drown out telltale sounds. Sometimes we spent hours there, listening to the tropical rain striking the walls of the building. We had a set of sheets my mother had bought in México in 1962. We still have them, and they recently celebrated forty-five years of faithful service.

There was a Ditto machine in my room: a reproduction device with a drum and handle. You could run off several dozen copies from a single master. It was like a primitive press. For years a variety of friends used that machine: poets who wanted to copy their poems for a literary workshop, or members of the different revolutionary groups with whom we had contact. Comrades from the Puerto Rican Socialist Party, the Chilean MIR, Nicaragua's

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Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). From the time that room was mine I had an unexpected privilege: those who came to use the Ditto spent hours conversing with me as they pushed its handle round and round.

I would lie back on my bed and take advantage of their presence to engage in long conversations. Often I'd fall asleep to the rhythmic sound of the roller and handle. In the second half of the seventies the FSLN began to reorganize and gather its strength in order to launch more frequent attacks against the Somoza dictatorship. A number of Sandinistas were in Cuba at the time. Some we'd known for several years. Others were new arrivals, there for training or recently freed from Somoza's dungeons by spectacular operations like the one on December 27, 1974 when a commando kidnapped dozens of members of Managua's high society and was able to gain the release of all political prisoners. Many of these people became my mother's friends, and she naturally offered to let them use the Ditto. Some, who came over like simple militants and spent hours running off copies, later turned out to be important leaders of the Sandinista Revolution. Carlos Fonseca, founder and leader of the FSLN, visited often. I remember conversations with Doris Tijerino, José Benito Escobar, and Daniel Ortega. But the talks around that machine that most impressed me were those with Jacinto Suárez. I admired his modest style and developed a great affection for him; I felt him both wise and complicit.

It was through these comrades that we got close to the FSLN. We listened to their stories of victory and defeat. We shared their anguish and hope. Sometimes one of them would stop coming around and we knew he or she had returned to Nicaragua. Many friends died along the way, among them Commander José Benito Escobar who, had he lived, would have been one of that Revolution's great leaders. Years later, after the Sandinista victory when my mother had moved to Nicaragua, I went with her to visit the last house where José Benito had taken refuge before he was killed. It was a humble shack on the outskirts of Estelí. The owner invited us in and showed us around. My mother took a few photos. Then the woman took us to the spot where our friend had been assassinated. She had paid a high price for her support of the FSLN. One day she found her son's severed head on her doorstep. That was the sort of sinister message the Somoza dictatorship handed down.

During those years we witnessed the division within the FSLN. Some of our friends were in opposing tendencies.³² We continued to offer our solidarity to them all; our friendships mattered more than the ideological positions. One day Jaime Wheelock showed up at the house. We hadn't seen him for several years. We knew he had gone to Nicaragua, and was one of the leaders of the Proletarian tendency. That was an important visit. It was 1978 and the news reports were coming fast and furious: the FSLN was occupying city after city. Jaime took advantage of his brief time in Cuba to spend several hours with us. We sat down

32 *The year before its victory, the FSLN split into three tendencies: Prolonged People's War, Proletarian, and Insurreccional or "Third Tendency" (since this was composed of those who did not adhere to either of the other two). The differences were mostly tactical.*





to talk, and he placed his pistol in front of him on the dining room table. I was shocked to see him armed in Cuba. The divisions inside the FSLN were so deep that he risked his life, even in this country which was a sacred place of refuge and an important rearguard for the organization. I later learned it was on that visit that the famous meeting between Fidel and the Sandinista leaders took place, the meeting that sealed the unity of the three factions. From that moment on there was a combined National Directorate with three commanders from each tendency. Among the nine were Wheelock and several others who had visited my room.

Months later, in July of 1979, the Sandinista Revolution emerged victorious, and that provoked another great sense of hope. Twenty years had gone by since the victory in Cuba, and six since the military coup in Chile and the beginning of the long night that descended upon almost all the countries of the Americas. It seemed as if this might be the beginning of another revolutionary upsurge and this filled us with hope. Almost next door to Nicaragua, in El Salvador and Guatemala, other comrades were involved in struggles that might bring the next wins. In Chile, in the area of Neltume, the MIR was preparing a rural guerrilla force designed as the rearguard of the Resistance against the Pinochet dictatorship. From my room I observed the advances and retreats as if from an airport control tower. The faces in the newspaper were those of my friends. I voiced my doubts with whoever was working the Ditto at the time. I vibrated with their experiences as I built a global picture, in which each of those separate histories had particular importance.

Our home continued to be a meeting place. Comrades from many different countries came to visit. Each year the Venceremos Brigade would arrive from the United States, bringing hundreds of supportive North Americans: young people avid to understand what was happening in Cuba. Our living room would fill with people, crowded onto every available seat and on the floor; and my mother would offer her vision of Cuba and answer questions. Sometimes my sisters and I participated. Innumerable members of many revolutionary organizations arrived, each with his or her history and fate. I remember Miguel Enríquez' partner, Carmen Castillo, who had been wounded in the battle in which Miguel died. When she got out of prison she came through Cuba. There were also many poets and writers: Juan Gelman, Julio Cortázar, Ernesto Cardenal, Mario Benedetti, and Elizabeth Burgos.

Around this time a group of young Cuban poets were also drawn to my mother. Among them were Alex Fleites, Víctor Rodríguez, Bladimir Zamora, Arturo Arango, Norberto Codina, and Antonio Castro. They usually came around in the late afternoon, and the evenings were memorable. They would talk, somebody would read poetry, Antonio would get out his Venezuelan cuatro and sing a few songs. We might have intense discussions on political or cultural topics.

Around nine o'clock at night my mother would fall asleep. Everyone just continued talking and an hour later she would open her eyes, say goodnight and disappear into her room.

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Little by little, as we got tired, we would turn in. Our guests might stay on late into the night. The last one out turned off the lights and closed the door. Those poets were among our closest friends and one of the best things that happened to us in Cuba. My mother was a sort of older sister, with whom they could discuss their work; she helped them grow. They in turn brought their humor, poems, and good vibes to the house.

It was around this time that my mother began her relationship with Antonio Castro, a Colombian who had spent most of his life in Venezuela and was now in Cuba. As a member of the Venezuelan MIR he'd been sent there to care for Domingo León, a guerrilla commander who'd been paralyzed by wounds received in combat. Domingo had a long black beard that hid a bullet still lodged beneath his chin. On special occasions he'd let us feel it. Antonio was a small man, with a dark mustache and swarthy complexion. He played and sang, wrote poems, and knew how to do all the things a life of poverty teaches. He came to live with us, becoming a permanent presence at the house. In time he reupholstered the worn out living room furniture, refurbished the desk where my mother wrote, and filled many an evening with music. On the front terrace he constructed a makeshift flower bed filled with plants and had an ongoing conversation with those plants. Sometimes Antonio would fix arepas, a kind of Venezuelan pancake; visiting friends would bring him boxes of the special flour. By this time we were all too old to assimilate another father, so Antonio became a beloved friend.

One day Antonio began to bring wooden boxes to the house; he had gotten them at our neighborhood supermarket. Meticulously he took each box apart, so he could reuse their fragile slats. We watched as he constructed a bookcase that covered one whole wall of his room. Years later, when he returned to Venezuela, he left me several important tasks. He wanted me to take a small amount of money each month to the son he'd had before getting together with my mother. To this end he left a bank account that would last quite some time. And he asked me to give his son that bookcase he'd built; that was his inheritance.

Toward the end of the seventies my mother began having problems we didn't understand: she lost her job while continuing to draw her salary, a number of people stopped socializing with her and we didn't know why. "Could she be a CIA agent? Better be safe than sorry." These were difficult years. The young poets continued to be our friends and spend time at the house. They were willing to take the risk, despite that paralyzing fear which can be so damaging in an authoritarian society. This made me love them even more. The comrades from the Chilean MIR, Puerto Rican Socialist Party, and FSLN also kept visiting; none of them let themselves be intimidated. They were an important support for us during this painful period. But the political comrades had the backing of their respective organizations, while the poets stood alone; they risked their careers and perhaps more, yet were willing to go with what their hearts dictated.

We were never able to truly find out what caused those suspicions that made my mother's





life so hard for several years. Perhaps it was her way of being and acting. She was always true to her convictions, rarely followed convention. She said what she believed, and loudly. Perhaps it was her closeness to some of the revolutionaries who belonged to groups that had fallen out of favor with someone in power. Maybe it was simply jealousy on someone's part. Maybe it had to do with the fact that she was a foreigner (and precisely a foreigner from the United States). Maybe it was all these things combined and more. There was one element in all this that had to do with the famous Ditto, that machine that had served so many of our friends in the reproduction of their revolutionary pamphlets or poems. For a while my mother and Robert had been close to a Canadian couple living in Cuba. One day those Canadians were accused of being CIA agents. Everything happened very fast. They were given a couple of days to leave the country. They were the ones who had given my parents the Ditto. So perhaps it symbolized some sort of contact with the enemy, at the same time as it became such a staple in our own relationships with a variety of revolutionaries. My mother never let all this destroy her. Several years later the Cubans discreetly apologized, and shortly thereafter she left for Nicaragua.

Another important presence at the house were the photographers. Late in the decade of the seventies my mother decided to learn photography. She talked an excellent Cuban photographer into mentoring her. The tiny cubicle that had once been a maid's bathroom was converted into a darkroom, and Grandal³³ took on the task of teaching my mother the secrets of that art. They had to mix their chemicals Cuban-style: with compounds they bought at the pharmacy or, very occasionally, from packets brought down by friends. Soon our home was a meeting place for a group of photographers: Macías, Rigoberto, Grandal. Just as we'd shared poems and stories in the literary workshops, we now shared photographic prints. These were laid out on the floor and we would walk among them, commenting on one or another. With this new group, too, everything was up for discussion: photography, politics, culture in general. The existence of that darkroom meant that the photographers were now coming around even more than the poets. And not only in the evenings but all day long. They became new members of our extended family.

In 1979, when the Sandinistas triumphed in Nicaragua, our old friends who were now part of that country's new government invited my mother to visit. First she made a three-month trip to do the field work for a book. But when she returned she'd made up her mind: she would go back to live and participate in that new revolutionary process. She took Ana, who was still quite young. Sarah, Ximena and I decided to stay in Cuba, to continue our studies and our lives. Sarah was seventeen and fully integrated into Cuban life; she would soon be entering the university. Ximena needed to finish high school; she had a boyfriend and other friends. I wanted to finish my undergraduate work and had my own future plans; my life and Laura's were also more and more deeply entwined. Almost without a clear break a whole other chapter was beginning. From now on we would be independent. But instead of the young people leaving home, it was our mother who left.

33 *Ramón Martínez Grandal, Cuban photographer.*





From the time we'd been small we always had to share the housework, so this wasn't a problem. Laura came to live with us. That year I was the one responsible for dealing with Ximena's school. She had her own group of friends and was very independent, but occasionally someone had to sign a permission slip or something as the "responsible adult." A year later Ximena graduated from high school and went to join my mother in Nicaragua. Sarah finished her twelve years of boarding school and went on to university; finally, she was living at the house. We organized ourselves. Now it was just us in that huge apartment.

One day a young Nicaraguan came along. He was the younger brother of one of the Sandinista comandantes and had come to study in Cuba. We received him with open arms. Pedro brought his Puerto Rican girlfriend, Ivelisse. The house became youthful turf, a collective space. Later Pedro also invited his friend Claudio, another Nicaraguan studying in Cuba—except that Claudio was a very good-natured kid from a poor family and it was easy for him to integrate himself into our household. The key to harmony was sharing the daily tasks: cleaning, cooking, washing the dishes. I was intransigent in this respect. Doing one's share of housework was non-negotiable. After a while I began having problems with Pedro, who by that time had separated from Ivelisse. Maybe his bourgeois upbringing came to the fore, who knows. The thing is, he wouldn't do his part; eventually, and painfully, I had to ask him to leave. Claudio stayed on, and Ivelisse later returned with her new boyfriend, Mayito, a Cuban who was studying to be a veterinarian.

On one of Laurette and Arnaldo's visits to Cuba we talked at length about many different issues. Laurette explained that Marx had totally misunderstood the unique characteristics of America's pre-Colombian social development, that his ideas in general had been very Eurocentric. Such a strong critique of Marx was unheard of for me, yet I felt she was right. It came from a scientific authority, and someone I trusted completely.

Arnaldo and I spoke at length about Latin America. He could see I was deeply interested in the history of the continent. At the end of that visit he gave me a very special gift: part of his personal library. A few months later the boxes began to arrive. Laura and I went to the post office to retrieve them. Almost all were about Latin America but there were also some on world history. The floor-to-ceiling bookcase in my room began filling up with that treasure.

When, years later, I too left Cuba, I thought I wouldn't be away for long or be able to return often. I took a suitcase with clothing and a few other things. I distributed my treasures, including some of the archaeological pieces Laurette had given me, among my closest friends. I left my room filled with objects and with memories. There were my journals, photos of ex-girlfriends, poems, and that library.

Years passed and I didn't return. My life was intense and I didn't have the money for that kind of travel. Sarah had taken possession of my old room, along with Enrique who was her partner at the time. I can imagine the emptiness and silence. My mother, Ximena, and Ana





now lived in Nicaragua, and Laura and I were in France. At that point the apartment was ours. Years later Sarah too decided to move on, to México. The house no longer embraced our family. Friends moved in, and then friends of friends.

Then one day a comrade in France made a trip to Cuba. I sent a hand-written note explaining who I was, and that I had lived there several years before. In that note I asked if it would be possible to send me some of my things. My friend rang the doorbell, gave my note to the person who answered, and was graciously received. He spent a few hours in my old room accompanied by the apartment's current occupant, going through boxes and boxes. The room was unused and closed off, and all my personal treasures were intact. On his return to Paris, he brought a couple of boxes with a few of my journals, a number of photographs, some poems I'd written as a child, and some of the books Arnaldo had given me. I still have them.





THE BRIGADE

In 1977 a couple of young people got the idea of organizing a group of Cubans and Latin Americans to spend two weeks of their summer vacation working somewhere in the country, on a project important to the new Cuba. They would donate the money they earned to some revolutionary cause. This is how the International Youth Friendship Brigade (BIJA) was born. A few of my Latin American friends and I joined immediately. The project was a perfect combination of revolutionary idealism, fun and adventure. It also reproduced in tropical Cuba the atmosphere I'd read about in Soviet novels like *How the Steel Was Tempered*.³⁴

That first year we went to Moa, at the easternmost end of the island, where they have one of the largest nickel deposits in the world. Before the Revolution, the United States had built a plant that separated the nickel and cobalt from the iron. The nickel and cobalt were exported, and a vast amount of iron remained in an oxidation pond. It was a great oxidized sea, like some lunar landscape: a solid mass that tricked the senses. It looked liquid, but you could walk on its surface, which was hard as metal and absolutely red.

There is an interesting story about this plant. I don't know if it's true, but we believed it and, in any case, it reflects the atmosphere of those early years. When the Revolution came to power, the management of the plant was all North Americans. They left the country, convinced the Cubans would be incapable of getting the enterprise up and running again. A single Cuban engineer remained. He may have stayed more because he was in love with that technological marvel than out of any interest in the Revolution. Che, who was Minister of Industry at the time, ordered that engineer to get the plant operational. It was an extremely difficult challenge. The engineer didn't understand how all aspects of the plant functioned and the old owners had left with all the blueprints and manuals. So they hunted down everyone who had worked under the Americans, and asked each to explain what he did through all the different phases of production. Little by little they were able to reconstruct the project, and the plant has been running ever since.

34 *How the Steel Was Tempered*, an epic novel by Nikolai Ostrovsky. Lauds the social construction at the beginning of the Soviet era.





Several years had passed. Now the Cubans wanted to do a better job of exploiting their mineral resources. They decided to build a huge new plant that would allow them to separate the three minerals that came out of the earth together. If the plan worked the country would be able to earn more, and to some extent reduce its dependency on sugar.

Soon the BIJA became a reality. They organized some eighty young men and women. About a fifth of these were Latin Americans, the rest Cubans. Off we went, led by Tirado and Panchito, the two Young Communists who'd come up with the idea. This wasn't completely original. In the Soviet Union and other Socialist countries they had experimented with this sort of thing, but it was new for Cuba. The Young Communists supported the grass roots project. It offered transportation and food, and got one of the construction workers' camps to provide us with lodging. This wasn't really about economics, but about using the experience to create a generous and committed consciousness among the youth. We set out with our customary high spirits and from the moment the buses passed through Havana Tunnel it was one great adventure.

Moa was filled with pioneers back then, a kind of new frontier. The red earth appeared desolate. Along either side of the road rose the barracks where the construction workers lived. They'd come from all over the country and were there for months at a time, only very occasionally going home to see their families. We heard there were ten men for every woman, and that it would be dangerous to allow our girls to go out alone. We had orders to accompany them everywhere. I think our young women actually did perturb those men who had been there for such long periods without female company. The brigade women were young and beautiful, with the sort of contagious enthusiasm that made them even more attractive.

We worked all day: digging trenches with pneumatic hammers or simply with picks and shovels; or helping the construction workers any way we could. We did everything from leveling a site to laying bricks and painting. In the evenings, after an exhausting shift, we still had the energy to build a bonfire and listen to music, discuss politics, and make love.

Some relationships began on the bus and lasted until we got back home. We called these "tunnel to tunnel," referring to the tunnel that passed under Havana Bay that we had to go through on our way out of town and again on our return. Other relationships lasted longer. On that first brigade there was a large group of Chileans. Among them were my friends Alejandro, Javier Cabieses, Noelle Pascal, Patricia Andrade, Paula Sanjinés, and El Cani, among others. Gonzalo Serantes, Rita and Gabriela Cultelli, José Enrique Pommerenck, Abel Sicavo, Andrés and Vivian Elena were from Uruguay. Rodrigo was Bolivian, and Juan Pablo Vivanco Argentinean. Katia was Italian. A number of them were in Itacumbú, the musical combo that practiced at my house; now they regaled us with their recitals.

We worked hard. We felt we were contributing in one of the trenches where the Revolution was winning its struggle with underdevelopment. There was a fever of construction in those early years that produced great infrastructural works. Industrial projects were equally im-

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portant. Everywhere cement factories and thermoelectric plants were going up. A nuclear energy installation in Cienfuegos was beginning to be built but remained unfinished years later when the Soviet Union imploded. Modern hospitals, like Havana's *Ameijeiras*, were built, as well as schools and universities in every province in the country.

We were paid a regular salary but we at the BIJA had decided we would work voluntarily and donate what we earned to a revolutionary cause. We came together democratically to decide where we wanted the money to go. That year we gave it to the Vietnamese; and over the next couple of years it went to Cuba's Territorial Militia, that was organizing to resist a possible military attack from the United States, and then to the Sandinistas.

News of the brigade spread and many young people wanted to join the following year. It wasn't easy to choose from among so many candidates. We decided members should



earn the right by demonstrating their "revolutionary consciousness" throughout the school term. In order to do this we had to do voluntary work on Sundays to help build the Pioneer Palace in Lenin Park. You had to spend your weekends working without pay in order to earn the right to work free during vacation! The interesting thing is we never lacked for perspective members.

Laura and I began our relationship in June of 1978. When she learned we'd be going to Moa a few weeks later, she wanted to come along. We were already almost at the end of the school





year, and since she hadn't known about the brigade hadn't done enough Sunday volunteer work. I told her she couldn't go. I wanted to be very careful to be fair, especially since she was my girlfriend. Luckily Alejandro, who was more tolerant than I, said I was full of shit. He told Laura of course she could join us. That's how she too became a member of the BIJA.

One day somebody discovered there was a ship full of cement docked in the small Moa port. If we signed up to work as stevedores we could earn a lot of money. Off we went. It was agonizing labor. For twelve hours solid we were down in the hold of that huge ship, lifting sacks of cement that seemed to weigh a ton. Inside the hold we had to load the sacks onto wooden pallets a crane then lifted onto the dock. Other comrades were responsible for hauling the sacks to waiting trucks.

The heat was suffocating. Sometimes a sack would split open and we quickly found ourselves covered in a cloud of cement. The powder penetrated our skin and burned the sores that had opened across our backs, wet with sweat. The rhythm of this work was fast and as time passed exhaustion threatened to overpower us, but we had endless energy and nobody wanted to give up. When we finished that shift and returned to camp it was already very late at night. We were weary but happy as we took our showers. The water there was hard and the soap didn't lather, nor did it manage to get at the cement that filled the cracks in our skin. Our girlfriends soothed us with their caresses, which felt like heaven that night. The following year the BIJA went to Las Tunas. This was an eastern city where they were building another large factory, this time for making glass. Carnival was coming, which in Cuba always meant three days off, and an unstoppable consumption of beer. For many it was the most important holiday of the year. Just before we arrived a worker had slipped and fallen into one of the enormous hoppers. He'd descended from a great height and his last words were: "Shit, I'm gonna miss Carnival!"

We found out we could work a few hours selling beer, and off we went. Any kind of work was good if it meant we could earn more money to donate to the cause of our choice. Several of us were assigned to one stall. There was a tank with a spigot where the beer came out, and a pile of cardboard containers. The fiesta began. Loudspeakers blared loud music and all of a sudden we found ourselves surrounded by hundreds of arms emerging from a raucous mass of people all screaming to be served. We waited on them as fast as we could. At first we attempted to carefully count the money they gave us but finally gave up and just tried to respond to the demands of that hundred-headed monster. Sometimes we threw their change into the beer cartons themselves. No one even noticed.

A big strong guy with a boxer's face showed up with a bucket for scrubbing floors and shouted: "Fill 'er up!" We did. Soon he came back with the same request, and once again we filled the bucket. This went on all night. Each time his words were harder to understand, his steps less steady. People drank like I'd never seen. At dawn, when we'd finished our shift, we walked back to camp through a mass of passed out people splayed every which way. They

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slept off their drunk and then, as soon as they woke, came back for more. This went on for three days. That experience taught me a healthy respect for any job involving serving people at a bar.

That year we returned to Havana on the “fast train.” This was one of the Revolution’s major infrastructural achievements transforming the country at the time: an eight-lane highway that would run the length of the island, but had only reached Las Villas at that point; a network of coaxial cable that would permit data transmission; and the famous fast train that was said to be able to go from Holguín to Havana in only eight hours. We boarded that train thinking we’d be home in no time. But the trip ended up taking twenty-four hours. When it did run it was at a snail’s pace, and stopped for long periods without apparent explanation. The strangest thing that happened on that trip was when the train came to a halt in the middle of a gigantic cane field. We passengers looked out and found ourselves in a sea of green. In all directions, as far as we could see, the sugar cane plants formed waves in the breeze. Stunned, we watched as they unhitched the locomotive and left us there. A number of cars sat in that field for several hours. No one told us why. After a while the locomotive returned, hooked up to the cars again, and off we went. The only thing any of us could think of was that the engineer had gone off to visit some girl in the vicinity.

Each year the brigade prepared another project and each year it was an extraordinary experience. We made deep friendships. Those summers marked many of our lives profoundly. They were a perfect combination of altruism and joy. The Union of Young Communists understood the project’s great symbolic value. Luis Orlando Domínguez, General Secretary of the UJC and one of the country’s prominent political figures at the time, held a banquet in our honor. Not long after this the Young Communists began promoting similar initiatives at every school. The organization’s local base committees were supposed to mobilize the students to do summer voluntary work. The newspapers published articles about the “thousands and thousands of young Cubans who went out each summer to voluntarily collaborate in the construction of a new world.”

A few years later at the university my best friend was Igor, a tall blond kid whose mother was from Ukraine and father Cuban. We were inseparable and our friendship produced no few jokes about “the Yankee and the Russian” who were always together. He was very intelligent and we were a good pair. Together we studied engineering and together discovered some inconsistencies in the political discourse.

We were very interested in trying to understand the issue of Stalin and Trotsky. Both figures had practically been eliminated from the official texts or were described in simplistic or obviously erroneous terms. I remember the day we discovered Lenin’s Political Testament. We were astonished when we learned that this important document had been made public only after the Soviet Communist Party’s twentieth congress in 1956, more than thirty years after Lenin’s death. This caused us to question much of the history we’d been taught.





Igor was a bright and revolutionary young man who liked to think for himself. He wasn't dogmatic and hated slogans. Mediocrity and opportunism were profoundly distasteful to him. He was also extremely smug, as we used to say; although he would reply that "the smug are those who think they are better than others and aren't. I really am better." This probably earned him some enemies. I don't know. In any case the story I want to tell has him at its center.

One day they passed a sheet around so those who wanted to do voluntary work that summer could sign up. If a person wasn't going he or she had to explain why in a column provided for that purpose. Igor and I both put down that this year we wouldn't be going but refused to say why. We argued that having to explain completely negated the idea of this being voluntary work and drained all political content from the project. "No, no, comrades, it's voluntary but you still have to explain why you're not going," the local UJC leadership responded in a huff. Almost no one had signed up. They had all sorts of justifications: sick aunts and grandmothers. It seemed that casting doubt on the voluntary nature of the whole thing was offensive.

Some time passed and the Assembly of Communist Conscience was fast approaching. This was that annual meeting where the collective had the power to take drastic measures with those it considered antisocial or counterrevolutionary. For example, it could expel from the university someone who had cheated and not even the university authorities could reverse the decision.

I remember the case of one girl who committed fraud. The assembly punished her by suspending her for two years. The Party Secretary pleaded for clemency but was unsuccessful. These things coexisted: on the one hand a central and vertical structure, with the Commander in Chief at its head and with a Party and Youth organization capable of listening to people and giving orientations that were generally followed; and on the other, sovereign assemblies at the grass roots level that were able to make irrevocable decisions. This base level power could be sublime or terrible depending, among other factors, on who was in charge, who controlled the assembly.

The situation was becoming more and more tense. The Secretary of our UJC Base Committee was an opportunist who saw a way to use her power and took it out on Igor. In just a few days all the UJC members' sick aunts had miraculously recovered and the list of those who had signed up to do voluntary work that summer had lengthened considerably. And every single morning she asked us: "Have you thought about it? Are you ready to say why you're not going?"

I requested a meeting and explained that I personally had been a member of the group that originated the BIJA, and they were turning an excellent project into a farce. I tried to get them to see that if they removed the truly voluntary aspect of the work the whole thing

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would be counterproductive. They couldn't hear me. They forgave me because in a certain sense I was "protected" by belonging to a fraternal political organization (along with the fact that by now everyone knew I also had a real reason for not signing up: I would be traveling outside the country that summer). But Igor was more vulnerable. The assembly was approaching and the situation got worse with each passing day. I didn't know what to do. The night before the assembly Igor brought the subject up. "They're bound and determined to fuck me over. I'm almost at the end of my university career and those sons of bitches are going to kick me out of school! What should I do?" I didn't know what to tell him. I said I would stand by him no matter what his decision but the truth was he was the one risking his future, not me.

Several professors came to the assembly. They were eager to see what would happen. The situation was being talked about by everyone; it had spread like wildfire throughout the entire school. The assembly began and many people spoke. I intervened, trying to convince those present that Igor had a right to his own decision. Finally, one of the UJC leadership began to speak and it was clear she intended to destroy Igor. It was then that Igor raised his hand and demanded a turn. He simply said: "I'll be going to voluntary work this summer." The world collapsed around me. Igor had saved his university career, and those thugs had killed the very idea of the BIJA as well as destroying Igor, who looked at me with a tense and serious expression, pale and emotionless. Summer came and a dengue epidemic prevented any student brigade from doing voluntary work that year. It was as if divine providence had interceded so that nobody had to work. In particular, none of those jerks who had come down so implacably on Igor went out on brigades. But Igor did work that summer; he was the only one who did. He wanted to earn a few pesos so he got a job at a factory that made plastic shoes.

Twenty-five years later Igor looked me up on Google. We began writing to one another. He had served in Angola. In the nineties he'd left Cuba, disillusioned by a series of incidents like the one above. Now he lives in Miami with his wife and daughter. His emails are heavy with anger. I sense in them a hatred of the Cuban Revolution and of Fidel. I tried to keep up our correspondence but it became impossible because in all these years we have gone in opposite ideological directions; helped along the way by some miserable human beings.





THE CUJAE

In 1978 I began my engineering studies at the Instituto Superior Politécnico José Antonio Echeverría (ISPJAE). This was an institute of higher learning that had been created when they separated Engineering and Architecture from the old University of Havana and housed them at José Antonio Echevarría University City (CUJAE), built outside the capital for that purpose. Later CUJAE became an independent institution called ISPJAE.

CUJAE was made up of a series of long buildings that communicated with one another by way of plant-lined walkways. The architecture was modern. Numerous gardens and interior patios were filled with trees, among them mangoes and jacarandas. The campus covered many acres and included sports installations, dorms, and a great number of laboratories. Each school had one or more buildings. I studied at the School of Cybernetics, Electronics and Telecommunications; its building was one of those closest to the main entrance.

Laura was at the School of Architecture. Our friends Gonzalo and Vivian were at Civil Engineering, and my sister Sarah studied Chemical Engineering. All those careers having to do with the generation and distribution of electrical energy were grouped together in another school. Across from the School of Architecture was a little park we called Plaza Ampere. This was a play on words referring to the Ampere, the unit of measurement for electrical current defined as one Coulomb per second. Typical of Cuban humor they said that “one *culón* a second passed through that plaza.”³⁵

Some 200 meters away rose a majestic sugar mill that dominated the landscape with its characteristic sounds and smells. As you approached the CUJAE you were met by dozens of mango trees on either side of the highway. In certain seasons their branches hung heavy with ripe fruits, their reddish yellow skins gleaming in the sun. The CUJAE's location, far from the city center, made it necessary to travel by bus, and that could take a long time. During my years in Cuba public transportation was always a problem. Female students routinely hitched rides and many were able to get them. We men would often be left waiting as we watched them disappear down the road with some motorist who had picked them up.

35 *Culón can be translated as big butt.*





We had to get up extremely early in order to be on time for class.

When I began my studies Cuba still suffered from a lack of qualified professors. The development of a stable academic body is a process that requires years. They said that at the beginning of the Revolution few university professors had remained on campus, and for some time these had to train the upcoming candidates.

By the time I started this situation had improved, but some of the professors were still quite young or in the process of earning their postgraduate degrees. The Cubans solved their problems very intelligently and planned far into the future, something still rare in Latin America. They had sent large numbers of professors abroad to study a variety of subjects. For mathematics or physics they sent them to the Soviet Union or Hungary, and they went to the Western countries for the more technical disciplines. Almost all these professionals returned when their courses of study ended: there was an energy typical of places where collective projects were being undertaken.

The five who had specialized in microelectronics in Canada returned with their masters degrees about the same time I started at the school. They'd acquired the basic knowledge to design and build Cuba's first integrated circuits, and set up a Microelectronics Research Center in an old house nearby. I heard they also constructed a 4-bit Arithmetic and Logic Unit (ALU). In the context of Latin America at the beginning of the eighties this was very advanced.

During my first years at the university I worked as an assistant in the physics lab. That's how I discovered that fascinating world. The professors there were experimenting with holography. The beam of light traveled around the room, bouncing off mirrors and passing through lenses. As if by magic a hologram appeared. It was impressive to see a head floating in space. I was especially struck by the hologram of a chess board. One moved and could hide the tower with the queen, that's how real the tri-dimensionality appeared.

The work and study principle was also applied at the university level. Each year we spent some time working. At first it was only a month but became progressively longer until in my last year of college it was two. The jobs we did were very basic at first. The idea was that engineers or architects should acquire the experience of making with their own hands what they would one day be asking others to make. And so Laura, who studied architecture, worked as an assistant bricklayer her first years, and as she advanced in her studies became a drafts-woman and then an architectural assistant. My first years I worked on the assembly line at a radio factory. My final year I worked at the Central Laboratory for Telecommunications, the place where the Communications Ministry tried out new technologies to determine if they should be adopted.

Because the professors were so young the courses sometimes lacked depth. I realized this





years later when I was able to compare them with those at other universities. But the education wasn't bad. This was clear to me several years later when I got to Paris and entered a post graduate program in Robotics. I only spoke a few words of French and was nervous when I showed up along with all the other candidates at the initial meeting. There were 120 of us and only thirty would be admitted. We faced four professors. One of them began looking over my records and study plan which, duly notarized, I had brought with me from Cuba. He smiled and said: "I see you got five out of five in Dialectical Materialism and only three out of five in Circuit Theory." I tried to explain that in Cuba we all studied Marxism; it was obligatory. After a few more questions along the lines of why I wanted to study Robotics, I was accepted. They said I could start right away but they didn't know if Cuba and France had educational equivalence so weren't sure if I could formally enroll. They recommended I begin the course while we waited for the official response. If by the end of the year they discovered that the equivalence existed, I'd have my degree. If not, I would have learned something in any case. I accepted. Fortunately, toward the end of that year I received a positive decision on the equivalence issue and was able to earn the diploma that later opened the door to what I've been doing now for more than twenty years. At the end-of-course party, between glasses of wine, one of the professors who had been at my original interview admitted they'd all made a bet on me. They wanted to see how the "Cuban" fared.

When I graduated in Cuba I was one of the best students in my class. Some three years later I began the post graduate course in France and found myself among the three or four worst, along with one Tunisian, one Algerian and one Vietnamese. Without a doubt part of my problem had to do with not knowing French; but my training in mathematics was also inferior. I saw signs of this almost daily. In public school the French students had been taught to think differently. The teaching of mathematics was based in the demonstration of theorems and they learned to extrapolate concepts. Much later, in Uruguay which is a country traditionally influenced by French educational methods, I saw that my Uruguayan engineering students were also superior to me in this respect.

Theory was generally weaker in Cuban curricula than in France or Uruguay. But other features of our education compensated for this. Even with scarce resources we got an important practical component. This came from our contact with design, experimentation, and a broad range of laboratory experiences. The work-study principle, which was almost a dogma, helped a lot to develop skills that made it possible for the student to mature. There was also a more holistic or integrated aspect that introduced social theory to every Cuban course of study.

And there was also something else: the sense that we ourselves could do almost anything if we tried, without inhibition. This was true collectively but also at the personal level. It was a feeling that permeated all aspects of our lives. When Cuba set out to build its own computers, or when it sent dozens of professors to other countries to study for their doctorates, it was sending a strong signal to its own population at the same time. There was a national





will to move forward and a strategy to achieve this. We were all imbued with that collective energy.

By the 1970s the Revolution was consolidated. Now the goal was to seriously construct a new Cuba (economically and socially), and long range planning was needed. The Cubans chose some strategic sectors where they would invest systematically for years with an eye to achieving excellence. Biotechnology and medicine were two of these. They opened several well-equipped research centers, developed human resources, and worked assiduously. Today the country is a world class power in biotechnology and medicine. It exports medications, offers medical services to many parts of the world, and has achieved a high level of development in these areas.

Electronics had also been defined as a strategic sector. A kind of international division of labor had been established among the Socialist countries, which at that time included almost a third of the world's population. Cuba exported sugar to Eastern Europe. But Cuba also wanted to develop other areas and began preparing itself to produce integrated circuits and some electronic components it could sell to the Socialist countries. While I and many other future engineers studied at ISPJAE, in Pinar del Río province they were building an integrated circuit factory. It was there that they hoped to produce the integrated circuits of the 74XX series (so popular at the time), in order to satisfy the needs of a good part of the Socialist world.

Cuba was less successful in electronics than it was in biotechnology. In the eighties the Socialist camp entered a terminal crisis and Socialism was wiped out in every Eastern European country, including the Soviet Union which ceased to exist as such. This caused the downfall, among much else, of the Socialist common market, and of that factory in Pinar del Río. I don't think the factory ever really got up and running. Many of my fellow students later worked at national industries that imported parts and assembled computers in Cuba. But during our college years we still had the illusion that we were being trained to be the engineers who would work in that strategic field. Aside from the fact that this sector never achieved the hoped-for development, the engineers who graduated in those years developed other areas, such as the design and production of medical equipment.

The draft existed in Cuba and every male had to participate. But doing your service, which lasted two years, interrupted your studies. So those who proved to be good students could go on to the university instead of doing those two years in the military. They received their training while they studied, and graduated with a rank in the reserve. My Cuban comrades had one day a week on which they studied military subjects, then a few weeks of intensive training at the end of the year. We all graduated with a diploma in Telecommunications Engineering, and the Cubans also graduated as army communications officers.

Women and foreigners were exempt from military training. This meant extra free time but





it also showed that although we lived in Cuba and felt Cuban, we really weren't. Not being Cuban gave us certain privileges. On the other hand, we couldn't receive military training like any ordinary Cuban (and the situation of tension with the United States sometimes led us to believe that not having that training could be problematic), nor could we sign up for an internationalist mission like so many of our Cuban friends. Neither could we join the Cuban Communist Party.

At the ISPJAE there were a few foreign students. Most were from "fraternal nations" (those where a revolution had been victorious or that had recently become independent) or from countries still engaged in liberation struggles. Cuba supported these students with scholarships. In my class there were four Palestinians and we talked for hours about their struggle. One belonged to Fatah and the other three were members of FPLP and FDLP. There was a young woman from South Africa. The ANC was still fighting apartheid and Mandela had been in prison for years. There were several Angolans, Vietnamese, and a Laotian who impressed us with his perfect calligraphy.

My friend Chernob was from Guinea Bissau and his family practiced polygamy. He had a father, five mothers, and a string of siblings. He would tell me about this society in which he had lived his entire life and which was so foreign to me. One day he mentioned a situation that had arisen in his family. Two of his mothers had some sort of problem and couldn't get along. In order to "resolve" the situation his father impregnated them both at the same time, and when they gave birth he switched the babies. According to Chernob that took care of the problem.

Some of my professors impressed me deeply. Albín Salas had studied in Hungary and worked in signal processing. He became interested in "teletext," which was just then beginning to see commercial use in some of the developed countries. He was my advisor on a final project that was the study of a modem. Data transmission of information was beginning to develop and achieving a transmission speed of 2400 bauds, via a telephone line, was something to be proud of. That which is commonplace today seemed incredible back then.

Marante was a much-admired professor who knew a lot about antennas. His office was on the school's top floor. On his desk he had a human skull with the words "I was what you are, I am what you will be." Marante wasn't that rigorous in class but he exuded a practical wisdom which he imparted generously and with good humor. He'd fill the blackboard with Maxwell's equations and then tell us: "Wow, these equations are fantastic for impressing girls on the bus. Just open your notebook to the appropriate page and they'll be all over you!" Then he would show us how to translate those complex equations into practical applications and build an antenna.

This teaching style was nice but sometimes annoyed me. Once Marante gave us an assignment I prepared with great care. I brought it to discuss in his office as he had asked us to do.

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When I arrived and without even looking at my work he said “Leave it on the table, you’ve passed.” Then he invited me to join the rest of the students who were gathered there to play ping-pong and drink beer. That was Marante.

Years later the U.S. government unleashed Radio and TV Martí, as part of its program of counterrevolutionary propaganda. They spent a lot of money on making sure the signals reached every Cuban home. Antennas were raised on ships or in balloons just outside Cuban waters. It was rumored that Marante was one of the experts who developed the Cuban countermeasures, which for years have neutralized TV Martí, turning it into an endless expense incapable of achieving its goal. We admired the technical expertise of that victory in the ongoing war with the United States.

Popi was unique. He was an athlete who had gone to Great Britain at the end of the seventies to do a masters in Metrology. While there he discovered the microprocessors that were just beginning to come into use. Popi understood their potential and set out to study them, even though this wasn’t why he was there. He returned to Cuba convinced that the future of computers would involve micro processing, and proposed teaching a course on microprocessors at the ISPJAE. In the seventies, in the context of their efforts to develop electronics the Cubans had decided to build computers, and despite the blockade had been able to get hold of a PDP11.³⁶ It was *fusilada*,³⁷ as we said back then. They copied it piece by piece, detail by detail, and production began on what they would dub “the first Cuban computer.” They labeled it the CID-201-B and it was an exact copy of the PDP11. It was built with the technology of the times, before the development of microprocessors.

When Popi came back with his proposal, which included using microprocessors, in some sense he was questioning all the work that had been done around the CID-21-B. Perhaps he threatened a few in positions of power. The truth is this idea, which would redirect the line that had already been established, wasn’t well received. But Popi wouldn’t give up. So what if they wouldn’t let him teach his course within the official curriculum? He’d teach it without credit for anyone who wanted to take it. He printed up some fliers announcing he would be offering the class at impossible hours: very early in the morning or on weekends. It quickly filled with students.

I took one of those classes. It was based on Intel’s 8080 microprocessor. I remember something Popi said that made an impression on me. He told us that in the implementation of a system, hardware and software were in dialectical contradiction with one another. His use of that Marxist-inspired metaphor explained how in certain solutions one aspect is more important, and in others the other. Hundreds of students took those classes. And time would prove Popi right. Throughout the world microprocessors replaced discrete components and changed the history of computation. Popi became a national authority on the subject.

³⁶ A popular computer in the 1980s, made by Digital.

³⁷ Copied without patent permission or payment.





In his logical design classes, he was always using examples from the world of sports. For example, we were supposed to design a board that showed the results in basketball, volleyball, or boxing events. Each sport had different rules and generated a new exercise. It was all very entertaining. For our final exam, Popi told us we could use materials during the test. He'd assign three exercises and would give a perfect score to anyone who solved at least one of them correctly.

Igor Paklin and me, and from time to time a few other students, studied together. Among the others was Carlos, a friend from Guatemala. Igor and I had very good grades but Carlos had some difficulties. The way we studied for exams included a complete revision of all the material; then we'd rehearse several possible tests. We'd usually invent these ourselves. We'd finish studying the day before the exam. Each of us had given a test to one of the others and we worked them all out in real time. After our practice time was up we'd discuss the results. That night we'd relax, often going to a movie.

Popi's exam came around, with his singular grading method. Before we began he pointed to four or five students, among them Igor and me. Somewhat arbitrarily he told us we could leave, that we'd already earned the maximum grade. Surprised, we got up and happily left the room. Everyone else had to take the exam. It turned out that one of the exercises was to make a board for a particular sport he'd never mentioned in class but that we had included in the tests we'd made up the day before to rehearse for the real one. The use of materials was permitted so all Carlos had to do was take out his notebook and transcribe what we'd practiced. He got the top grade.

In general, our professors were more conventional than Popi. The vast majority were very serious and did quality work. Of course there were also some professors who weren't so good. I remember one in Dialectical Materialism who spouted theories in an auditorium. He would read in a monotonous voice from a series of cards he'd prepared. It wasn't long before someone realized he'd transcribed those cards word for word from a Soviet manual. The students brought copies of the manual and those who weren't asleep read along with the professor. A low murmur spread throughout the room. Once the professor stopped and the murmur continued. When he started up again, repeating the very same words, there was an explosion of laughter and he was completely humiliated.

Our college career included a semester of Historical Materialism, one of Dialectical Materialism, another of Political Economy and a couple of other courses on the history of the international revolutionary movement. Some of the professors were able to make these classes interesting and tried to generate discussions on different topics. One professor claimed "capitalism was unable to successfully carry forward the scientific and technological revolution." The basic idea was that capitalism would undertake this revolution with an eye to making a profit, therefore it wouldn't be for the common good and would eventually lead the world into war and disaster. I raised my hand, and asked how she explained the





scientific and technological advances of Japan and the United States if capitalism was unable to successfully carry forward such a revolution? A heated discussion followed. With my provocative question that's exactly what I'd wanted. Of course someone had to point out that the question demonstrated my "ideological weakness." But the truth was, by that time my militancy in the MIR and my own personal interest had led me to study the classics and I was capable of sustaining that sort of discussion. I ended up being called into the professor's office to discuss the subject with her and with the department chair. It all ended on a positive note.

The blockade against Cuba made it very hard to get books and magazines. Professors who studied in other countries brought back the best books they could find. A selection of these was fusilada, that is, copied and reproduced by Revolutionary Editions. In this way, for example, I studied Microelectronics, the classic by Millman and Taub. Those copied books were published in editions of tens of thousands of copies. I don't know what Millman and the other authors would have thought, but they might have been proud to know their books were used by so many young people. Later I heard an anecdote about something that happened in Uruguay. The University of the Republic invited this same Millman to visit and the great professor spent several weeks working there. Before he left, someone asked what he thought of Uruguay and he said, among other things, that the country was "too Socialist" for his taste.

Many of our text books were Soviet. Most were published by MIR Publishers (mir means peace in Russian), which produced books in other languages by Soviet academics. Many of these were excellent but in general differed from the Western texts in that they were written in a much dryer and more boring style; often the translations were also pretty bad. Books from the MIR publishing house were very cheap and widely used, not only in Cuba. I've come upon them in Paris, Montevideo and Buenos Aires; they are very well thought of, even today.

The Soviets, like the North Americans or French, were jealous of their national contributions in the history of scientific discovery. So each of these "major countries" has developed its own "patriotic," somewhat imperialist, discourse in this respect. This was one of the more ridiculous aspects of the cold war. Almost every one of the classic laws of physics and electricity had its Western and Russian names, in honor of those each side claimed had discovered them.

The Soviets say the radio was invented by Popov, before Marconi as is claimed in the West. They argue that Popov showed radio transmission to the czars but they ignored it. They claim Marconi then secured his patent and was able to commercialize the invention. I think the Russians may have been right, at least that's what Wikipedia says; but in those years the issue became an absurd problem of principles. One of our professors was lecturing one day: "When Popov invented the radio..." and a voice from the back of the room responded: "he





tuned in the BBC of London.” Everyone laughed.

We had a full program of studies. Sometimes classes started at seven or eight in the morning and we would have them all day long. Students were not allowed to work part-time. The idea was that you should concentrate exclusively on learning. It wasn't acceptable to say you needed the money. If a student really did have economic problems which made full-time study a problem, he or she was offered aid. In such cases the student was given a stipend of thirty pesos a month, which was considerable. Back then most Cubans earned less than 200 a month. Furthermore those students with scholarships had the right to a card that permitted them to eat free meals at school, and in some cases even got a bed in one of the dorms. It was inconceivable that anyone be denied full-time study for economic reasons.

The majority of those who lived at the dorms were foreign students. I remember Minh, a Vietnamese who was one of Laura's closest friends and whose personal history was indicative of the times. The Vietnamese government excused one child in each family from going to war. Minh, who was brilliant, had been given the privilege of full-time study. He told us with great pride that Ho Chi Minh himself had given him a basket of gifts for being one of the country's brightest students. When he finished his high school education he had the opportunity of studying abroad. He wanted to study math so chose Hungary, the Socialist country considered the best in that discipline. Minh worked hard to learn Hungarian, one of the world's most difficult languages. But when the time came the Communist Party of Vietnam decided he wouldn't be going to Hungary after all, because of the risk of “ideological deviance.” Arbitrarily it decided to send him to Cuba to study architecture! And there he was, with his good humor and brilliance. Minh was an excellent person, and a great friend to my partner, often getting her into the cafeteria line reserved for those who boarded at the school.





POWER

Many years have passed and the world has changed so much that what was natural or logical to us when I was young now seems unreal. Some certainties from that era appear absurd today, many people have acquired new ways of thinking, and the general context is so different that one sometimes asks oneself if it was all a dream. It seems important to me to be able to pass on to our children what we experienced back then. This memoir is one way of doing this, telling the stories on a daily basis is another. I've never stopped thinking about all that happened. Can we even explain it?

I grew up in that atmosphere. From the time I was small I was interested in what was going on in the world. I noticed everything and questioned even more. Later I read all I could get my hands on and developed the ability to memorize huge numbers of events and statistics. Gradually I learned to analyze all that information. The education I received was privileged in this respect. On the one hand I had that profound everyday communication with my mother, my fathers, and their many friends. On the other, from the time I was nine-years-old there was Fidel's constant presence. His speeches were real master classes where he would develop an idea rationally and explain why things happened the way they did. He never talked down to us or explained something in simplistic terms. He might have been mistaken at times, but his discourse possessed a solid logic that allowed us to put things in perspective, and we internalized that logic. One could listen to him speak and understand the economic measures the Revolution was taking, examine the errors it had committed in one area or another, imagine the future. There was an enormous distance between Fidel's speeches—always intelligent and original—and those of most of the other revolutionary leaders. There were a few exceptions, such as Che or Armando Hart; but when someone else gave one of those rhetorical diatribes, the popular response was instantaneous: "Oh, man, what a *teque*!"³⁸

Later, when I was at the university, there were classes in formal Marxist theory, based on those dogmatic and boring Soviet manuals. But by this time the reading I had done on my own, and my range of interests, allowed me to separate the wheat from the chaff. From the

³⁸ *Teque* is a Cuban term used to describe an overly ideological speech or simply one filled with rhetoric. The word would be used especially in cases in which the language was boring and/or dogmatic.





age of thirteen or fourteen I'd begun to read the revolutionary classics; at least those that were accepted, such as Marx, Engels, Lenin, Che, and Giap. And also a few that weren't yet classics, like George Jackson's *Prison Letters* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Our closeness to the many Latin American revolutionaries who visited our home put me in touch with other authors, like Mao and Trotsky, who were absent from the official canon. It was a privilege to be able to get to know all those people who frequented our home. It enabled me to talk, one on one, with the very protagonists who were shaping the history of those years: the Sandinistas who taught me about Nicaragua; members of the MIR who taught me about Chile; Manuel Sadosky with whom I discussed scientific ideas; Laurette Séjourné who broadened my historical and archaeological horizons; and Cortázar, Gelman, Benedetti and countless other writers who contributed to my cultural awakening.

Later still, my connection to the Chilean MIR allowed me to construct a more complex analysis. And this new education provided a "protected space" in which I was able to learn, since the MIR was an organization that was recognized and respected in Cuba and within the general struggle. I felt its analysis was more sophisticated.

The long conversations I had with my mother were an important part of my formation. We talked about everything and at length. We were able to develop a very high level of trust and complicity. Today I continue to read her journals regularly; they are like a continuation of those conversations we had so long ago. She still has that special talent for linking bits and pieces of what's going on in the world, or of speaking about a food recipe in the context of a war breaking out somewhere far away. During the years of my childhood we grew together intellectually. She developed her own thought process, nurtured by her own experience, by feminism and other movements taking place in the United States. As I grew and matured I developed my own vision of things.

Little by little the schematic ideas of my childhood developed into more complex thought, and my language became richer. Many years later I reread that diary I'd kept at boarding school when I was twelve. It was embarrassing. More than a diary it was a list of slogans. The sensibility was there but hidden beneath a mountain of empty rhetoric.

Later, when Laura and I met, I was fortunate to be able to get to know her father. Pablo is a man who thinks for himself and deeply. Our conversations broadened my intellectual horizons in important ways. He was the one who introduced me most fully to the history of the Latin American university and its ideas, which gave birth to so much else.

Throughout all these years, certain public events also marked my formation and shaped my worldview. The war in Vietnam spread throughout Indochina toward the end of the sixties, engulfing Cambodia and Laos. The Khmer Rouge led the anti-Yankee resistance in Cambodia and logically formed part of the group of nations and movements we considered fraternal. The equation was simple: the enemies of our enemies are our friends. In the mid 1970s the United States was defeated and expelled from the Indochinese peninsula. Re-

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construction began and at the same time the efforts to build Socialist societies in Vietnam, Kampuchea (the new name for Cambodia), and Laos. From afar the historical differences and cultural specificities seemed important but secondary. We couldn't have imagined that "a sister nation immersed in Socialist construction" could be so different from what we knew in Cuba. When we finally learned the truth about the Khmer Rouge regime we were stunned.

My main news sources at the time were Granma, the newspaper that was the official voice of the Cuban Revolution, and The Voice of America radio which was the official mouthpiece of the United States. I had learned to read and listen between the lines. Both these sources were fairly crude in their methodologies. The Voice of America bombarded us with a discourse totally disconnected from our own reality, which in and of itself diminished the little credibility it had, given that it came from the enemy; but listening to it did allow us access to some information that didn't appear in Cuba's press. If some event was published by both sources, we gave it more credence. Granma's editorial page was filled with official Communist Party propaganda. On its international page the paper reproduced almost word for word the major international news cables. The way it tended to try to control information was basically through an "all or nothing" technique, and by the space it assigned each item. Those stories that reinforced the official line were emphasized; others were minimized or didn't exist. So any action on the part of a revolutionary movement anywhere in the world was an important piece of news while problems or difficulties either weren't mentioned at all or were presented as "enemy propaganda." The result was that our information was distorted in at least three different ways. We were given the impression that the whole world was engaged in revolutionary struggle and we were on the threshold of victory in a number of countries. The image of the United States was totally misrepresented: all we got were stories about violence, drugs, racism and repression, with very little about real advances or virtues. And finally the image of the Socialist camp and national liberation movements was pretty homogeneous. These were our allies and it was considered bad form to criticize them too much. We knew that the Soviet Union and China had differences in many areas, and that Cuba had differences with the Soviet Union with regard to Latin America and other issues. But we had little access to the complexities of these differences and rarely had an opportunity to discuss them.

It's important to point out that all this was taking place at a unique moment in world history. Throughout the 1970s there had been great defeats, particularly with respect to the extension of dictatorships in Latin America. But there had also been significant victories: Vietnam had defeated the United States in 1973 and had achieved full independence in 1975 along with Laos and Cambodia. The Revolution of the Carnations came to power in Portugal in 1974, and not much later we saw the victories of the independence movements in Guinea Bissau, Cape Verde, Mozambique and Angola. In 1979 the people of Zimbabwe overthrew the racist regime of Rhodesia, leading to the future end of Apartheid in South Africa. In that same year the Sandinistas were victorious in Nicaragua, and the revolutionary





process in El Salvador gained momentum. It was relatively easy to believe that history was moving in the direction of independence, freedom, and socialism. Deeper analyses would have allowed us to observe other dynamics: those internal ones already weakening the socialist camp as well as those at the global level that were even then creating the conditions for the coming decades which would be marked by globalization and neo-liberalism. But propaganda and political education emphasized certain aspects while minimizing others.

All this was in stark contrast with Fidel's traditional honesty on so many subjects. I remember a huge rally at which the people shouted "Cuba yes, Yankees no!" over and over again. Then I listened as Fidel explained that the enemy was the U.S. government, not its people. He spent quite some time pointing out the many good qualities of the people of the United States. He said that "if the U.S. people really knew what its government was doing to us it wouldn't last five minutes." By the same token there was no one more critical than Fidel of the Revolution's own shortcomings. He was able to analyze in vivid detail something that only a few days before had been official policy, destroying it completely. He became the Revolution's most serious critic, which may have contributed in great measure to his political longevity. We were lucky to be getting both messages.

When the Vietnamese invaded Kampuchea it was my first real jolt with regard to Cuba's distortion of information. The Voice of America had been broadcasting for a while about the horrors of the Khmer Rouge, but we had rejected its version almost automatically as "imperialist propaganda." Our own press talked about "our Kampuchean brothers and sisters." We were convinced that all "our people" were motivated by the same humanistic values that vibrated in everything we did. What's more, along with the Vietnamese and Laotians, the Kampucheans had just beaten the Yankees; they were heroes of the anti-imperialist struggle. Then all of a sudden in 1979 we woke to the news that Vietnam had invaded Kampuchea and, from one day to the next, Granma began publishing stories about Pol Pot's atrocities. It turned out he was one of history's most horrendous criminals, responsible for the deaths of more than a million of his own people! The things we read about in the paper were simply incredible: to wear glasses implied you were an intellectual and meant almost certain death; they emptied the cities in a matter of a couple of days and forced millions to an absurd return to the countryside; the schools were transformed into torture centers and scenes of mass murder. I couldn't understand how we had gone so suddenly from total negation to such a detailed explanation of what was going on. Just a few days before we had denied these same atrocities as enemy propaganda and now it was so true that it justified an armed invasion on the part of Vietnam!

I remember the issue of Kampuchea as my awakening to press censorship and the manipulation of information. Right after this I remember asking a Vietnamese comrade why they hadn't told the world what had been going on so close to them, why they had been silent all this time. He responded with great calm and tranquility—perhaps a millennial wisdom—that Vietnam could only face one enemy at a time. Shortly after this China began

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its war against Vietnam in reprisal for Vietnam's intervention against the Khmer Rouge, and I understood the meaning of his words. Vietnam had been fighting almost uninterruptedly for so many years: against Japan, France, and the United States; then, without a break, it had had to face Kampuchea, and then China! But Cuba was thousands of miles away. There was no excuse for our silence. These events were very useful to me. They triggered my doubts and opened my eyes.

I began to notice other inconsistencies and stored them away in my personal file. Some of my friends or acquaintances returned from studying in the Soviet Union or one of the Eastern European countries. They told all sorts of stories. I was particularly troubled when they talked about racism or egotism on the part of people who for several generations had been building the "new society" to which we aspired. It was clear that the priorities weren't the same in all the Socialist countries. The emphasis Cuba placed on health and humanistic values didn't seem so important everywhere.

I searched for other sources of information in order to better understand. That's when I began to receive the Mexican edition of *Le Monde Diplomatique*. My father-in-law sent it to me through the mail. There I found a vision that was more analytical and complex, and also more critical. From then on I've read that publication every month. A few years later, when I began to live in France, I imagined that I would at last have better access to information. I devoured papers such as *Le Monde*, *Liberation*, and *El País* (the Madrid daily). But I soon discovered that these supposedly more objective papers also lied and manipulated. They were much more subtle than the Cuban press but I was able to grasp their distortions easily. By this time I knew Latin America and Cuba, and had no problem seeing through the manipulation. In these publications a more nuanced approach made it more difficult to separate the wheat from the chaff. I ended up not buying any newspaper, tried to follow what was happening in a variety of different ways, and used the analytical ability I had developed during my years in Cuba.

I've already mentioned that at a particular moment my mother fell into disgrace. It was a gradual process and never clearly spelled out, but in time it became obvious and hurtful. She was given less and less work and eventually had no nine-to-five job at all. They kept paying her monthly salary but she had no workplace. My mother just kept writing at home and tried to find out what was going on. She asked and asked but no one was willing or able to tell her. Friends stopped coming to see us. Contact had become too risky. My mother seemed to be a kind of pariah. Painfully we began to notice which of our acquaintances preferred turning away. Only our really good friends remained. They came around as always. Fortunately, there were quite a few of them. Everyone understood they were risking something by visiting us, although that something was nebulous and unnamed. I don't have detailed memories of this time. I mostly retain a sense of disgust. I hated not knowing why this was happening. At the very least I wanted to know what the accusation or problem could be. And I was also developing an inner rage. I loved my mother tremendously and it





hurt me to see what they were doing to her. Furthermore, I was completely sure of her and of her loyalty to the Revolution. Whatever it was had to be based on lies. I had fantasies about my mother dying and using the occasion of her funeral to make an impassioned speech denouncing this injustice. My audience was shamed into silence.

During this period, I got even closer to my mother. Sometimes I would see her crying in her room and I'd go and hug her. I tried to accompany her, to be her support. I simply couldn't understand what was happening. Even today I only have hypotheses. But I was always there with her. Once I suggested we leave Cuba. I told her we could start over in some other part of the world: "Let them go to hell! It's their loss!" I couldn't stand to see her suffer. My mother said she wouldn't leave until she could clarify her situation. She explained that to leave before she had an explanation would be interpreted as running away and would also imply some sort of guilt. My admiration for her grew even more. My mother stood strong and the Cubans eventually recognized their error; but the whole thing lasted several years, which were very difficult and marked us profoundly.

During those years of my mother's ostracism we continued to be part of the Revolution in spite of a kind of internal exile. The people who continued coming to the house, especially the young Cuban poets who practically lived there, showed us the situation was more complex than it appeared. These good friends were proof of the fact that there were good people, with independent minds, who were true to themselves in the midst of the madness.

I think our contact with the Latin American comrades was one thing that saved us during that period. The Sandinistas of Nicaragua, the Chilean MIR, the Puerto Rican Socialist Party: these groups were independent and didn't necessarily agree with everything claimed by Cuba. They were a source of diversity in terms of ideas and attitudes. Many of those comrades had the courage and strength to stick by us. When I remember this I can't help but think about the dignity of the FSLN when General Ochoa's trial took place in 1989. As part of the process Cuba stripped Ochoa of all his medals and demanded the same of our sister nations. Nicaragua refused to follow suit. It was a gesture of dignity in the midst of such a shameful episode.

I find it hard to use the word "trial" when speaking of the transparent lynching that ended with the execution of Ochoa and three other comrades accused of running drugs and betraying the Revolution. The four of them were important Cuban militants who had devoted their entire lives to the struggle. Colonel Tony de la Guardia had been involved in numerous clandestine actions in support of our revolutionary brothers and sisters (in Chile, Venezuela and Nicaragua, among other places); and General Ochoa led Cuba's military missions in Ethiopia and Nicaragua, and commanded thousands of Cuban internationalist fighters in winning the war in Angola. His leadership was important in gaining Namibia's independence and achieving the beginning of the end of apartheid in South Africa. In mid 1989 the two men and their assistants were accused of drug trafficking and forced to stand "trial," a

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farce that ended with their executions. It will be many years before we learn the truth about all this, but I cannot accept the explanations we've been given to date.

The truth is, those four men belonged to a collective of comrades who had the difficult task of defending the Revolution in extreme circumstances. Tony de la Guardia headed a group whose job was to obtain important items Cuba was unable to import because of the economic blockade. In undertaking this mission he had a great deal of autonomy and access to every imaginable means. His people ran small boats through the Florida straits, operated through front organizations in a variety of countries, and had contact with all sorts of traffickers. They were charged with an important task and to be successful often had use illegal means. For years they succeeded at getting everything they were asked for: medical equipment, hard currency, all manner of technology. At some point they came in contact with the international drug mafia, and were accused of having endangered the Revolution. For his part, during the time he commanded the Cuban troops in Angola, Ochoa was accused of having trafficked in ivory, precious stones and fine woods. He had been given the mission of winning a war and didn't have the means to do so. In Angola he faced the South African army, with its vastly superior weaponry, and he was far from his bases of support. At one point he had to build a landing strip in the middle of the jungle. He built it as he was able, eventually selling illegal goods to obtain the money he needed. And he remained with his troops until they won that war. When he got back home he received a hero's welcome. This was the basis of his being accused, along with de la Guardia, of doing business with drug dealers. I have always believed both men undertook these tasks in the service of the Revolution: de la Guardia in order to get his hands on those necessities the economic blockade made it impossible to obtain, Ochoa to win the war in Angola.

The Revolution often promoted the idea that "the end justifies the means." We can look to the whole history of armed struggle throughout the 1950s and the '60s, when so many comrades sacrificed everything for the Revolution (not only their lives but also their families, their friendship, and so much else). It's true that we were also taught that there's a delicate line between "good and bad." There was a moral discourse that considered it unacceptable to take advantage of children or kidnap the innocent. A revolutionary movement clearly operated differently from a terrorist organization. We also knew the Cubans did not share certain practices used by guerrilla groups they supported more generally. But it wasn't always easy to understand where the line between what was acceptable or not was drawn, and one could understand that in the heat of battle it was possible to lose one's way. This is what I felt had happened with those men. I don't believe they did what they did for personal gain or to jeopardize the Revolution. At worst, they acted in error. There was one moment in the trial we saw on TV that seemed to me to be, perhaps, one of the few in which one felt some sincerity; it was when Ochoa, speaking before dozens of generals, said that perhaps he had made mistakes but he had made them for the Revolution and that everyone there knew how he lived.





There's another very unsettling aspect in this whole case. It was very difficult to imagine that others high in the revolutionary hierarchy—including Fidel and Raul—hadn't been cognizant of Ochoa's and de la Guardia's activities. But during their trial it seemed no one else had known. We saw all Cuba's generals seated on the Honor Court, and Ochoa seated before them. They all condemned him, but who among them hadn't incurred in similar rule-bending or, at the very least, knew what he was doing? If the vote had been divided, if even one member of the Counsel of State had voted against execution. But no. They all participated in that unanimous chorus, and that provoked considerable doubt.

We heard a rumor that the United States had discovered those drug deals and might have been using them as an excuse for military invasion. Punishing those men as severely as they did, sent a clear message to the world: "this isn't revolutionary policy but merely the work of a few bad apples, and they will be dealt with." It may well be that this was one of Fidel's brilliant maneuvers to "save the Revolution," but it left me with a bitter taste. I was convinced those comrades had been deliberately sacrificed, that the process lacked a minimal transparency, and that condemning comrades who had given their entire lives to the Revolution was unjust.

When the Revolution came to power in Nicaragua, the Sandinistas went from being one among many guerrilla groups throughout Latin America to assuming their role in government. Many of those men and women had spent hours and hours at our home in Havana, conversing, using the Ditto in my room, dreaming of victory and preparing for it. Now they had won. Nicaragua became the second "free territory in America." It was then that Ernesto Cardenal invited my mother to Nicaragua. By this time the Cubans had spoken with her and "apologized for their mistake." I never learned exactly who had spoken with her or exactly what had been said. My mother was always very discreet in this regard. A few months later she went to live in Nicaragua, taking my sister Ana with her. She had found a dignified way of leaving, with head held high. But she went into another even hotter and more dangerous situation, now on the front lines of struggle. The whole situation remained engraved in my mind and heart, and I no longer believed in the absolute purity of our cause nor of its protagonists, just as years before I had stopped believing in the absolute truth of our messages. Things turned out to be much more complicated, not nearly as clear.

That situation with my mother might have produced in me a visceral hatred of the Revolution, but it didn't. I understood its complexity, found a way to understand such weaknesses as indicative of the human condition, and continued to consider myself a revolutionary. But I promised myself I would never be complicit with that sort of injustice.

This and other experiences taught me that revolutions are made by human beings and are necessarily contaminated by all the debilities we possess: jealousy, opportunism, ambition and bad faith. My experience in Cuba showed me that in revolutions the best qualities flourish: generosity, solidarity, the sharing of a dream. And all these coexist with our debil-





ities that also continue to exist. In the revolutionary context, where great masses of people achieve enormous and sometimes uncontrollable power, human passions can run wild and often do. An assembly can have sovereign power, sometimes more than that of the Party itself, and may commit atrocious injustices. A single person may also hold enormous power, unchecked by efficient social controls. These things happen in every society, but in the whirlwind that is revolution they can take on added strength, and human fragility may at times turn them into mortal dangers to the Revolution's very essence and to its participants.

Each revolutionary measure necessarily affected a certain number of people. Land reform produced hundreds of thousands of happy beneficiaries and also thousands of landowners whose property was expropriated. When it was decided that no one could own more than one house in the city and another in the countryside many acquired a home of their own while others swallowed their anger at losing a house that might have resulted from a lifetime of work. And to all this one must add the ideological campaigns waged by the Empire through its radio stations, by the Church through its priests and pastors, and via *radio bembaba*³⁹ with its well-known efficacy. A thousand rumors were launched: that the Revolution intended to send children to the Soviet Union against their parents' will, that the Russians would land with their teeth sharpened, thirsty for blood... Many people went into exile. In just a few years Cubans made up one of the most important communities in Florida.

Meanwhile the Revolution advanced, defining itself ever more profoundly as it went along. People were genuinely involved in building a new society, and those who left were seen as quitters or enemies. It was all-out war. During the first eight years of the Revolution there were military actions in the Escambray Mountains and in Pinar del Río. There were terrorist attacks, launched from speedboats that sailed from Florida, and monstrous actions like the one that blew up a Cuban plane in 1976 with seventy-two people on board. The U.S. economic blockade could be felt in every aspect of our lives. And it was in this difficult and threatening context that the Revolution continued to survive. Its development was affected by the realities of these attacks as well as by its libertarian aspirations. The most powerful empire on earth was attacking it from all sides. These circumstances may not explain everything but they're important.

Throughout the Revolution's history emigration also played a central role. The country's insular nature has isolated it, even as it has been a defensive weapon. As the political process became more radical, and confrontation with the United States more intense, defensive measures were more obvious. Among these the efforts to control the country's borders and in general all forms of communication with the outside, were always important. The relationship between the Cubans who stayed and their other half, those who now lived elsewhere, evolved as the years went by. At first there was a sort of psychological barrier.

39 *Radio bembaba was a term used in Cuba during the 1970s to describe the role of person-to-person communication in the population's ability to spread a given message to large numbers of people. Bembaba in Cuba means big mouth, or thick lips.*





Those who left were traitors and one didn't talk to them. Any kind of communication was frowned upon. We must understand that almost every family was fractured. Each had an uncle, a brother, a child or a grandmother who had "gone north." In the new lexicon, these family members were "worms"⁴⁰ and many refused even to write them a letter. Years of separation ensued and a great deal of suffering accumulated. Only a few had the courage or depth of love to keep in touch with that other part of themselves. By the 1970s the rupture was complete. The territorial war had ended but every now and then an enemy speedboat was able to infiltrate Cuban waters or was intercepted at sea. The economic blockade had managed to deprive Cubans of all sorts of material goods and there was always some relative in Miami who wrote about the abundance and luxury in his life. The dictum was to stay strong and dignified. "To build the new world in spite of them." The idea was that we might have to suffer for a few more years, but history was moving in our direction and in the end we would win. One had only to consider the recent victories in Vietnam, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique and Angola, the Sandinista Revolution, and the obvious improvements to our own lives in Cuba.

Articles of first necessity were subsidized and little by little the line defining luxury shifted. Some product never before available made an appearance: at first in small quantities which were distributed through work place assemblies to the best or neediest. Then that article would arrive in the stores in sufficient quantities and would be "liberated," meaning anyone could buy one. I remember when wrist watches first came on the market. My father and I went to look at them in the shop windows. A year later they would be commonplace but still highly sought after. The same thing happened with television sets and portable radios, and with products like refrigerators and fans: almost necessities in the tropical Cuban climate.

We were privileged. We had chosen to live like Cubans, had the same ration book, and went to the same schools; but we didn't suffer all the same privations. We could travel freely to visit our families and see the outside world with our own eyes. We could compare both realities.

Beneath that tough outer shell human nature hid out with all its limitations and complexities. Once I was going to New York and a friend asked me to do him a favor. Years before, his parents had gone to the United States and he had never responded to any of their letters. When he found out I was going to the city where they lived he gave me a note for his mother and asked if I would look her up. Robert and I went to see her. I thought I was doing something beautiful: perhaps carrying a message of love. The woman lived in a modest apartment in Brooklyn. She and another family member received us with great emotion. She read her son's letter. It must have been the first she'd had from him in years. We waited in silence, seated in her small living room. In that letter my friend had asked her to buy him a gold Rolex and give it to me to take back to him in Cuba. The woman and man looked at one another, almost oblivious to our presence, trying to decide what to do. There was no

⁴⁰ *Gusanos, literally worms, was the word used for years to describe those who left the country.*





question but that they would respond positively. They would have to borrow money from several other relatives but would do anything it took. A few days later they delivered that watch which I wore back to Cuba. The mother begged me to give her son a strange message. She wanted me to tell him that if he learned English she would send him a mattress as a gift. All those years of mutual isolation had woven absurdly distorted ideas on the part of each about the other. Human mediocrity won the day. That friend had never answered a single one of his mother's letters but now asked her for a gold Rolex and she, frantic for her son to learn English, held out the promise of a mattress as bait. Each time we returned to Cuba our friends and acquaintances expected we would bring them some present "from the other side." It might be something as simple as a ball point pen. We always came back with many such gifts.

A strange combination of circumstances produced in many Cubans on the island a certain chauvinistic pride concerning their revolutionary participation, and at the same time an obsession with the material items they lacked. Levis or a brand name watch, a pair of tennis shoes or ball point pen: all these things acquired a value far beyond their monetary worth. Isolation from the outside world and the "protection" of a paternalistic State generated a profound inability to understand certain things. So an ordinary Cuban thought that "outside" all kinds of material goods were practically free and thus it was logical that anyone traveling would be able to bring these "trinkets" back as gifts. And if by chance a Cuban traveled to Paris, México or Panama, he or she had a lot of trouble getting around on public transportation or understanding the concept of credit cards which didn't exist in Cuba at the time but were commonplace in those countries.

There were objective reasons that made traveling outside the country difficult for Cubans; for example, the fact that Cuban money was worthless because of the blockade. But on top of this genuine problem the Cuban government put forth the idea that controlling migration was important to the defense of the Revolution itself; and I think this was the real reason it was so hard for people to come and go freely. For an ordinary person this sort of travel was all but impossible. Foreigners like ourselves and people on official business (whether or not they worked for the government) were exempted from these restrictions. For everyone else there was always some "reason" why they weren't able to get an exit permit. They might be of military age or work at a ministry where they had access to State secrets. These restrictions made everything very difficult. Cubans in general couldn't leave the country, and each had some members of their family outside. Even communication was limited. My position of privilege allowed me to circumvent all this and see things from another perspective. I always believed that limiting travel was a serious error, not only for humanitarian reasons but also ideologically. In the context of the confrontation with imperialism limiting certain freedoms might have seemed acceptable, but this one was counterproductive. With the passage of time I came to see that other limitations were as well, including the strictures on the press and the organization of alternative political parties.





After a while Cuba's economic problems made it necessary to revisit the issue of tourism. Cubans living outside the country, who longed to visit their families, were one of the greatest potential reserves of tourists. They would not only bring much-needed revenue but also many scarce consumer articles. And so the "worms" became "butterflies." The Cuban sense of humor was always caustic and to the point. Those who had left in shame and been vilified when they did, returned to take their revenge. They stepped off the plane dressed impeccably, literally blinding in immaculate white. They came with two or three watches on each wrist and as many as five wide-brimmed hats, one over the other atop their proud heads. Each family member received a gift and the very presence of these visitors pointed up the material difference between what it was like to live in Cuba and Miami. It didn't matter that many of these returning Cubans struggled at low-paying jobs or that in order to travel they went into debt for months or even years. The important thing was to be able to return to their homeland laden with "things."

The economic situation on the island was progressing well but couldn't compete with the U.S. consumer society. This wasn't only due to the enormous difference between the United States' and Cuba's economic potentials. Socialist societies have different priorities, such as health, education, culture and sports; and are less interested in developing consumerism. Cuba, furthermore, had taken on several internationalist obligations in the 1970s (armed expeditions to Ethiopia and Angola, its support of the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua, and the revolutionary process in Grenada) that drained its material resources and had a high cost in terms of human sacrifice and lives lost.

All of this brings us to 1980 when Mariel impacted the lives of hundreds of thousands of Cubans. For years the United States had maintained policies aimed at intensifying the tensions inside Cuba. These policies included the commercial blockade, support of terrorist groups, radio and television propaganda, and also its migratory regulations. If a Cuban wanted to go legally to the United States, he or she had to go through a formal procedure at the U.S. Interests Section in Havana. Any Cuban who initiated such a process was marked as someone intending to leave. All "political confidence" in him or her was lost, which could mean anything from losing one's job to a certain social ostracism. In spite of this, many did go to the Interests Section, the office that handled U.S.-Cuban diplomatic issues, and more often than not they would be denied a visa. But if they took to the sea on a raft, hijacked a plane, or fled in any other illegal way, they were welcomed into the United States with open arms; and in less than a year obtained permanent residency: the famous "green card." It was a finely tuned strategy that generated a great deal of tension inside Cuba and a very bad image in the rest of the world.

One day, a group of Cubans broke into the Peruvian Embassy by force. They killed the Cuban policeman standing guard at the entrance. Cuba demanded the return of the criminals and when the Peruvian government refused Fidel made a drastic decision. He appeared on TV, explained what had happened, and said the Cuban government wasn't about to go on

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risking the lives of its military personnel detailed to protect foreign embassies or the shores of countries that clearly incited this sort of crime. He said that as of the following day there would be no more guard at the Peruvian Embassy; and that anyone who wanted could take refuge there. Within hours, thousands of Cubans crowded the gardens of that diplomatic site. Fidel also explained that this was an ideological struggle and he called on patriotic Cubans to demonstrate in front of the embassy. Hundreds of thousands of us marched in support of the Revolution, along the street that bordered that garden filled with refugees. Days passed and the situation grew ever more dramatic.

Then Fidel took another step. He said Cuba would do nothing to prevent illegal emigration to the United States. Anyone could come to Cuba in a boat and pick up those who wanted to leave. To this end they authorized the port of Mariel as the place where boats from the United States could dock. This unleashed a kind of collective hysteria unlike anything I'd seen. In a few weeks more than 125,000 Cubans left from Mariel. It was a varied group: those who had been waiting a long time to leave legally and those who might never really have thought about going but, faced with this sudden opportunity, decided to try their luck. The Cuban government even opened its prisons and let a good number of delinquents out. The watchword was "Let the scum leave!"

All this took place in the context of a powerful ideological campaign. The idea was to let everyone go who wanted to, and show that those who stayed were doing so because they really wanted to be there; that they consciously chose the Cuban Revolution with its quota of sacrifice and beauty. After all was said and done the revolutionary process would be strengthened. Those who left would be people it didn't make sense to retain by force. It was assumed that one of the immediate results would be a lessening of tensions around scarce consumer goods. The United States was stunned at this seemingly endless wave of immigrants and was forced to negotiate. An agreement was reached, through which the U.S. would issue 20,000 visas a year to those Cubans who solicited them at the Interests Section in Havana, and Cuba would reinstate its migratory control.

Processes like this can get out of hand. The leader announces the rules, the Party implements them, and then the whole thing takes on a life of its own; not always predictable and often ending in a combination of ideology and the crassest of human behavior. The patriotic marches took place, with their shouts of "let the scum go!" and in the process a great many opportunists emerged. There were those who had long hidden behind an orthodox hardline mask who suddenly announced they were leaving. When they heard the news, their neighbors would stand outside their houses and organize "repudiation acts," public demonstrations of contempt. They might stay there for hours or even days, shouting their disgust, throwing eggs at closed windows or painting insulting slogans on walls. The people who were leaving had to remain inside, terrified, afraid to go out, without food, often even without electricity or water. A building near ours was the scene of one such act of repudiation. From our balcony we could see several dozen people menacing and shouting; and

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a few days later we watched as policemen made their way through the crowd, picked up and shielded the people inside, and put them in police cars headed for Mariel where they would board a boat for the United States. In some cases these acts of repudiation could be explained by the anger inspired by opportunists who only days before had been the most intransigent at some meeting or other. Mostly they were simply an expression of mass intolerance raging out of control. Soon the whole thing assumed truly dangerous levels. "The masses" couldn't be contained. The Party tried to rein them in but was unable to redirect the energy. Ideology got lost in the context of the opportunity to settle an old account someone might have with someone else who was leaving. It was rumored there were even four or five deaths, people lynched by the mobs.

I heard about Party members risking their lives to help those who, terrified, had taken refuge inside their homes. It was said that Blas Roca, a member of the Politburo, had fought his way through a sea of insults to go to the aid of a neighbor. I witnessed a terrible spectacle at the CUJAE. Someone discovered a professor packing up his things. Word got out and in no time there was a crowd of several hundred people shouting at the man: a young person with Asiatic features. I approached and was overwhelmed by the horror of the situation. The professor was surrounded by eight or ten Party militants who were having a hard time protecting him from the mob; they themselves were receiving the spit and blows. An angry crowd surrounded them all, everyone shouting disgusting slogans and songs. They demanded that he leave behind the texts and notebooks he carried: "You have no right to touch that material with your filthy hands!" They forced him to wave his arms like a bird. This was a metaphorical way of insinuating that he was queer, a real insult at the time. I watched him wave his arms, head down, completely humiliated. They wanted to hit him. The incident might have become a veritable lynching, with tragic consequences. A Party official got up on another guy's shoulders and tried to calm people down. Cupping his hands, he pleaded with them to stop. He finally made himself heard and with great intelligence achieved a miracle that may have saved that professor's life. He said something like: "Comrades, let's not give arguments to our enemies! Let's show we're not like them! Let's form two disciplined lines and this traitor can walk between them, listening to us say everything on our minds; but nobody touch him! Agreed?" Everyone accepted this solution and formed a double line several hundred strong. I watched as the professor walked between them, diminished, receiving insults and gobs of spit. And so he took leave of the place where he had once worked, escorted by a couple of Party members who accompanied and protected him. His life was saved but he must have been marked forever.

I felt numb. I wrote something explaining that this whole thing was wrong and asked that it be posted on the school bulletin board so everyone could read it. The Young Communist in charge of the board read it and said if I wanted he would put it up; but he advised me not to sign my name. I took his advice. He put it up without my signature. I didn't have the courage to expose myself to the fury of those masses.





Will it one day be possible for us to resolve the contradictions between ends and means? So many have alerted us to the dangers of power! Rosa Luxemburg and Mikhail Bakunin in their day. It seems that such enormous power is required to change the social structures, and implicit is the greater danger of how one achieves those very ends sought by every liberation effort. When we attempt to learn from this cycle of revolution and defeat that characterized the twentieth century, this contradiction may be our greatest challenge.





PLAN '78

The Chilean coup was a devastating trauma. The dictatorship assassinated or disappeared thousands of Chileans. Tens of thousands were imprisoned. A powerful people's movement, and one that had inspired so many, was disarticulated and all but destroyed. Something that had seemed so solid and unstoppable, offering hope to millions of people throughout the continent and world, shattered beneath an onslaught of bayonets and the brutality of an army that brought fascism to mind.

I remember the effect the coup produced in Cuba. A numbing quiet invaded us as we watched those incredible images of the planes bombing Moneda Palace flashing across our TV screens. In Havana's Revolution Plaza hundreds of thousands of Cubans listened in silence as Fidel spoke of President Allende's final battle. He described a hero: fighting with the AK47 given him by Che, the Moneda in flames around him, defending a constitutional government against the treason of murderous generals.

Allende's last speech, transmitted by radio moments before his death, has a force and dignity that still give me chills. It ended with the words that have repeated themselves like echoes in the hearts of millions around the world: "Workers of my country: I have faith in Chile and her destiny. Others will overcome this dark and bitter hour in which treason would impose itself. Go on in the knowledge that much sooner than later the great avenues will open and a free people will pass through on their way to building a better society. Long live Chile! Long live the people! Long live the workers! These are my final words and I am sure they will be a moral lesson at least, one that will punish felony, cowardice, and treason!"

Chile became the broken hope of an entire generation. This was where they'd experimented with profound social change while at the same time retaining the greatest space for personal freedom, even expanding that space. The Popular Unity (UP) had come to government electorally; it had kept freedom of the press and assembly as well as a plurality of political parties and free elections. Until the Chilean victory all this had seemed impossible.

Cuba was the vanguard of the continent-wide revolution but it was conscious of the lim-





itations imposed by its own history. Cubans were hopeful about the Chilean experiment. Would they be able to make the Revolution with this degree of freedom? Would profound social change be possible without the powerful destroying that hope? The Cuban people weren't sure. Their history had taught them otherwise but they sincerely hoped the Chilean experiment would succeed, and they'd supported it with everything they had.

Fidel visited Chile and spent a number of days traveling the country from one end to the other. He made speeches, listened, learned; and when he came home excitedly told us what he had witnessed. He spoke, for instance, about the phenomenon of liberation theology that would later prove to be so important in Nicaragua, Salvador and elsewhere in Latin America. Up to this point Cuba had been wary of anything smacking of religion. Cuba's Catholic Church had placed itself squarely on the side of counterrevolution, and the phrase "religion is the opiate of the people" had become dogma to us. After Fidel's visit to Chile there was a greater respect for those who came to their revolutionary convictions from a position of Christian faith. Fidel was clearly moved when he said that at last he'd seen another country in the Americas taking its own destiny in its hands. Finally, there were others accompanying us on our journey.

Cuba gave Chile everything it had and more. To Chile we sent everything from sugar to professionals and arms. Allende's personal guard was composed of members of the Chilean MIR, the Chilean Socialist Party, and several Cubans. It was rumored that Colonel Tony de La Guardia was there beside Allende on September 11, helping defend his life, along with a number of other Cubans.

For its part the United States considered the Chilean process extremely dangerous. Now that the once-secret Nixon-Kissinger conversations have been made public, what we thought back then has been revealed to be true. Latin America had millions of hungry people living in abject poverty in countries with republican traditions, where a generalized education allowed for the existence of hope. Cuba had shown it was possible to attempt an independent project, even go all the way. Revolutionary movements with their goal of taking State power had emerged in almost every one of the continent's countries. Most intellectuals were part of this vast movement. Among the martyrs of those years were many poets and writers, priests, and of course thousands of young people. Many armed movements had failed. Perhaps the greatest failure, at least symbolically, had been the death of Che Guevara in Bolivia. But people refused to give up and almost every month brought some new surprise. In this context Chile seemed to signal another way.

One important thing the empire had done, and I'm not sure it was entirely conscious, was to polarize this situation until Cuba was forced to embrace the Soviet Union and thus distance itself somewhat from the local Latin American reality. Its alliance with the Soviet Union made it possible for Cuba to resist the empire and survive. The Soviets sent arms and food, technicians and oil; and its support afforded a certain degree of protection. At the same





time the alliance had repercussions within the Cuban process, strengthening those sectors linked to Soviet-style Communism to the detriment of those that were more innovative and creative. Those that, in their own triumph, had shown that another type of Socialism was possible. As a result, even as it defended itself the Cuban process became more rigid. It managed to survive with many of its original characteristics, but became as well a player in the cold war and was less able to replicate itself. Large numbers of people throughout Latin America admired the Cuban Revolution. They were proud of the fact that one of their own had been able to take its destiny in its own hands, that Cuba was capable of standing up to the all-powerful United States, that it had achieved real progress in the areas of health and education. But the path Cuba was able to offer, with its original Latin American characteristics, gradually began to fade. It became contaminated with the problems already beginning to surface in Eastern Europe.

Che Guevara's critical speeches were like desperate pleas warning of this situation. He understood the critical juncture and led the current of thought and action that pointed to another way of building Socialism in Cuba and the world. He proposed to prioritize the use of symbolic stimuli, cooperation and generosity instead of material stimuli in order to make the economy function. He understood that the use of capitalist economic mechanisms gradually destroys the essential basis of the Revolution. Che was also conscious of the need to defeat imperialism globally in order to obtain viable local victories. His conviction led to his death in 1967, demonstrating his characteristic commitment to practice what he preached. Inside Cuba those tendencies we might call guevarista began losing strength, and a few years later the country aligned itself even more solidly with the Soviet Union, on the international front as well as in terms of its own economic policy. The Cuban revolutionaries were conscious of the risks; they didn't make these decisions lightly but were pushed by circumstance. I believe this is key to understanding the entire history of the Cuban process. Under Fidel's tactical leadership these internal tendencies alternately advanced and retreated; throughout, he remained at the center. Sometimes he would support one idea, sometimes another, depending upon the internal or international balance of powers. Fidel's tremendous tactical ability, his leadership and the fact that he has lived to such an advanced age, have all been essential to the miraculous fact that only ninety miles from the empire the Cuban Revolution has survived for so long.

In spite of these discussions and even to some degree because of them, thousands of young people throughout the continent began to dream with their eyes open and embrace struggle. In Cuba they can see the first concrete results of the Revolution: flourishing literacy and culture, improvement in public health, a genuine attempt at sustainable development. Organizations and movements inspired by Cuba sprang up in every country and tried to make their own revolutions. During the 1960s most of these were guerrilla groups and almost all suffered military defeat. Many of the best young people, the most creative and generous of their generation, died in these attempts, and their feats illuminated a path many others followed. The idea of the Revolution advanced and took a different form in each country, de-

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pending on its particular traditions. The Popular Unity process in Chile in 1971 represented a new path. If it worked it would inspire new approaches in the overall social revolution Latin America so badly needed. For the first time there was the possibility of revolutionary social transformation through a democratic election instead of by force of arms. We were all watching this experiment. The empire understood the danger and acted decisively. Chile had its internal counterrevolution but this had fundamental support from the United States. Pinochet was as much a son of the empire as Somoza had been in Nicaragua, Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, Videla in Argentina, Goyo Alvarez in Uruguay: the list of dictators that left their mark across the continent during those years is a long one.

Divisions and reproaches also existed within the Chilean left. The Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR), which was the local manifestation of those tendencies that believed armed struggle was central to taking power, had given critical support to the Popular Unity government. It didn't believe profound change would be possible without a violent reaction on the part of the ruling classes. Still, it understood the importance of the process and suspended its armed actions. It offered some of its best cadre to insure President Allende's personal safety, and threw itself into grass roots organizing. The MIR remained outside the Popular Unity coalition but supported the process from the left. It grew exponentially in the context of pre-revolutionary fervor created by the Allende government. Its policy was to try to radicalize the process and take advantage of the circumstances to organize itself to be ready for the confrontation it knew would come. Some criticized this position. They even assigned the MIR some blame for the process' eventual destabilization, citing its radical slogans and great mobilizing efforts among the poor in the countryside and cities. There's no doubt that the MIR represented the radical pole of the Chilean process, but I believe that despite its differences it was an important part of that process. It established a relationship of mutual respect with President Allende. Slogans such as "Create, Create, People's Power!" or "People, Consciousness, Guns, MIR, MIR!" resonated in multitudinous demonstrations in which people sported the red and black flags that had previously flown for Cuba's 26th of July movement, and even earlier for the Anarcho-Syndicalists during Spain's Civil War.

Miguel Enríquez, who was the MIR's General Secretary, emerged as a national political figure, known for his brilliance and courage. Thousands of people joined the organization. Land takeovers in the countryside pushed the agrarian reform movement forward. Takeovers of city terrain turned miserable shantytowns into centers of political effervescence, where people lost no time in building a different future. My mother visited Chile and returned astonished by the atmosphere she'd witnessed. I remember her photographs and stories. One of her photos remains engraved in my mind. She is standing, radiant, in the middle of The New Havana,⁴¹ among impoverished shacks but breathing in the winds of social revolution. The coup hit less than a year later.

41 *The New Havana was one of the shantytowns around Santiago, with a high percentage of revolutionary participation.*





Popular Unity's defeat in Chile was also our defeat, the defeat of every revolutionary on the continent, including the Cubans. After the coup came the great Diaspora. Thousands took refuge in embassies. The Cuban embassy opened its doors and thousands of Chileans began to arrive. They came with comrades from other Latin American countries, many of whom had earlier taken refuge in Chile, escaping the military coups in their countries of origin.

A mantle of silence descended over Chile. Where there had been energy and laughter, now there was silence and death. The news reports were horrible. About many comrades we knew nothing; about others there were only a few fragmentary bits of information. Santiago's national stadium was turned into a prison camp. The songwriter Victor Jara was murdered there; his music, perhaps more than any other, had symbolized the Chilean process. They said that before they killed him they crushed his fingers. Who knows if this is literally true but symbolically there's no doubt. Many members of the leadership of all the Popular Unity parties went into exile. Hundreds went to México, Sweden, the Soviet Union, Germany, Cuba, and Venezuela, among other countries.

The MIR grew even more. In a dramatic gesture its members declared they would not seek asylum or go into exile. They reminded people that they had predicted the enemy's reaction and the urgent need to prepare a People's Resistance; and no one had listened. They pointed out that they had not been part of the government but that they would stay and fight with the people. Ricardo Ruz' verses resonated like the cries of revolutionary commitment they were: "Here I am / here I will remain / with my struggle and my people / with my dead and with my comrades / for my struggle is our struggle / I am not alone, nor am I afraid..." Ricardo Ruz would die in combat in 1979. The MIR's directorate didn't seek asylum. As the months went by Miguel Enríquez became a mythic figure leading the underground resistance. The decision not to seek asylum had enormous moral value but at a cost that may have been one of the most important causes of its eventual defeat. Each month brought news of the death of other comrades: Bautista Van Showen, el Coño Molina, Lumi Videla, Sergio Pérez. The battles were heroic but impossible. Three or four would try to defend a house surrounded by hundreds of soldiers. And so a generation's most selfless and committed young people were lost.

Years later a Cuban comrade told me an astonishing story. In the months leading up to the coup Cuba had sent arms to Chile to be used to defend the government in the event of an eventual insurrection on the part of the right. The Popular Unity didn't want to give these arms to the MIR, because it felt it couldn't control the organization. Miguel understood this and never asked for them. Many of the weapons were handed over to the Communists, Socialists and members of the other UP parties. On the day of the coup two members of the MIR leadership went to the Cuban embassy. People were already fighting in the streets so they went to ask for some of those guns. After an anguished wait they left empty-handed.

Terror quickly invaded the country and many sought asylum. The majority of those arms





that had been sent by Cuba remained unused and hidden underground. While those for whom they'd been intended went into exile, some were sold to collectors, others given away as gifts. Miguel set about recovering those weapons. From his hiding place he retrieved them one by one. He took careful note of their serial numbers and every once in a while would send Fidel a letter with the list of those he had managed to retrieve.

Miguel died in combat on October 5, 1974. His death was a terrible blow to the Chilean Resistance and for people throughout the world who were following what was happening there. With Miguel's death we lost the person capable of unifying and leading the Resistance. Later, in 1976, several other of the organization's top leaders, among them Pascal Allende and Nelson Gutiérrez, left the country after escaping an unequal combat in which Dagoberto Pérez was killed.

Chilean revolutionaries in exile began regrouping in Cuba, México, Venezuela, Holland, Sweden, France and other countries. In Cuba, in 1977, a group of young Chileans and Latin Americans had joined the MIR youth organization. What had happened in Chile had marked us all. The heroism of Miguel and his comrades was an example of abnegation and commitment. The MIR's theoretical texts had a level of sophistication that particularly attracted me. The language took me back to what I'd read in those Bolshevik documents from the Russian Revolution but reflected a contemporary reality. I believed the MIR was one of the Latin American political organizations that had gone farthest in terms of combining a profound and rational analysis with action that was decisive and courageous. All our work was in solidarity with "the front," that is to say the struggle inside Chile. We supported the comrades when they arrived, often in horrible conditions. Some came straight from prison, others escaping repression.

After an important part of the MIR's top leadership finally left Chile in 1976 a process of reorganization began; and in 1978 the decision was made to attempt a counteroffensive. The MIR's Central Committee met underground and in exile and prepared what they called Plan '78. This plan had several parts: guerrilla groups that would infiltrate different parts of rural Chile, an urban guerrilla that would begin to operate in the cities, new forms of organization capable of dealing with a repression that was both brutal and very professional. To put this plan into effect they depended upon the will of hundreds of militants in exile who would be called upon to return clandestinely. This was what we called The Plan of Return.

I look back and it's difficult for me to understand how those comrades, many of whom had already suffered prison and torture, were willing to embark once more on a project like that. It's only explicable when one thinks of the enormous energy, so present you could almost touch it. Miguel's example and that of so many others helped. The hope was that this time it might be possible to change history, that this time it would be different. Commitment, discipline, and a dose of madness came together in one explosive cocktail.





Cuba offered its complete support. Hundreds of comrades came to the island from their countries of legal exile. They trained for months, then left via sinuous paths to occupy their posts inside Chile. A discreet structure took charge of receiving and selecting these people, giving them the necessary training, then sending them to the front. One day someone should write the history of this aspect of the Chilean Resistance, with all its errors and successes. I hope whoever does will be able to transmit the energy and beauty of that generous effort.

I was still young and barely understood the profound meaning of certain events. Without asking too many questions, we knew what was going on. We were participants in that

shadowy dance. For years Cuba had engaged in internationalist support. The combatants who went to fight with Che in Congo and Bolivia were trained in Cuba; those who went to Venezuela, Nicaragua, and El Salvador as well. Cuba supported revolutionary movements in almost every Latin American country. It had even sent important contingents of troops to fight in Ethiopia and later in Angola. While all this was going on thousands of Cubans were mobilized and millions kept the secret. People would disappear from their work places and nobody asked where they'd gone. Until one day Fidel announced the presence of Cuban troops in Angola, fighting alongside Agostinho Neto's Peoples Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA).

Internationalist missions belonged to the natural order of things and we considered taking part in them a privilege. People said that to be an

internationalist was "to achieve the highest honor to which a revolutionary may aspire." And so the MIR's Plan '78, which was even closer to our hearts, had our total support. We ourselves dreamed of going. We dreamed of participating as our parents had, and doing so better if possible. For many young people of my generation in Cuba there was no question about any of this. Everything we did was part of our secret preparation for a future journey that would take us to our combat post.



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One day the MIR comrades called me to an interview at which they asked if I wanted to go to the front. I had been waiting for this for a long time and naturally said yes. They asked if I preferred the urban or rural guerrilla. I preferred the urban, which I knew was more dangerous but thought would be less physically demanding. I believed I knew my limitations. When I left that interview I was exuberant. At the age of eighteen I could hardly believe my good fortune. I imagined how things might proceed and for many days dreamed awake. I kept the secret but began preparing for my journey, selecting what I would take with me. One brilliant day, walking by the sea with my flaquita, I told her I would be leaving, perhaps soon. I told her if this should happen I wanted each of us to go on with his or her life. I wanted her to be happy and told her not to wait for me. We kissed beneath the stars of a Cuban night. We kissed on the grass along Fifth Avenue. We kissed, moved by the passion of the circumstances.

Time passed. Other friends my age also waited. It was 1978. I began my university studies. One night I received a telephone call: "We'll be by for you in an hour." I hurried to collect



a few things and stuffed them in a bag I'd already half prepared. I took a little piece of cloth my sister Ana had given me to remember her by, and some clothing. Quickly I wrote a letter to leave for Laura. I said goodbye and that I hoped she would be happy. I told her I'd loved her a lot. I said goodbye to my mother, Sarah, Ximena, and Ana. I hugged them all very tight, thinking it might be a long time before I saw them again. I

didn't think about the possibility of dying but the idea was present in some form. I was excited, nervous, happy, and trembling. Laura came home that night after I was gone.

A car arrived to pick me up. Other comrades were already in it, with their small bags. We drove for a while. The car stopped close to one of the micro brigade buildings, where I later learned a member of the MIR's leadership lived. The comrade driving the car got out and told us to wait. We sat there for a while. Finally, he came back and told us there had been a contrary order. We wouldn't be leaving for now. He dropped us at the Cabieses' apartment, high on adrenalin and with our bags packed. They'd call us again, he said. The next morning, we all went home.





There they were: Laura, my mother, Sarah, Ximena, and Ana. They had all hugged one another and cried, imagining how this would change their lives. Perhaps they were surprised that all those meetings I'd attended, and which may have seemed like young people's play to them, had suddenly turned into something real and perhaps terrible. I embraced them all. I kept my bag packed and went on with my life. When I least expected it I might receive the call again. I wanted to be ready.

Other comrades stopped studying. Why continue if in a few days or weeks they might be called up again? I decided to go on with my education until the very last minute. I didn't want to lose out on my university career because of something that might go up in smoke as had already happened once. I was fortunate to have made this decision. Each week I called the comrades to ask if there was any news and each time they told me just to wait, they'd let me know. Relax, they said, some things still have to be worked out. Finally, one day I got word that they had changed the plan: we were still young and should finish our studies. In the future the Revolution would need professionals. Our job now was to get our degrees and do well. Who made this decision? I never found out, but it changed my life and the lives of my friends. Years later, walking through the streets of Havana, my mother and I talked about that moment. I asked her if she had interceded in some way to avoid my deployment, and she was emphatic in saying no. She told me she never would have done such a thing but that if I had gone off and been killed she would never have forgiven the MIR.

Twenty-five years later I read a book about the Neltume guerrilla. This was the MIR's most important project during those years, in the context of its attempt to create a rural guerrilla force inside Chile. The comrades had worked for more than a year in very difficult conditions, building underground refuges and exploring the environs on the snow-covered terrain of southern Chile. They were discovered and many killed. Some fought to the death, their feet frozen solid. The whole guerrilla was annihilated, with Commander Paine at its head. As I read that book, describing the horror and heroism of that experience, I imagined what might have happened had I been there. It had been as good a possibility as any other. I lent the book to a friend who had shared that experience with me. He too was unable to sleep after reading it. Like me, he thought about how his own life had unfolded. Together we remembered those years and I asked if he had any idea who had made the decision that we remain in Cuba and finish our studies. He told me his parents had spoken with el Coño Villabela, a MIR leader who had been as close to him as Jaime Wheelock had been to me. He remembered a phone call from Villabela saying he should go on studying, that this was his task. This phone call was el Coño's goodbye before he left for Chile like so many others involved in Plan '78. He went back and took on the MIR's internal military leadership. He died fighting in Santiago in 1983.

Reading that book about Neltume I remembered a conversation I had years later with El Toro, one of the few survivors of that heroic experience. We were at a university cafeteria in Paris. He had escaped the disaster. Outrunning a repression that almost got him, he had

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managed to make it to Argentina. El Toro was like his name: stout and strong with a generous smile. We talked for a long time that day. For whatever reason, he had taken a liking to me. He tried to analyze what had happened, and shared his reflections. I listened as one listens to an older brother. At the end of the eighties, when the MIR ceased to exist, El Toro began working with the comrades of the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) of Peru. He was captured and went to prison in that country. Internationalist altruism often demands a terrible price. It implies total allegiance to a cause not one's own. It embodies the idea that nothing human is foreign to us. El Toro was one of those internationalists and now, so many years later, he remains in a Peruvian prison at an altitude of 12,000 feet, fighting loneliness and oblivion.

Many comrades were part of Plan '78, which lasted several years. I was a privileged witness to the experience. I was a member of the MIR but wasn't sent off at that time. I continued to do support work and to observe the process up close. Sometimes both members of a couple were called up and they had to figure out what to do about their children. This was the beginning of what we called the Homes Project. The MIR designated a number of comrades to care for the dozens of children left behind when their parents went back to Chile to fight.

The Cubans contributed a whole apartment building in Alamar. Nearby was another building full of MIR comrades; it was known as the Chileans' building. The old timers Pérez Vargas lived there with their only child who had survived; the dictatorship had assassinated or disappeared the other five. There too were the widows of Ricardo Ruz and Trosco Fuentes and the families of countless others. I remember a very good man who walked with a limp. His name was Toto and he cared for Santucho's children (the Argentinean dictatorship had murdered so many members of that family). The Cabieses also lived in that building. Their oldest daughter went out with an Argentinean named Juan Pablo. To me they seemed the perfect couple: young, beautiful, and always happy. They weren't that much older than I but already seemed like adults. When they separated I mourned for weeks. Cabieses' other daughter was la Mini; also beautiful but beyond my possibilities. She too seemed of another generation, although she couldn't have been more than a couple of years older than me.

The first building housed victims of the first repression. Would the children who lived in the second be victims of the repression to come? At the time they were simply the sons and daughters of those combatants who were leaving for the front. I always loved those children and often visited them. We would invite them out or sometimes I'd just talk to them like an older brother. Maybe I remembered my own situation years before at that camp at Santa María del Mar, when I didn't know if I would see my parents again.

Those children's parents left convinced they were doing their revolutionary duty, but it's difficult to imagine the brutal rupture they experienced. It reminded me of what I had felt when my own parents had to send me to Cuba but the situation was very different. In our case I don't think our parents ever really risked death, although during those months we





waited for them, alone, we imagined that as a possibility. In any case the goal was for all of us to reunite in Cuba as soon as possible. These comrades were leaving their children to go to fight, who knew for how long; and the possibility they wouldn't survive was very real. Some couldn't stand it and quit, but many left and returned to Chile and no few of those died in combat or in the jaws of an efficient and bloody repression. The effects on those children, of decisions made back then, surely remain today. They were innocent victims of circumstance. I imagine some of them, now adults, may one day have the strength to write about those times. Back then we were all part of the same dance. Some went off while others remained behind. The children suffered the most.

Thirty years later one can see things from a different perspective. The dead, the uprooted, the sacrifices: everything can be viewed through history's prism. If we had won, society would have considered our dead to be heroes. And I don't only think about our dead but about those of our enemy as well. Some were simple soldiers. If we had won our sacrifices would have been worth it. But we lost and defeat erased the utility of sacrifice. Or did it? It's a hard question to answer. For every victory we've achieved in the long history of people's struggle, how many defeats have we known? Without those defeats, would the victories have been possible? The very notion of victory and defeat is a slippery one. It's hard to think in terms of processes rather than ends, although that may be the only valid analysis. The process is the most important. This story isn't over yet. History continues, continues. The most terrible thing is to forget. Why is it that so few survivors write about what happened?

Many years after these events, I was talking about all this with a dear friend who was a member of the leadership of the MIR back then. He shared an image that is engraved in his memory. On one of the balconies of the Homes Project building a little girl was crying, held by some adult, her tiny hands moving back and forth in the humid and salty air of Alamar. Her mother was down below, getting into the car that would take her to her destiny. She waved goodbye to her daughter. The child screamed "Mamita, Mamita, don't go! Mamita, they're going to kill you!" The mother began to cry, and in one superhuman effort climbed into the car and disappeared. Is it possible to imagine that sort of sacrifice? Hundreds of comrades had the same experience. Each one of them gave all they had, with total generosity and maybe also with a tremendous lack of consciousness. That little girl knew exactly what would happen. Did her mother?

My decision not to stop studying until the last minute saved me from losing a semester or even a year of university. Other comrades made different choices. They quit school, believing they would be going off soon, and some never finished their careers. Some of them were eventually called up and began training. Soon afterwards the insurrection exploded in Nicaragua and thousands of Latin Americans went there to fight just as, in the 1930s, people from all over the world had joined the International Brigades that went to Spain to combat fascism.





The MIR decided to send a group of combatants who were training in Cuba to Nicaragua. Some of my friends were part of that decision and participated in that war, launched by an entire population that ended up ousting the Somoza dictatorship. Meanwhile I studied as hard as I could, and envied them. I did my best. I wanted to be useful and devoted myself to preparing for that. Each of us had our task. Back then that's what I called destiny.

One important piece of the MIR's revolutionary project was what we called Radio Liberation. This is where I ended up. With other comrades I designed and built the small modules that would be used to interfere with commercial radio in Chile, thereby launching our messages of rebellion and hope. The idea was to construct hundreds of little low-powered transmitters, and teach other comrades how to operate and distribute them throughout the country. The transmitters functioned on the VHF band.⁴² One had to locate the commercial station's antenna, generally situated at altitude and with a strong beam. The action consisted in interfering this beam, by virtue of the fact that in certain areas one could reach the surrounding buildings with a strength that was locally greater than that put out by the commercial antenna. If we were successful the radios in the area would pick up our proclamations, which totally replaced the commercial broadcast.

Another method, which was a little riskier, was to interfere with the link between the studio and the antenna itself. In this way we could use the full strength of the commercial station to get our message on the air. But this method required a physical study of the terrain and a plan that allowed the operatives to escape before they were caught. The enemy had its own method of pin-pointing the place of interference so some danger was involved.

I was passionate about this project. I studied antennas, radio waves, radio frequency amplifiers. I wrote technical and operating manuals. I helped design and build equipment. One of my jobs was to train future combatants in setting up and running the transmitters. I gave intensive courses. When they got to Chile and arrived at the zone of operations the comrades had to be able to get the proclamations on the air. These were some of my first teaching experiences. I had to figure out how to transmit these concepts to people who had no technical background.

In July of 1983 I graduated with a degree in telecommunications engineering. At that point the movement asked me to go to France and work in the rearguard. In that country I would continue to work in the area of technical support, and from there I would periodically go on missions inside Chile. I asked Laura if she wanted to come with me, and she said yes. It had been five years since we'd started our relationship and three since we lived together. We'd never thought about marrying. We didn't think it was important, maybe not even possible; but when we began talking seriously about going to France, Laura suggested it. She said her grandmothers would feel better about our being together. And so we got married one

⁴² A band of electromagnetic frequency that goes from 30 to 300 megahertz. Commercial radio stations that use modulated frequency (FM) broadcast on one part of this band. Many radio links that connect different stations with their antenna towers do as well.





morning in Alamar. We did so surrounded by good friends and before a sympathetic female judge who allowed herself a joke when the formal part of the ceremony was over. In line with the Family Code, approved just a few years earlier by the entire population of Cuba, we had promised mutual support and to share domestic duties and childcare. As the judge handed me the certificate she said: "So here's your title to the property!" Afterwards we all went to the beach, and that night family and friends shared a meal at a local restaurant. My mother had come from Nicaragua, and Laura's father from México. The following Monday I left, and a couple of months later my *flaquita* joined me in Paris.

This is how, in that dance of shadows that was Plan '78, I ended up in France. I assumed my post with discipline and a sense of satisfaction. At first we lived in a house that belonged to the organization. I worked all the time and had almost no contact with French society. My mind and heart were in Latin America. I had always somehow believed in my own Plan of Return. But return to what? To Latin America, that continent I felt such a part of. To that world which was so diverse, and yet whose peoples had so much in common with one another. Years before, in Cuba, a comrade had asked me the obvious question: how was it that I was so devoted to the struggle in Chile, a country to which I'd never been? To me all of Latin America was of a piece: a continuous territory that went from the Río Grande to Patagonia. I had no images of my own to go with its cities or countryside so I filled the imagined terrain with invented pictures. And my friends were those I had made in the struggle rather than in my childhood as we played in the neighborhood or at school.

We got to France in 1983 and for several years I was a full-time political cadre. On a number of occasions, I traveled to Chile where I played a modest part in the collective effort to defeat Pinochet and his dictatorship. In each small task I remembered, as if they were witnesses to my commitment, those comrades I had watched pass through Cuba on their way to the front. I felt that those who had left their children behind were watching. One day we had to break into the beam of a station that transmitted from the top of San Cristóbal hill in Santiago. There were families picnicking with their children. We got close to the huge antenna and remained there for the few minutes the procedure took. Then we got into our little Citroneta and went back down as quickly as we could, hoping they wouldn't have blocked the only exit to the park. Someone should also write the history of Radio Liberation, the heroism of those who made the project possible. Several died in that undertaking. My task was mostly support.

Years have passed. The MIR was defeated although its continuous struggle to keep the flame of rebellion burning contributed to the defeat of the Pinochet dictatorship. Hundreds of comrades died in that effort and I want to believe their generous commitment will be remembered. I hope today's young people will try to decipher their dreams, learn from them, follow them. It was a bitter defeat and the MIR I knew no longer exists. It had been a product of its time and died with it.





Those of us who had a part in that history recycled ourselves as we could in order to go on living. Almost all my friends from that period continue to have the same ideas and an ideological cohesion in their daily lives that fills me with pride. But it was hard to learn to walk alone, without either the organization or the project that had been at the center of our lives for so long. Each of us encountered problems as we remade our lives. Fortunately for me I had Laura at my side; she kept me connected to everyday life. She was my link to the world. With her support I decided to go back to school. I got my doctorate and the university became my field of action. This led to the next chapter in my life.

Laura and I lived in France for many years. There we grew, had our children, studied. But we always remained connected to Latin America. We were always thinking about our return. I in particular was stuck on this idea: to return, return. Our French friends wondered if I was crazy. What do you want to return to? All the years we were in France we never bought a single piece of furniture. Our roots weren't there. And eleven years later we finally moved to Uruguay. That's when we discovered our roots. France was part of our lives, part of our history. Nostalgia made us love it more. Little by little the word return took on a different meaning.

One day in 1994 we "returned." Cuba had occurred to us as a possible destination, but no one in either of our families was any longer there. We thought about México where Sarah and Ximena lived. But after mulling it over for a while we chose Uruguay. Laura's whole family was there and the University of the Republic offered me a professorship. Enthusiastically I began to work. I wanted to contribute to a different future for our Latin American nations. For me the journey had one great continuity, from the years in Cuba to my current options. Uruguay made it all possible. My life followed an Ariadne thread that would keep on weaving its fabric with everything in place. None of my university colleagues knew about my past life nor was it necessary for them to know. Deep inside I knew I was continuing on the same journey as always.





GOING BACK IN 2003

In 2003 I visited Cuba after an absence of twenty years. It was a very intense journey, which I embarked upon with some degree of trepidation. After that long a time away, I was afraid I would find something very different from what I remembered. So much had happened in the interim. Cuba struggled to survive economically and to this end had ceded some territory with regard to many of its original ideas. It had opened up to foreign capital, allowed some small businesses to be privately owned once again; and tourism flourished with its byproducts of prostitution and social exclusion. Every so often, Fidel explained all this in one of his speeches. People understood, and the economic arguments convinced the most recalcitrant. I followed the news from afar, and discussed what was happening with my friends. For years I lived in Paris where, in spite of the austerity of my life as a political militant, I felt privileged not to be suffering Cuba's everyday privations. This made me wary of criticizing what the Cubans were doing to survive. At the same time, the nature of my activities throughout the eighties kept me somewhat isolated from the real world. When the MIR was defeated I reentered "normal" life, and was surprised when I realized I didn't know how to use a credit card, in spite of having lived in France during the latter part of the eighties. And so my perception of what was going on in Cuba was affected by my own unique experience during that time. I felt that under Fidel's leadership Cuba was processing its own transition to Capitalism. Capitalism with a Social Democratic veneer, in which the Revolution was trying to preserve some of its symbolic achievements, but Capitalism all the same. I had a profound respect for the Cubans and their leaders, and I'd learned to try to see things in historic perspective, so I simply assumed all this was the result of history as it unfolded and not due to errors or betrayals. Cuba stood alone in the world in this phase of generalized revolutionary retreat, and this was the only way it could survive.

In 1989 General Ochoa, Tony de La Guardia and two of their assistants were executed after a trial that seemed to me to have been a complete farce. To a great extent, Ochoa and La Guardia symbolized the Cuban revolutionaries who for thirty years had fought on the internationalist fronts that characterized Cuba's foreign policy up to that time. To me their deaths symbolized the end of the Revolution. A mother had eaten her own children, and had done so in a macabre way, with a show of force I had no doubt could be traced to Fidel.

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The Soviet Union ceased to exist; Cuba entered the so-called Special Period in Time of Peace, a war economy invented to deal with the new situation. Through those years, they were able to keep some of the Revolution's basic achievements in place (general access to health and education, for example) but at the cost of hardship that made the eighties seem like an era of abundance. In the seventies, when someone talked about "before," he or she was talking about before the Revolution. In the nineties they meant before the Special Period.

I continued to feel like a Cuban, moved by and suffering for Cuba, remembering. But inside, a fear of going back was growing. On the one hand, I had severe criticisms, and as a "Cuban" I felt I had the right to make them. On the other, I had lived outside the country all that time, I hadn't suffered the privations or made the sacrifices of those who'd stayed; and I felt that this took away a certain moral right to publicly criticize.

At the beginning of the nineties, when we decided to return to live in Latin America, Laura and I had discussed the possibility of going back to Cuba. It attracted us a great deal; we'd had many of our best years there. But we felt that a lot had changed. Cuba had changed, and we had changed as well. I remember telling her: "If we go back now, I'll be in prison in no time." We finally decided to move to Uruguay. Laura's family was there, and I was offered a position at the university. My own family was scattered around the world. When I got to Montevideo I was surprised by how extraordinarily similar it was to Havana: the layout of its neighborhoods, the rambla or sea walk that ran along the coast, and its general ambience. I'm still surprised each time I get on a bus and see pictures of Che and Fidel.

In time, my work at the university put me in contact with Cuban colleagues. On a number of occasions, they invited me to visit, but I was still gripped by the fear of discovering how the country had changed. At last, in 2003, I decided to go. Twenty years had passed since I'd left.

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It's a short flight from México but from the moment I get on the plane it feels as if I am entering a time tunnel. My seat mate is a young Cuban woman, on her way home. We begin to talk and she tells me she was selected "exemplary worker" and, along with a number of others, was awarded a 15-day trip to México. She speaks about her children, and says she lives in Moa. I can't believe it. It is as if someone has dished up a salad of memories especially for my arrival. Soon the island rises in my window. From that moment on it's all one big whirlwind, hard to explain. My fear of "the unknown" gives way to a mixture of excitement and joy. Images bringing me back twenty years crash together in a kind of emotional shock. Still aboard the plane, heat spreads through my body. When I step onto solid ground I feel I have come home, that I am reconnecting with something I have long since let slip through my hands. We had flown over Pinar del Río and I'd recognized Viñales Valley, with its rock

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formations and tropical green. A memory flash brings back a brief stay at a hotel in Saroa, where Laura and I and Ivelisse and Pedro once spent a few days. I recognize the Cuban countryside, covered with fields of crops and small dams and every now and then a “school in the countryside” with its typical architecture. I close my eyes and think of Puerto Rico, where I’d been just a few months before. A phrase sounds in my ears: “Cuba and Puerto Rico are two wings of the same bird.” The turquoise blue sea in this part of the world is the same, but within each of these two countries things are very different. Flying over Puerto Rico, I had noticed the barren hillsides and unused land. Puerto Ricans have petrochemical plants, and import all their food from the United States. In Cuba one has the impression there’s not an inch of fallow land.

The airport itself is my first surprise. This isn’t the old airport from which I’d flown off twenty years before, but a new and modern one, with graceful lines, lots of glass, escalators—more like a shopping center. They treat me very well; I’m not even asked to open my suitcase as I go through customs. Emerging onto the street, I see few signs of police presence. A tranquil atmosphere. A friend picks me up and I find myself traveling back through time. We take the modern highway, in good condition, that links the airport with the CUJAE. We pass neighborhoods of micro brigade buildings that look much the same as they did in my era, almost as if they’ve received no maintenance at all. We drive through other neighborhoods, poor but clean. Not many people are out in the streets on this Sunday afternoon. I begin to feel melancholic. I recognize things: that remembered mix of modesty and dignity, almost no commercial advertising. Once in a while a sign with a slogan on it. A large one of these proclaims: “This is a Revolution of Ideas!”

I spend one whole day at the CUJAE. The same buildings: that architecture that still impresses me with its excellent design. The ample spaces where one can gather in the shade of lush trees that create welcoming corners. The gardens are well tended, the lawns recently cut. Everywhere I look people are weeding and caring for the flower beds. The open walkways are clean too, with people wiping spider webs from the ceilings, and sweeping the leaves. On those paths, or on the benches of the “paso de los vientos” or the Plaza Ampere, I come across groups of young people studying or talking quietly. I recognize the same bulletin boards and the same jacaranda trees, with their violet flowers whose high branches I used to see from my classroom window. I visit some classrooms. I feel as if I am submerged in an ocean of memories. I come upon places where I once waited for la flaca so we could share our lunch. Places where I debated or loved, studied and learned.

Along with the cleanliness, silence, and young life, I also notice the wear of age and dilapidation of the buildings: broken windows, shabby balconies. And window bars everywhere. Bars that didn’t exist when I was here. Evidence of the Special Period of the 1990s, when the economic crisis encouraged theft and criminality at previously unimaginable levels. My friends tell me there is less theft now, and the meager police presence seems to bear this out. But it isn’t just the bars. The taboo against petty crime has been broken.

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I look for some of my old professors and find Carmen Moliner who was Dean when I was here. Now she is a professor of telecommunications and networks. She has a small desk in a very modest space shared with five or six others. She remembers me: “Oh man, you put me through a lot! You were absent more than the rules allowed, and I always had to make excuses for you...” We talk for a while. Then I go off to see if I can find Albín Salas, but he’s teaching a class. I look for Marante, but am told he is in Colombia for a few months. I stick my head into several empty, darkened, classrooms that smell of antiquity. Outdated equipment lays about on the tables, apparently no longer in use. It’s not an atmosphere of academic work. It seems the learning process is focused more on the classroom and less on research or creativity. I feel old and sad.

A professor recognizes me. It’s Oscar, who taught radio receptors and television. “Coño, Randall, is that you?” I talk with him a while, and with a group of others who happen to be in the room. Before I know it, I’m telling them about how the Latin American university system works—product of the Córdoba reform—and about my own University of the Republic in Uruguay. I talk about co-governance and autonomy.⁴³ They look at me with astonishment in their eyes, dreaming perhaps. They don’t understand how something like that can function, are amazed by the system of credits, flexible curriculum, and the fact that the university is open to anyone who wants to study. In Cuba, admittance to the university is still limited by quotas. I describe the educational power of a democratic university, and its efficiency in certain areas. I feel a mix of gratitude and embarrassment, emotion and sorrow.

I ask if I can sit down at a computer and connect to my account in Uruguay, but that’s not possible. Email and navigating the Net are all that are available; you can’t establish a direct link to a computer in another country. The old obsession with control limits this type of communication. Lack of confidence in the people is like a hydra that goes about destroying so much potential!

How can one fail to think about the constructive importance of the future of university co-governance? How can one not understand the way it fortifies democracy and the future of the country? How can one not dream about a co-governed university in Cuba? Dreams, dreams... And yet this may be the only solution to the Revolution’s continuity. It is interesting to examine the contradictions, to realize that the university in Uruguay lacks so much of what Cuba has had for so long, and that Cuba doesn’t have what is so commonplace in Uruguay! All these ideas swirl about in my head as I sit on a bench in front of the School of Architecture, as if I am once again waiting for my flaquita to get out of class. I explore the

43 *Uruguay’s University of the Republic is one of the purest examples of the Latin American university system, born in the Córdoba Reform. It is entirely governed by professors, students, and alumni. All the authorities, including the president, are democratically elected by these three bodies. The students have a great amount of power. Although it is a publicly funded institution, the government has almost no say in university decisions. The university has a high level of social commitment.*





places we walked together, the exuberant foliage that embraced us, the cafeteria where we sometimes ate.

That same afternoon I walk along 23rd Street. I go into the Ministry of Higher Education and asked for Popi. I give my name to the receptionist, a seemingly ageless black woman. She tells me to wait. An army officer, who is also waiting for someone, strikes up a conversation. With genuine interest he asks me where I'm from and wants to know what I think about Cuba. All of a sudden the elevator doors open and there's Popi. He hasn't changed since he taught those microprocessing classes at six in the morning twenty-five years before. "Coño, Randall!" And he opens his arms to hug me. "Come on, kid!" He tells me to leave some identification at reception, gets me a visitor's card, and up we go to his office. He has risen to a high position: advisor to the Minister of Higher Education. We talk for a half hour. He asks a lot of questions about my university and my life. We exchange addresses. The Minister is waiting for him in the next room so there's no more time. That half hour infuses me with energy.

I call Adela, who was one of Laura's best friends. They studied architecture together. Her partner Juan also studied engineering. During our years at the ISPJAE, we often double-dated. Adela is from a family with a revolutionary background. Her parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles all participated in the war of liberation, and kept up their Communist Party membership. Twenty years have passed since we've been in touch, and I'm eager to make contact. Adela immediately recognizes my voice on the phone. She sounds excited and asks about Laura. When I ask about her partner, her voice changes and she says: "Oh, Goyo, you don't know what we've been through. Juan is in prison." I can't believe what I'm hearing. I tell her I'll be right over, and head straight for their apartment. It's a very beautiful place, in Vedado. There is my old friend, slim as I remember. She welcomes me into their living room, along with her son and his girlfriend. The boy knows about us. They've spoken of us and despite those twenty years—his whole life—we exist for him. Then Adela tells me her story. Throughout these years they've worked in several different countries, but have been back in Cuba for some time. Juan was a Party member, and manager of a company. At a certain point he accepted kickbacks. But then the Party decided to launch a campaign against corruption and, as was usual in Cuba, the leadership suffered the heaviest punishment. Juan received a six-year sentence, of which he has served a year in very rough conditions. He lives in a dorm with other common criminals, and works in the fields. The food is poor and scant. Adela almost cries as she tells me he only weighs 110 pounds, it isn't right for him to be there. Many of the other prisoners are murderers, and he risks his life every day. "He's sick right now," she says, "so they have him nearby, at the Fajardo Hospital."

I listen in silence, with a strange mix of emotions. I am sorry for my friend, and at the same time glad that in Cuba they still punish corruption, even when practiced by someone of the "upper classes," and more so when it's a Party member. When I ask, as gently as possible, what made Juan take kickbacks, she says there's no way I can understand what things have

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gotten to be like. “Oh, Goyo, this has all changed so much! You can’t survive without doing something illegal.”

After a while Adela excuses herself. She has made some food for Juan, and wants to take it over to the hospital. She says she’ll be gone for a while, but I can make myself at home with her son and his girlfriend. So there we are, the three of us. The son is today’s typical young man: someone you might expect to find in Cuba or anywhere in the world. He is tall and seems somewhat rebellious, with long hair and jeans. When I ask what he thinks of life in Cuba, he quickly shows his dissatisfaction with anything smacking of revolution. All he wants is freedom, he says. He is angry about his father being in prison, and can’t say anything positive about the revolutionary process. I ask what he’s doing. He responds quite naturally that he is studying music at the National Art Institute. I say I’d like to hear his music and his face lights up. He calls his best friend, and in a few minutes the four of us are in a room at the back of the apartment. The centerpiece of his studio is a computer with a music editing program. Records and photographs of artists are everywhere. They regale me with a private concert. The two young men play the guitar, and show me their latest compositions. This is rock music with very political lyrics: a hunger for freedom and clear rejection of the regime. I am surprised when he tells me they play his music in a few cafés, places where some of the young alternative bands perform. When I lived in Cuba this wouldn’t have been permitted. They ask me to listen to the songs on their “new CD,” and I ask what they mean. I am sure this music can’t be recorded in Cuba. “Why?” they ask, obviously surprised. They explain that in fact it isn’t so easy to record in Cuba, not because of any ideological censorship but rather because the studios want stuff with commercial value, not ideas. “All they’re interested in is money. All they publish is dance music, or music that sells.” I feel like I am listening to a rebellious young musician anywhere in the Capitalist world. I ask them who their favorite singer songwriters are and they mention Joan Manuel Serrat. I feel a deep spiritual connection with these two young men. I feel that if I were their age, I might be one of them. Precisely because I feel like a Cuban revolutionary.

Time passes and Adela returns. I hear her coming down the long hall. She tells me that Juan was very happy to hear about us, and she gives me a note he’s written to me in his hospital bed. Then she tells me how to let myself out. She’s invited the soldier, who guards Juan, home for a cup of coffee. “He’s not going to escape,” she’s told him, “come and have some coffee.” The soldier is in the living room, and she prefers he not hear my foreign accent. I say goodbye in the studio, go back through the living room and gesture so long to the soldier. Going down in the elevator, I feel a little dizzy from this concentrated dose of Cuban reality. Out on the street once more, beneath the radiant Caribbean sun, I open the note Juan sent. His hand-written message is concise but gentle. He says it has made him very happy to have news of us, to know we are “still the same,” and that he hopes our paths will cross again in better circumstances. The final paragraph is a strange mixture of bitterness and optimism: “I would love to be able to explain in person many things about this country. Don’t be fooled. All that we wanted to paint with beautiful colors in the seventies they’ve made impossible.





They've painted it gray, there's nothing to be done, and it's not going to change for a while."

I walk along 23rd Street to the Havana Libre and Coppelia. There are groups of people at the bus stops and parks. The statue of Quijote surprises me, even though it's exactly where it's always been. I don't expect it and my memory does a somersault. Just as when I lived here, so many years before, I like it a lot. I ask myself if reality is out there, or if we invent it as we go along. I walk the streets of Vedado. The neighborhood has a variety of houses. Some are old and broken down, and seem as if invisible strings keep them miraculously standing; every once in a while there's one that has been newly painted. The streets are clean, the parks well-tended, the grass cut, and people are painting the park benches. I'm told they've decided to repair many of Havana's tall buildings, now in very bad condition. Years and years without maintenance, followed by the Special Period, has left the city in ruins. Everywhere buildings and houses are falling apart. Salt air has corroded railings and grillwork. It's impossible to understand how the electrical installations keep on working, or at least this is what one thinks as one rides an elevator or presses an intercommunication button, wondering if one's voice is going anywhere or simply being swallowed up.

In the midst of all this general degradation a few signs of renovation appear. After the worst years of the crisis (1990 to 1994), and a few more of stagnation, the economy is beginning to grow. And so they've decided to begin a few new projects, such as repairing and painting schools and hospitals. As I walk along, I notice the results of this decision, and find myself constantly thinking about the rest of the continent. How does a country respond to a crisis of this magnitude? It's here that I sense a continuity with the years of my youth. It's clear that health and education continue to be priorities. The very ambiance is imbued with the sense that in each new circumstance "someone" makes a series of decisions clearly based on real needs. For years housing is in disrepair, and when there's finally enough money to begin some sort of restoration, all the schools and all the hospitals come first. Who makes this decision? Is it Fidel, or the Party, or maybe even Peoples Power with its neighborhood assemblies? Who knows? I am no longer used to phrases beginning with the words "It has been decided that..." The phrase with which people explain what's happening here.

I'm surprised by the powerful presence of private property. When I lived in Cuba one rarely saw the office of some foreign company; and private enterprises owned by Cubans were limited to farmer's markets, taxi drivers, and a handful of artisans (locksmiths, carpenters, etc.). Now the city's main streets are filled with small stores selling all sorts of things: sandwiches and cake, banana chips, hamburgers, soda pop, ice cream, pizzas. There are money-changers, used book stalls, crafts, barber shops, food stuffs, toiletries, clothing...

People seem calm, maybe too calm. I don't see many police, but people seem a bit sad, perhaps tired or resigned, or simply pensive. The joy so prevalent in my youth, those eyes I remember filled with life and future, the everyday music and movement are no longer here. At least I don't perceive them. But the ability to communicate, the openness and generosity

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still exist. The bus stops overflow with crowds of people, sometimes waiting in long lines. Cars stop at the corners or at the traffic lights, and many hands reach out asking for a ride. Half the vehicles take one or two or three people: "Are you going to 25th?" The door opens. In some places traffic inspectors stop official cars and ask them to take people waiting for a bus.

I turn into our old building and take a look at the parking lot in back. I don't know how, but the elevator still seems to be working. Disrepair has also landed here, as it has in every corner of this city. I get off on the fourth floor. Plants and doors and bars and multiple locks. I ring the bell. Silence. I get back into the elevator and go up to the tenth; I knock and Ambrosio answers. I tell him who I am, and the smile and embrace are immediate. I spend three hours with him and his wife Silvia, talking about all sorts of things: Our America and Cuba, life, the Special Period, their sons, my family. A warm and lovely visit. We promise to see one another again. They still support the Revolution, but a phrase leaves me thinking: "After all is said and done, our destiny is still determined by the United States: if we're a colony, we're a colony; and if we're independent, our policies are still in opposition to..." We talk about the possibility of a war of aggression, and the fear that this engenders.

When I ask about the neighbors I find that with the exception of our apartment everyone else is still here. This produces a strange sense of immobility.

I visit Roberto in his second floor apartment. We talk about family, the world, and inevitably Cuba. Here is my old tutor, giving me his analysis of these twenty years. He talks about how the end of an era proved also to be the shattering of a crystal urn, like an ideological gasp. He tells me sixty percent of the population makes do by taking advantage of one or more of the different options offered by today's economy: the possibility of working for oneself by opening a small restaurant or selling something in the streets, driving a taxi, some small agricultural project, or renting a room. Others work for the mixed enterprises that are so prevalent now, or in the tourist sector where a gratuity in hard currency may be worth a whole month's salary in Cuban pesos. Still, he says, there's a considerable percentage of the population that lives in poverty. He recommends that I read a magazine called *Temas*, which has become a place where





Cuban intellectuals discuss these issues. There are articles on the economy, on politics and ideology. Corruption is openly discussed these days, as is marginality and racism. Many of the chains that once restricted thought have been broken. The crisis has brought with it a flowering of discussion. We talk about what will happen when Fidel dies—the always latent question—and I’m surprised, as I have been talking with others, that people are quite calm when they speak of this inevitability.

I want to visit our old apartment on the ninth floor, and we get back in the elevator. The woman who lives there now rents rooms to tourists. She has fixed the place up; it looks beautiful. She invites us in. She already knows about me; the news has spread along the block and she is more or less waiting for me to knock on the door. She offers me a cup of coffee, that intense and friendly Cuban coffee that always seems at the ready, I don’t know how. Being in our old house is like a dream. I look out the terrace windows toward the sea, and at the old North Vietnamese embassy where I once tried to learn that country’s language. From this very window, I watched the young Vietnamese women with their long hair who once filled my fantasies. On this terrace I remember a photograph in which Robert and I have our arms around each other. I can’t find the little garden Antonio built in the corner. Almost the only things unchanged are the wooden windows between the terrace and living room. Neither the furnishings nor posters are still here. They’ve torn down the wall between the dining room and the terrace, opening up that communal space. Everything is freshly painted and well cared for. Outside the city seems in shambles, but it’s warm and inviting in here.

We talk for a while. Some people are upset by Fidel’s internationalist projects which seem for them exaggerated in the context of the country’s painful economic conditions. People tell me about the Latin American School, where 5,000 students from other parts of the continent study medicine. This is a gift Cuba wants to give her brothers and sisters. Those 5,000 students enjoy free room and board as well as their complete medical training. At the hospitals there are so many students it’s sometimes difficult to attend to them all. The neighborhood polyclinics and hospitals serve the population with fewer doctors, because several thousand have gone off to work in Venezuela. When that country’s name is mentioned people look hopeful; they feel they might finally have an ally in the region, another revolutionary process capable of advancing the utopia. Is the effort worth this sacrifice? People say when those medical students finish their studies they’ll go back to their countries, forget Cuba. “Maybe they’ll just be interested in earning money.” People make these predictions with a certain shame, as if it’s wrong to criticize an altruistic gesture. All these years so much energy went to Angola, Ethiopia, Algeria, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Chile, and so many other countries. So much energy and so many lives! This is a country where the people have been educated in the idea of internationalism, they’ve internalized it and given what little they’ve had. Now so much of that dream has gone up in smoke. The nations they helped often turned out to be different from what they expected, or betrayed the cause for which they fought, or were defeated, or simply disappeared ingloriously. Is it worth it to give

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and give and give, while inside Cuba people are living at the limits of their endurance? It's a question that keeps coming up.

Down the block I pay a visit to Maza. The old man welcomes me into his humble apartment. He's almost eighty-seven now and tells me with pride he's still the president of the CDR; he's had the job for forty-one years. A photo of Fidel adorns one shabby wall. He points to the TV thundering in his living room; the neighbors got together to give it to him on his fortieth anniversary as Committee head. He looks the same, but without his Helena who has been gone now for several years. He seems very much alone. But his memory is intact. He not only recites the names of everyone in our family, but hundreds of details as well. He speaks eloquently of the years that have passed, and yearns for those we shared: more combative, more collective... His grandchildren make their appearance: one little pionera and a young man of seventeen. Every few moments he tells me how happy he is. I feel so tender toward the old man.

As I walk through Vedado, I relive my past. I see people playing dominoes on the corners, young men and women sitting on the low walls, housewives talking in the entryways. Cubans continue living with their doors open, in spite of the metal bars imposed by the Special Period. I see groups of young kids in uniform. Those trees that impressed me so as a child, the ones with the huge trunks made up of branches and roots intertwined and forming intricate labyrinths, their foliage filled with birds, are still there, on every block, giving shade and greeting the passerby. You curse the pot holes and broken pavement, the pools of stagnant water, but those trees calm and caress you. They are so beautiful. Their shade lends intimacy and wellbeing to a broken landscape. Among the trees the women of the neighborhood keep on sweeping. I can't situate myself here now. Something huge has changed in me. I can't imagine living here, and yet I see myself, natural and integrated, in several memories of years gone by. Everything seems so simple and so broken and so soft and so strong! I keep on walking, aimlessly now. How much do I owe this country and these people? Who would I be now, had I stayed? Which paths converge in a single person's life and which converge in everyone's? How can we build a better world? I feel like what I am seeing is what we are, although we don't know it, somehow we... My journey turns into a river of emotions, contradictions, life. At some point I understand that I really couldn't live here, wouldn't be able to stand someone trying to control my life, limit the information to which I have access, decide for me... A moment later I realize that I am one among many. I feel like the person I was twenty years before, easily coexisting with those things that the me from outside finds absurd, and deeply enjoying those things that seem impossible utopias to the me from outside, and which in this country quite simply exist.

One night I meet with a group of old friends. The conversation naturally turns to one of the topics of the day: the new educational reform. Everyone is talking about it. The Special Period left many scars, not only material and ideological. The hardship and difficulties produced a generation of young people much less prepared than we were. Students learned or they





didn't, teachers often didn't make it to school, transportation was faulty, and there was little with which to work. Survival was the priority. A large number of teachers and professors left the country; others left their professions to work in the tourist sector, where they earn more. Some time back, and in the context of an upturn that may signal the beginning of a better economic situation, Fidel decided to launch an educational reform. He wanted to make up for lost time, and perhaps also make a big leap forward. The whole thing seems symbolic to me of the Cuban Revolution, with its genuinely humanist ideas and enormous voluntarism that so often brings unexpected consequences. The reform is composed of several parts: renovation of all the broken down school buildings, construction of more classrooms so that no grade school class has more than twenty students and no middle school class more than fifteen, a TV in every classroom with an educational channel that broadcasts all day long, and the highest level professors preparing and teaching those television classes



(for example, my friend Roberto). The ideas seem interesting, but the problem is there aren't enough teachers and professors to fill the need. The solution is the so-called emergent teachers. These are fifteen-year-olds who have completed middle school and take a six-month course to prepare them to teach groups of twenty elementary

school students. These teachers will take their students through their entire grade school experience. Many theoretical classes will be on TV; others will be the teacher's responsibility. These young people will learn to be teachers as they teach. They'll be mentored by an experienced teacher, when one is available. These fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds are products of the Special Period, and often they themselves know almost nothing. My friends regale me with anecdotes. One friend's daughter has a teacher who told her: "Divide the words into syllables," or congratulated her with a comment in her notebook that read: "continuu lik that." There are other aspects to the program: in middle school there's a single teacher for all subjects. This seems crazy to me. How is it possible for one person to teach mathematics and literature, and do a good job at both? They've decided to eliminate the middle school *becas* and make them obligatory in high school, so everyone who goes to the university will have spent three years in the countryside between the ages of fifteen and seventeen. Many don't want this, but there's only one high school in the city and it's for kids with certified health problems. Still, the institutes for training mid-level technicians are in the city, and they're not *becas*. Because of this, many kids are choosing technician's training over university. The

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results are unpredictable, and I don't think anyone really knows how all this will turn out. The best students aren't going on to the university but getting mid-level technician's training instead: as mechanics, lathe operators, electricians, brick-layers. The most ambitious hope to be able to do a university degree later in the evenings.

As is to be expected in this revolution rich in embellishments, there are adornments as well: classrooms out in the countryside with PCs and TVs, even though they may have a single student (it seems there are twenty-five schools in this situation). A friend proudly tells me about the solar panels that will provide energy to run those mythical PCs and TVs.

I talk about all this everywhere I go. Some think it's the only way to get out of the current dilemma, and note that it worked in the past. I remember the Pedagogical Detachment when I was there, and our sixteen-year-old teachers who lived with us, their students who were thirteen and fourteen. I remember the unrequited crushes, the classes, the efforts at maintaining discipline. I tell myself, after all, it didn't turn out that badly. But how many times can this sort of solution be the answer? How much does it cost, in human terms? How much does the moment and atmosphere influence it all?

Another day I go out with Martín, a sociologist and friend of many years. I remember a conversation we had in Paris in 1993, and his calm conviction that Cuba would make it through the Special Period. The world we had dreamed of was crumbling around us, the impossible had occurred, and as if by magic the Cuban Revolution was still standing. The gross national product had fallen by thirty-five percent, and the country's entire commercial infrastructure had imploded. Industries couldn't produce because of a lack of raw materials, or because their technologies were outdated (built to the specifications of replacement parts produced by the now nonexistent Socialist countries). Shortly before we had witnessed the end of a few dreams: the Sandinista Revolution sinking into a swamp no one could have predicted and the end of the Socialist world that had seemed so invincible. The manipulated images of the Gulf War or the fall of Ceausescu in Romania had convinced us it was better just to turn off our TVs. On our continent the hope of revolution had faded in post-dictatorial transition arrangements, or in peace accords established to try to save what could be saved. I continued to move along the same old track with a kind of dogged determination, a profound but almost mystical conviction stuck in my craw. And then Martín appeared: calm and sure. He'd told incredible stories of hardship: of himself on a bicycle going from church to church in search of a certain medication for a respiratory infection, or about his dual jobs as a social scientist and rabbit farmer in his own backyard. And then, in the same breath, he would tell me how they hoped to emerge from that situation, methodically and with perseverance, through sheer willpower. That conversation had made a deep impression on me. Confidence is surely one of the attributes Fidel gave his people. This is probably necessary for them to have done what they've done.

Now here is Martín again: wreathed in smiles as always, giving me a hug. We climb into





his broken down car, and head for Old Havana. We start talking almost where we'd left off in Paris, except ten years have gone by and so much of what he had explained back then is here before our eyes: a country that survived the crisis and is emerging on the other side, a revolution that has lost a great deal but is trying to preserve its essential aspects, a profound change in analysis, freed from certain ties and solidly linked to others. We drive through the neighborhood of Central Havana, one of the most problematic in the country. The houses are standing who knows how. The streets are full of young people and children, through every open door old men and women in rocking chairs shout out their cacophony of conversation. This neighborhood seems like an advertisement for material poverty. People live in incredibly crowded conditions and in suffocating heat. Every once in a while a house collapses, killing one or more. This is where, in 1993, people exploded in rage and poured into the streets. For a moment things could have gone either way. Groups of policemen arrived, prepared to use force to restore the peace. But Fidel had the wisdom to stop them and a few hours later he himself appeared to speak to those people who simply couldn't stand it any longer. A few days later the government announced the famous fourteen measures that signaled the beginning of some relief: allowing people legal access to dollars, to open small private businesses, and reopening the farmer's markets, among others.

From the coast some 400 yards inland one can see the benefits of tourism and "the new economy." Miramar and Marianao look like they belong to another country: the houses are all painted and from the street one can glimpse their perfect gardens. As the car makes its way along Fifth Avenue, there is a comforting silence. Offices of mixed economic ventures and embassies have replaced the raucous energy that once filled those mansions where we played and studied when they housed our becas. Beyond this are neighborhoods that seem like they exist on another planet. Here is the scientific sector, with its buildings devoted to laboratories, and the neighborhoods where those who work in them live. Vedado continues to be as it was: filled with old houses converted into ministries, institutes, and State or Party offices. With those trees that shade the entire street and their roots that have totally destroyed the sidewalks; with its night life, hotels, shops, and people going to the movies or theater. Next in line, Centro Havana, where we are now, presents a picture of the recent past, a kind of museum of the Special Period. Other neighborhoods far from the shoreline may be as bad.

Soon we come to Old Havana. We park the car and begin to walk. The whole area impresses me tremendously. It's no longer a matter of two or three square blocks, remodeled for the tourists. Now there are blocks and blocks and blocks, several square miles that have been completely renovated. All the streets have been repaved in their original cobble stones and the facades of the buildings preserve the colonial style. On all sides one sees little plazas, restaurants, or bars, reminiscent of the city's era of greatest elegance. There are art galleries, museums, hotels that look like they're in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. One sees art everywhere: murals, sculpture, streets that are living museums. Eusebio Leal, the city historian who in my era waxed eloquent and exuberant in his love for Havana, has overseen a

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project truly worthy of praise. First funded by UNESCO, it is now run by a local enterprise situated in the area itself, which manages all sorts of services for the tourist (mainly shops and hotels). The money earned is reinvested in continual renovation, such that the reconstruction advances in all directions. The inhabitants of Old Havana lived for years in conditions similar to those I have just seen in Central Havana. Now they live in a giant museum, and many work in the shops and hotels. Old people have their meeting places and children their schools, in those museums with special rooms designed to meet their needs. These children now breathe in the silence of those exhibition halls and study surrounded by art. In the plazas many people sell crafts or old books, earn their livings as guides and chauffeurs, or work in the hotels and cafés. Many artists, painters, sculptors, architects, engineers, and sociologists work here. The whole project has an astonishing degree of autonomy. As we walk through the area, I talk with Martin about this experience. It appears that it may be a new development model: integrated, self-sustaining, autonomous; and may begin to be reproduced in other parts of the country, even other parts of this city. He tells me a similar plan will soon begin around the Prado Walk and along the malecón as far as Vedado.

One night a taxi picks me up, and we cross Central Havana, Vedado, and Marianao. It is two a.m., groups of people are in the streets, walking and talking; the night is alive. I comment on this with the driver and he tells me it's normal for a Friday night. I ride along, thinking about these people, all of them shouldering this history in one way or another. Today some are very critical of the Revolution, or are resigned, or perhaps even clearly opposed. Still, I see in them a strange sort of continuity. They are all the Revolution's children, they have been shaped by it, and I somehow see myself in them, or at least the person I was twenty years ago. I feel the Revolution is still alive and can save or revive itself if we can have confidence in today's generation. Give them wings; let them fly. There are so many ways in which Cuba has been a vanguard in Latin America and the world! I feel this often: in its generous prioritizing of health care and education. In the way it has traced its objectives as a country, and set out to achieve them with perseverance and creativity. In its effort to imagine itself into reality. In how it has formed the academic, scientific and technical bases from which to build its future. In the combination of manual and intellectual work. In so many things. But there are also so many things that the rest of the continent could give Cuba! The synthesis should come someday.

During this visit to Cuba a whirlwind of emotions breaks through the boundaries of the lives I've lived. Perhaps this trip has been a return to my beginnings, a reconnection with myself, a bit of time travel. Cuba trapped me and turned me inside out, like the skin of an orange. I arrived nervous, almost fearful of what I would find, and leave walking upright, renovated, happy. I still can't explain what happened or how. There is so much on that island that isn't how I would wish it to be, so many things that make me doubt, and also so many that convince me. I feel as if behind every question there is a voice that says: here I am; I continue to be what I was, and they continue to be me. When I hear them speak I recognize my voice, I identify with and love us both.





On my way back to Uruguay, as the plane flies over that tiny island that remains stalwart against all odds, when I look through my window trying to spot one of my memories, I realize that Cuba has won me over once again. Or perhaps I simply discover I've never left.





GLOSSARY

ALVAREZ, GREGORIO (GOYO ALVAREZ). Uruguayan dictator from 1973 to 1985, first as a prominent member of the junta that launched the coup in 1973, and as de facto president from 1981 on. His regime was characterized by the imprisonment and torture of thousands of citizens, making the Uruguay of those years the Latin American country with most political prisoners per capita. His government worked in close coordination with the repressive regimes that existed at the time in Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, Paraguay, and Brazil. During this period hundreds of comrades were assassinated or disappeared, in Uruguay as well as in the neighboring countries.

ANC. African National Congress. South African revolutionary party that led the struggle against apartheid. Governing party since 1994.

APARTHEID. System of racial segregation that operated in South Africa from 1948 to 1994. With this system a group of several hundred thousand whites kept millions of black citizens controlled and repressed; the latter had almost no legal rights. South Africa under apartheid was one of the most despised regimes in the world, a prototype of injustice.

BAKUNIN, MIKHAIL (Bakunin). Russian revolutionary in the 19th century. Father of modern Anarchism.

BLACK PANTHERS. African-American liberation movement founded at the end of the 1960s and inspired by the teachings of Malcolm X. It carried out important social and political organization in various parts of the United States until it was destroyed by FBI counterinsurgency.

BLANCO, HUGO. Peruvian revolutionary. Leader of the Peruvian Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR) and of the guerrilla this party sponsored in 1965.

BOLSHEVIKS. Name given to the Leninist faction of the Russian Social Democratic Party. It led the October Revolution and later became the Soviet Communist Party (CPSU).

BORGE, TOMÁS. Nicaraguan revolutionary. One of the founders, and long-time leaders, of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). Member of its Prolonged Peoples War Tendency and, following unification, one of the nine members of the organization's lead-





ership body. Commander of the Revolution. Minister of the Interior from 1979 to 1990. Borge was both one of the historic Sandinista leaders and a symbol of the corruption that overcame part of the party leadership at the end of the 1980s. He died in 2012.

BRAVO, DOUGLAS. Venezuelan revolutionary. Leader of the Armed Forces of National Liberation (FALN), one of that country's guerrilla organizations during the 1960s.

CPSU. Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

CARDENAL, ERNESTO. Poet, priest, and Nicaraguan revolutionary. He was Minister of Culture during the Sandinista Revolution.

CASTRO, FIDEL (Fidel). Revolutionary and leader of the Cuban Revolution. Man of ideas and action. Governed Cuba from 1959 to July 2006, at which time illness distanced him from the presidency. Because of his influence and that of the revolutionary process he led, he is one of the most prominent figures of the twentieth century in Latin America and throughout the world.

CASTRO, RAUL (Raul). Cuban revolutionary. With his brother Fidel, Che and others, he led the 26th of July Movement that launched the revolution. Chief of the Armed Forces from 1959 on. In 2006, because of Fidel's illness, he became interim president. In 2008 he was elected to that office.

CHI MINH, HO. Vietnamese revolutionary. Founder of the Communist Party of Vietnam, leader in the struggle for independence and in the successive wars the people of Vietnam were forced to confront against French colonialism and U.S. imperialism. First president of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam until his death in 1969.

CRUZ, LUCIANO. Chilean revolutionary, member of the leadership of the MIR. Died in an accident in 1971.

CULTELLI, ANDRES (Cultelli). Uruguayan revolutionary. Leadership member of the Movement of National Liberation (MLN) Tupamaros. He died in 2003.

DEPARTMENT OF AMERICA. Office under the jurisdiction of the Cuban Communist Party's Central Committee, dedicated to supporting the revolutionary movements in Latin America. It was headed by Commander Manuel Piñeiro.

DFLP. DEMOCRATIC FRONT FOR THE LIBERATION OF PALESTINE. A Palestinian revolutionary group of Maoist inclination, split off from the (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) PFLP and struggling against the Israeli occupation of Palestine and for social revolution. Member of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

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DORTICÓS, OSVALDO (Dorticós). Cuban revolutionary. President of Cuba from 1959 to 1976. He committed suicide in 1983.

EISENSTEIN, SERGEI (1898-1948). Soviet film director. Famous for masterpieces such as “The Battleship Potemkin.”

ELN OF BOLIVIA (ELN). National Liberation Army of Bolivia. An organization founded by Che Guevara in order to make the revolution in Bolivia. It was part of a continental project that included groups in Argentina, Peru and other nearby countries. When Che was killed, the ELN continued under the leadership of the Peredo brothers.

ENRIQUEZ, MIGUEL (Miguel). Founder and leader of the Chilean Movement of the Revolutionary Left (MIR). A man of thought and action, “he was a true revolutionary leader” as Armando Hart would say in Cuba’s official tribute at the time of his death. Following Pinochet’s coup, Miguel led the Chilean Resistance. He became a mythical figure throughout the Latin American left and worldwide. He died in combat in Santiago, on October 5, 1974.

ERP. PEOPLE’S REVOLUTIONARY ARMY. Argentinean revolutionary group that came on the scene in 1969 as the armed branch of the Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT). In the 1970s it became very active and powerful militarily, and important among certain sectors of the Argentinean working class. Member of the Committee of Revolutionary Coordination (JCR).

ESCOBAR, JOSÉ BENITO (José Benito). Nicaraguan revolutionary. One of the leaders of the FSLN. Escobar was assassinated in Estelí a few months before the Sandinista victory, and the Sandinista trade union movement was named for him.

FONSECA, CARLOS. Nicaraguan revolutionary. Founder, principal figure and historic leader of the FSLN. He died in combat in 1976.

FATAH. Palestinian political and military organization founded by Yasser Arafat. Main component of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), fights for the cause of Palestinian nationalism and against Israel’s occupation of Palestine.

FOCO THEORY. A current of opinion within the Latin American revolutionary movement of the 1960s that believed the conditions were ripe for revolutionary struggle throughout the continent. It maintained that a revolutionary nucleus, an organized and committed vanguard, could precipitate a popular uprising and revolution. Inspired by the Cuban experience.

FSLN (SANDINISTAS). Sandinista National Liberation Front. Revolutionary movement that led the anti- Somoza struggle in Nicaragua from 1961 on. It organized the popular in-





surrection that produced the Sandinista revolution in 1979, and governed Nicaragua from 1979 to 1990. A revamped FSLN returned to power in Nicaragua and governs today, but it is far from the original organization.

GDR. GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC, that part of Germany that remained occupied by the Soviet Union's Red Army at the end of the Second World War. Later it became an independent country under the leadership of the German Communist Party. After the implosion of the Soviet Union, the GDR ceased to exist as such and was reunified with the rest of Germany.

GORRIARÁN MERLO, ENRIQUE. An Argentine revolutionary, member of the leadership of the PRT-ERP. Along with other Argentinean revolutionary internationalists, he joined the Sandinista insurrection in Nicaragua. Later he led the commando that succeeded in executing Anastasio Somoza in Paraguay where the latter had taken refuge after being forced out of Nicaragua. Years later Gorriarán was captured in México and then extradited to Argentina where he was in prison for several years. He died in 2006.

GUEVARA, ERNESTO CHE (Che). Argentinean revolutionary. In 1954 he was in Guatemala when the Jacobo Arbenz government was overthrown by a mercenary invasion supported by the United States, giving rise to intermittent cycles of guerrilla warfare that lasted into the 1990s. Guevara joined Fidel Castro in the Cuban revolutionary effort, and upon its victory became one of its most important military and political leaders. He was president of the National Bank and then Minister of Industry. He represented Cuba in numerous international venues. He was a man of action but also of ideas, and severely critical of the way in which socialism was being developed in the countries of Eastern Europe. In his essay "Socialism and Man in Cuba," as well as in many other writings and speeches and in his personal practice he put forth a new and different way of constructing the new society, based on moral stimulus and on the development of a revolutionary consciousness. Guevara was extremely coherent in his everyday life, and became an example of mythic proportions for the revolutionaries of the entire world, almost an apostle of the new society. He was convinced of the need to fight imperialism at the global level, and of the importance of internationalism. This can be understood in his famous exhortation: "Create two, three, many Vietnams!" Faithful to his ideas until the last moment of his life, he led a group of Cubans who fought in Congo in 1965 and later went to Bolivia where he headed the ELN, part of a project of continental revolution. He was captured in combat and then assassinated on October 8, 1967.

HART, ARMANDO. Cuban revolutionary. Urban resistance leader during the insurrection. Minister of Culture from 1976 to 1997. Husband of Haydée Santamaría.

JACKSON, GEORGE. African-American revolutionary. He went to prison very young, accused of having robbed a gas station. He stayed in prison for the rest of his short life, and from his cell became an important leader of the Black Panthers and someone who raised

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the consciousness of a generation of North American revolutionaries. He was assassinated in prison in 1971.

JCR. Committee for Revolutionary Coordination. A coordinating body of four left revolutionary movements in the southern cone of South America for the purpose of providing each other with mutual support and making social revolution. The Chilean MIR, the ELN of Bolivia, the PRT-ERP of Argentina and the MLN Tupamaros of Uruguay were the four member organizations.

Khmer Rouge. Name that was given to the Communist Party of Cambodia. It was a particularly dogmatic and extremist party that imposed a regime of terror and genocide in which the cities were emptied and the population was arbitrarily moved into the countryside so it could be “purified” through manual labor. The Khmer Rouge became the greatest example of aberration and horror of all the attempts to transform society inspired in Marxist ideology.

Kollantai, Alexandra. Russian Bolshevik revolutionary and writer. One of the earliest feminist voices within the Communist movement.

Lenin, Vladimir Ilych Ulianov (Lenin). Russian revolutionary. One of the most important Marxist theoreticians, leader of the Bolshevik party and October revolution. Founder and maximum leader of the Soviet Union. Assassinated in 1924.

Makarenko, Anton. Russian pedagogue, active in the early years of the Russian revolution.

Mandela, Nelson. South African revolutionary, leader of the African National Congress (ANC) and of the struggle against apartheid. He was in prison for 27 years, becoming the best known political prisoner in the world. After his release, he became South Africa's first post-apartheid president. Recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. He died in 2013.

Marighela, Carlos. Brazilian revolutionary. Leader and theoretician of the guerrilla movement that fought the Brazilian dictatorship, in particular with the sector known as National Liberation Action. He was assassinated in 1969.

Marti, Jose. Cuban poet and revolutionary. He founded the party that fought for the independence of his country and Puerto Rico at the end of the nineteenth century. Marti died fighting for the independence of Cuba in 1895, and became the Apostle of the Cuban Nation. He is considered to have been the inspiration of the revolutionary generation that took power in 1959.

Mayakovsky, Vladimir. Great Soviet poet. Bolshevik.





MIR of Chile. Movement of the Revolutionary Left. Chilean revolutionary organization, founded in 1965. Characterized by mass action challenging the system in power that influenced large sectors of the poor population in the countryside and cities. It did not join the Popular Unity government, but lent its critical support, ceasing its armed actions and dedicating itself to grass roots organizing. After the coup it went underground and through numerous armed actions led the popular Resistance against the dictatorship. Hundreds of its members died in combat or assassinated, including almost all its leadership. Part of the JCR.

MIR of Venezuela. Venezuelan Movement of the Revolutionary Left that engaged in armed struggle during the decade of the sixties.

MLN (Tupamaros). National Liberation Movement (Tupamaros). Organization of the revolutionary left in Uruguay. Led an urban guerrilla movement that was particularly creative and active at the end of the decade of the sixties, with actions that were spectacular because they were so ingenious. It exerted a powerful political influence throughout the country. In 1972 it was defeated militarily, and the majority of its members were imprisoned, murdered or forced into exile. It was part of the JCR.

MPLA. Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, the revolutionary group that led the struggle for Angola's independence until it achieved its goal in 1975. Since that time it has governed the country.

MRTA. Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement. Peruvian revolutionary group in the tradition of Che Guevara, active between 1984 and 1997. Among the group's most important actions was the takeover of the Japanese Embassy in Lima. The revolutionaries asked for the release of several political prisoners, but President Fujimori launched a massive attack and the action ended in the assassination of all participants.

Neto, Agostinho. African revolutionary and poet, leader of the MPLA and then president of Angola until his death in 1979.

Ortega, Daniel. Nicaraguan revolutionary. One of the leaders of the FSLN's Insurrectional Tendency and later a member of the organization's nine-member National Directorate. Commander of the Revolution. Ortega was president of Nicaragua from 1979 to 1990. He continued at the head of the FSLN and became president of the country once more in 2006. He is one of the FSLN's historic leaders and, at the same time, through his personal and public conduct, a betrayer of the Sandinista cause.

PAIGC. African Party for the Independence of Guinea Bissau and the Cape Verde Islands. African revolutionary group that led the struggle for the independence of Guinea Bissau and the Cape Verde Islands. Led by the great revolutionary Amilcar Cabral.





Paine (Miguel Cabrera Fernandez). A leader in the Chilean MIR. He organized and headed the guerrilla group that operated in the zone of Neltume, in the extreme conditions of southern Chile. His column worked for more than a year in those snow covered mountains, preparing the conditions for a rural guerrilla movement; but they were discovered and, in several skirmishes, annihilated. Paine died in combat in October, 1981.

PCC (the Party). Cuban Communist Party. Resulted from the fusion of the revolutionary groups that won the Cuban revolution: the 26th of July Movement (Fidel's organization), the 13th of March Movement (the student movement), and the People's Socialist Party (Communist). It was founded in 1965 and from then on has led the Cuban revolution.

Peredo, Inti and Coco (Peredo brothers). Bolivian revolutionaries, they fought with the ELN beside Che and survived his assassination. They went on to lead the organization until their own assassinations in 1971 and 1972. A third brother, Chato, survived and is a leader of The Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) lead by Evo Morales that won the Bolivian elections in 2005.

PFLP. Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Palestinian revolutionary group that combines Arab nationalism and Marxism, and fights against the Israeli occupation of Palestine and for social revolution. Member of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

Perez, Dagoberto. Chilean revolutionary, member of the leadership of the MIR. Died in combat in 1975.

Piñeiro, Comandante Manuel (Barbaroja, or Red Beard). Cuban revolutionary. Fought in the mountains. Headed the Cuban Communist Party's Department of the Americas, and in that capacity played a very active role in all the revolutionary activity throughout Latin America between 1959 and the end of the 1990s. He died in an automobile accident in 1998.

Pinochet, Augusto. Chilean dictator from 1973 to 1990. The regime he led was known for its violent repression against the popular movement. Thousands of people were assassinated or disappeared, and tens of thousands imprisoned and tortured. Pinochet became a symbol of treason and criminality when he overthrew Salvador Allende in a brutal coup in September of 1973. He was a great friend of Britain's Margaret Thatcher. Taking advantage of the repressive nature of his regime, and in consultation with the Nobel Prize in Economics Milton Friedman, he imposed upon Chile one of the most stringent neo-liberal models in the world. He died in 2006.

Popular Resistance (the Resistance). A name given by the Chilean MIR to the many anti dictatorial actions following the coup. The idea, impossible to really put into practice, was to create an anti dictatorial broad front that would bear this name.





Pot, Pol. Leader of Cambodia's Khmer Rouge, that fought U.S. aggression against his country. Later, he governed Kampuchea (the new name for Cambodia) from 1976 to 1979. He was one of those principally responsible for the dogmatic regime that committed genocide against more than a million of its own people. He died in 1998.

PRT. See ERP.

PSP. Puerto Rican Socialist Party. A Marxist party that fought for Puerto Rican independence and social revolution.

Rios Montt, Jose Efraim. Guatemalan dictator from 1981 to 1982. His was one of the numerous military governments that ruled Guatemala from 1956 to 1990. It was particularly cruel in its war against the Maya people, as the guerrillas were also strong in their homelands. During the Rios Montt regime tens of thousands of indigenous people were assassinated and 370 villages wiped off the face of the earth. Along with Videla and Pinochet, his was one of the most criminal and repudiated governments of the final generation of twentieth century Latin American dictators.

Santamaría, Haydée (Haydée). Cuban revolutionary. One of two women who participated in the attack on Moncada Barracks that marked the beginning of the Cuban revolution in 1953. She was captured and imprisoned after that attack and resisted torture, including a macabre episode in which the torturers showed her her lover's testicle and brother's eye. Haydée founded and for many years was president of Casa de las Americas, one of the revolution's most important cultural institutions. She committed suicide in 1980.

Santucho, Mario Roberto. Argentinean revolutionary. Founder and leader of the PRT-ERP. A man of thought and action, he led a spectacular prison escape at Rawson in 1972 and was one of the most important figures in Argentina's revolutionary movement throughout the decades of the sixties and seventies. He died in combat in July of 1976.

Sendic, Raul (Sendic). Uruguayan revolutionary. Founder and historic leader of the MLN Tupamaros. Sendic was one of the dictatorship's hostages from 1973 to 1985, prisoners held by the regime as insurance against future revolutionary actions. One of the best known political prisoners in Latin America at the time. He died in 1989.

Serge, Victor. Russian revolutionary. Writer and journalist. Earlier an anarchist, he joined the Bolshevik revolution and was a follower of Trotsky. He wrote "What Every Revolutionary Should Know About Repression" with information taken from the archives of the Czar's secret police.

Somoza, Anastasio. Nicaraguan dictator, he governed that country from 1967 to 1979 when he was defeated by the Sandinista insurrection. The Somoza dynasty ruled Nicaragua con-

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tinuously from 1937 to 1979; it was prototypical of the twentieth century Latin American tyrannies. Anastasio Somoza was known for his anticommunism, the bloody nature of his regime, and the personality cult that characterized his government. A commando from the Argentinean ERP, led by Gorriarán Merlo, executed him in 1980 in Paraguay, where he had taken refuge.

Stalin, Joseph (Stalin). Georgian revolutionary. Bolshevik leader during the October revolution. He rose to power in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1922 and annihilated the party's competing tendencies over the next ten years. He led the Soviet Union and international Communist movement with an iron hand until his death in 1953. He developed the economic and social structures that came to be known as Real Socialism and which strongly influenced world Communism during the twentieth century. He was responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of Soviet citizens and revolutionaries around the world and, because he eliminated diversity and imposed his dogmatic vision of Marxism, was one of those responsible for the failure of the revolutionary wave that began with Russia's October revolution. As maximum leader of the Soviet Union during the Second World War, he played an important role in defeating fascism.

Torres, Camilo. Colombian priest and revolutionary. Member of the Army of National Liberation (ELN). In his option for the poor he symbolized the political commitment of Latin American Catholics and became a predecessor to Liberation Theology. He was known for his affirmation that "If Jesus was alive today he would be a guerrilla fighter." Died in combat in 1966.

Trotsky, Leon (Trotsky). Russian revolutionary. Together with Lenin, he was one of the prominent figures of the October revolution. During the revolution of 1905, and again in 1917, he headed the Revolutionary Military Committee in the city of Saint Petersburg. He was the People's Commissar of Foreign Relations and later founded the Red Army. He became a leader of the left faction inside the Soviet Communist Party, was expelled from that party, deported to Siberia and finally sent into exile. He was assassinated in México in 1940 by one of Stalin's agents.

Trujillo, Rafael Leonidas. Dictator of the Dominican Republic from 1930 to 1961. Along with Somoza, Trujillo was prototypical of twentieth century Latin American tyrants.

Turcios Lima, Luis Augusto. Guatemalan revolutionary, leader of the Rebel Armed Forces that operated during the 1960s. His death in 1966 marked the end of a revolutionary guerrilla cycle in Guatemala, to be continued latter by other guerrilla organizations in the seventies and eighties.

UJC (the Communist Youth). Union of Young Communists, youth organization of the Cuban Communist Party.





UP (Popular Unity). Left coalition led by Salvador Allende that won the Chilean election and became the country's government in 1970. It was weighted in favor of the Communist and Socialist parties but also included several other configurations. The UP governed Chile until the coup of September, 1973. This was the most important attempt in the world to achieve revolutionary social transformation via electoral means.

USSR (Soviet Union). Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. A federation of socialist republics that emerged as a result of the October revolution and the disappearance of the Czarist empire. Russia was the most important of the republics but the union also included traditionally European republics such as Latvia, Estonia, Ukraine and Belarus, and others that were traditionally Asiatic such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Valdez, Ramiro (Ramiro). Commander of the Cuban revolution, Minister of the Interior for a number of years and then in charge of Cuba's electronic industry.

Van Schowen, Bautista. Chilean revolutionary, member of the leadership of the MIR. He disappeared following his capture in 1973.

Videla, Jorge Rafael. Argentinean dictator from 1976 to 1981. Videla became the symbolic figure in Argentina's last twentieth century dictatorship. His regime's repression was qualitatively different from that of the other dictatorships the Argentinean people suffered throughout their recent history; it employed a special sort of cruelty. During the Videla government disappearance became an everyday occurrence, affecting 30,000 Argentineans and numerous Latin Americans who had sought refuge in the country. Through assassination or because they were forced into exile, Videla's regime wiped out the intellectual elite of an entire generation.

Villabla, Arturo (Coño). Leader of the Chilean MIR. He returned to Chile clandestinely and became the Resistance's military chief inside the country. He died in combat in Santiago in September of 1983.

Weatherman. Underground revolutionary organization in the United States, that emerged when Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) split into several tendencies.

Wheelock, Jaime. Nicaraguan revolutionary. One of the leaders of the FSLN's Proletarian Tendency and later one of the nine members of the National Directorate of the unified organization. Commander of the Revolution. Minister of Agrarian Reform from 1979 to 1990.

Yon Sosa, Marco Antonio. Guatemalan revolutionary, leader of the 13th of November Revolutionary Movement, which operated in the decade of the sixties.

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GREGORY RANDALL was born in New York City in 1960, then lived eight years in Mexico, fourteen in Cuba, eleven in France and since 1994 has resided in Uruguay. He and his wife have three children and one grandchild. He did his undergraduate work in telecommunications in Cuba and earned his doctorate in information technology from the University of Orsay, France. Since 1994 he has been professor of electrical engineering at the University of the Republic in Montevideo. From 2007 to 2014 he was also that institution's vice president for research, during which time he promoted and oversaw the establishment of several university campuses in the interior of the country. *To Have Been There Then* is his first book, a memoir of childhood and young adulthood in the Cuba of the 1970s and '80s, with moving, often breathtaking stories of what it

was like for a young boy to grow up in revolution.

MARGARET RANDALL (TranslatorNew York, 1936) is a poet, essayist, oral historian, translator, photographer and social activist. She lived in Latin America for 23 years (in Mexico, Cuba, and Nicaragua). From 1962 to 1969 she and Mexican poet Sergio Mondragón co-edited *EL CORNO EMPLUMADO / THE PLUMED HORN*, a bilingual literary quarterly that published some of the best new work of the sixties. When she came home in 1984, the government ordered her deported because it found some of her writing to be "against the good order and happiness of the United States". With the support of many writers and others, she won her case in 1989. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, she taught at several universities, most often Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. Randall's most recent titles include *MY TOWN, AS IF THE EMPTY CHAIR / COMO SI LA SILLA VACIA*, *THE RHIZOME AS A FIELD OF BROKEN BONES* and *DAUGHTER OF LADY JAGUAR SHARK* (all poetry, all from Wings Press, San Antonio), *CHE ON MY MIND* (a feminist poet's reminiscence of Che Guevara, published by Duke University Press), and *MORE THAN THINGS* (essays, from The University of Nebraska Press). Her latest collection of poems, *ABOUT LITTLE CHARLIE LINDBERGH*, appeared from Wings in summer 2014. *HAYDEE SANTAMARIA, CUBAN REVOLUTIONARY: SHE LED BY TRANSGRESSION*, is recently out from Duke (August, 2015). Her most recent collection of poems (June 2016) is *SHE BECOMES TIME*. A large bilingual anthology of Cuban poetry, *ONLY THE ROAD / SOLO EL CAMINO*, is due out in October. Randall lives in New Mexico with her partner (now wife) of almost 30 years, the painter Barbara Byers, and travels extensively to read, lecture and teach.





GLOSSARIUM / UNSILENCED TEXTS



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GLOSSARIUM: UNSILENCED TEXTS AND MODERN TRANSLATIONS

was established in early 2016 in an effort to recover silenced voices outside and beyond the familiar poetic canon, seeking out and publishing both contemporary translations and little known (and unknown) out of print texts, in particular those under siege by restrictive regimes and silencing practices in their home (or adoptive) countries.

The term “Glossarium” derives from latin/greek and is defined as “a collection of glosses or explanations of words, especially of words not in general use, as those of a dialect, locality or an art or science, or of particular words used by an old or a foreign author.” The series is was initiated by and is curated by Managing Editor Lynne DeSilva-Johnson, with the help of contributing editors Ariel Resnikoff and Stephen Ross, as well as a wide range of global allies and friends.

Ashraf Fayadh’s “Instructions Within,” in a full Arabic-English dual-language translation, was the first book in this new series, preceding the award winning memoir of life in Cuba, *“To Have Been There Then (Estar Allí Entonces)”* that you hold in your hands. Two additional parallel Spanish-English translations by Margaret Randall will follow in 2017-18 -- the first of which is Chely Lima’s . The second is *“Viaje de Regreso / Return Trip,”* a dual language edition of Cuban poet Israel Dominguez’s striking poetry, with a beautiful cover featuring Havana street art by Jose Parla and JR.

Ashraf Fayadh, “Instructions Within.”

translated by Mona Kareem with Mona Zaki, and Jonathan Wright; and with Ammiel Alcalay, Pierre Joris and Lynne DeSilva-Johnson assisting/editing.

This is a first Arabic-English full translation of Ashraf Fayadh’s singular volume of poetry, INSTRUCTIONS WITHIN, which was published by the Beirut- based Dar al-Farabi in 2008 and later banned from distribution in Saudi Arabia. This special edition includes two paintings by Ashraf Fayadh on its front and back covers, and is right bound, asking the reader to consider their estrangement from Arabic language, literature, and life, inviting a new relationship to beginning to form. The Operating System will donate proceeds from sales of this book to support Fayadh’s ongoing case for his release from imprisonment for apostasy in Saudi Arabia.

“Why do you need to read this book in America today? Because a US journalist asked if it really was worth it to write poems that might get you killed. Because Ashraf Fayadh, as poet, artist and human being, is being jailed and tortured for doing his job, that is for daring to expose & deride the two-headed Moloch governing the country he lives in (Saudi Arabia) and





ours (these States): Fundamentalist religion & oil-money. Because Ashraf Fayadh is inventing a needed poetics to break not only those taboos but also the shackles of standard Arab poetics, freeing the language—and a freed language is needed for free thinking. Because his own exile (he is of Palestinian extraction) is so absolute that it does not fit the traditional nostalgic poetics of exile & searches for a new way of saying a new & wilder dislocation. Because this exile is so close to all of our own dislocations, even as, smugly ensconced in our North American bunker, we don't see that the same future is awaiting us. Because he wrote: "I am Hell's experiment on planet Earth."—Pierre Joris

"Palestinian poet, artist and cultural activist Ashraf Fayadh reminds us, through his life and work, that blasphemy (for which he has been sentenced to 8 years in prison and 800 lashes) is still a crime in Saudi Arabia, but also that poetry is powerful against the criminal madness of a deranged state: '...these pages have exhausted all languages known to earth / ...to offer a name that matches your definition of self / your name-like an inkwell pregnant with possibilities.' The Operating System does us an extraordinary service by making this magnificent poet's voice available. Read Fayadh to understand what we are fighting against, and for!"—Margaret Randall

"Just a few years before his death, the great poet Amiri Baraka railed against what he saw as a poetry of complacency, of 'the indoors,' and harkened back to those of his generation (and older), 'who actually worked to register some understanding of 'the great outdoors' i.e., the real world.' It is with more than some irony that we here, in the belly of the imperial beast, must seek such poetry of 'the great outdoors' from someone like Ashraf Fayadh, a Palestinian imprisoned in Saudi Arabia. Like the real world, Fayadh's poems are dizzying in their associations and resonance, recalling echoes of lines from different times, languages, and circumstances, from reverie to exile, from brutality to utmost tenderness. Poet and artist Etel Adnan once wrote that 'Palestine is a land planted / by eyes refusing to be closed.' The poetry of Ashraf Fayadh, in a dream state of vigilance, attention, and horror, forces us to look at the world we actually inhabit, in all its glory and horror."—Ammiel Alcalay

"I have not known Ashraf Fayadh, but this sentence teaches us all we need to know about his poetry — about his strength, about his violence. Poets are insurgents, carriers of fire, companions of truth and of evidence. They are the light which goes out into the darkness and gives words to things which die from not having been said. They are fragile and strong at the same time. They possess only their breath, their souls, who resist. We can hit them, whip when, throw them to the bottom of a well, bury them alive, but their voices continue to rise, and wake up the world". – Tahar Ben Jelloun trans. Lynne DeSilva-Johnson

Ashraf Fayadh is a Palestinian artist and poet born in Saudi Arabia in 1980. He attended Al-Azhar University in Gaza City in 2001, and has been active in the art scene in Saudi Arabia with organizations like Edge of Arabia, a British- Arabian art collaboration. Ashraf also curated exhibitions of Saudi art during Jeddah Art week in Saudi Arabia and in Europe at the 55th Venice Biennale, where he showcased the work of emerging Saudi artists.

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Chely Lima, “What the Werewolf Told Them / Lo Que Les Dijo El Licantropo”

“Here is the strength of poetry for the world. Is it possible this book exists? I cannot be the only one who realizes I have been waiting all my life to read Chely Lima! The poet driving their own body in the trunk through the vast vulnerable fields of becoming human the way they want to become human in an inflexible world. Many thanks to Margaret Randall for these beautiful translations of one of the most brilliant books in many years! Chely Lima is here! Everyone tell everyone!” --C.AConrad

“These are poems of astonishing courage and compelling craft. Their language sizzles on the page. The poet’s familiarity with history and his penchant for plumbing its most significant myths imbue these texts with a special richness. The myths come from the Greeks, Hindus, Germanic fairy tales, those drum beats brought to the New World by Africans during the ravages of the Middle Passage, and stories from indigenous America. Chely also creates some myths of his own.

“These poems are also gender-transgressive, revealing a personal journey as painful as it has been liberating. And it is a complicated journey. We cannot say the poet is only a man or that he was once a woman; such binary notions are themselves being challenged here. Body parts and the uses to which they are assigned in our inadequate society are routed from their comfort zones, made to look at themselves in a succession of mirrors and confronted head on. Chely refuses to play by society’s hypocritical rules—in his life or work.

“The poem called “Recognition” begins: “I am digging up my face, / which is to say all the faces of my tribe. / With difficulty I haul them from obscurity / and hang them from the insulting stakes / marking each of their graves, my grave.” And the poem ends: “I am rebuilding with one clenched fist / in my pocket. Rebuilding my tribe, / my face unmasked for the first time.” Chely’s power lies in being willing to take the reader to the depths of his agony while at the same time permitting us to glimpse a future, a way out of suffocation that is woven of his ability to imagine a world in which acceptance and dignity bloom.” - Margaret Randall, from the Introduction

Chely Lima is a queer North American poet of Cuban origin. He writes prose, poetry, theater, journalism, scripts for film, radio and television; and is also a photographer. He has published numerous books in Cuba, Spain, the United States, Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela and Ecuador—among them *Lucrecia quiere decir perfidia* (Ediciones Bagua, Madrid, 2015), *Triángulos mágicos* (Editorial Planeta Mexicana, 1994; Eriginal Books, USA, 2014; and Ediciones Territoriales, Cuba, 2015), *Discurso de la amante* (Imagine Cloud Editions, 2013), and *Confesiones nocturnas* (Editorial Planeta, 1994), all of these novels. His books have been translated into English, French, German, Italian, Russian, Esperanto and Czechoslovakian. His monologues and works for the theater—for children as well as adults—have been performed in Cuba and Ecuador (he lived in the latter country from 1992 to 2001). A rock opera and a cantata were performed in Cuba’s National Theater in the early 1990s.





Israel Domínguez, “Viaje de Regreso / Return Trip.”

“A breathtaking book by a major Cuban poet. Margaret Randall’s translations beautifully embody Israel Domínguez’s yearning for a future of justice for all. His yearning is his gift to all of us who seek a different way of being in the world. The Return Trip is a welcome and necessary poetry.” - Demetria Martinez, recipient of an International Latino Book Award and an American Book Award for *The Block Captain’s Daughter*.

“Margaret Randall’s clear and lively translation of *Viaje de Regreso / Return Trip* invites us into the life and work of a poet born in the early 1970s, nearly 25 years into the Revolution. Domínguez’s poems represent the lyric tradition in the best sense; they are poems investigating the emotion of the experience living in one’s body, in one’s mind. Written from a photograph or a memory, these poems explore love, family, spirituality, material reality. Many of these poems are dedicated to friends, family, mentors, and attest to a relationality and love that’s both humbling and inspiring. In these poems of dense image and rich sensation, Randall presents us with the gift of her translation of Israel Domínguez’s poetry.” - Stephen Motika

Viaje de regreso / Return Trip is a compendium of nostalgia, in which a familiar street, an old photograph, or memory of when the trains ran on precision time take up residence in poems in which a mature philosophy of life breaks through a patina of childhood wonder. A clothesline becomes a highway. A plum tree calms the spirit. A public restroom holds a dark menace. A woman’s name floats in a swimming pool. A hero of the Great War looms upon the horizon. Through it all, the music and culture of the country to the north refuse to fade into oblivion; despite the ever-present weight of political attack from the United States, a love for its popular culture remains familiar and strong. The poet writes: “Glory belongs to my neighbor / who owns a Buick / and wears a lot of gold.”

Israel Domínguez was born in Placetas, Villa Clara, in 1973. Throughout his childhood his father recited poetry, and he and his mother often accompanied him to his performances. By the time Domínguez graduated from the University of Havana in 1996, his family had moved to Matanzas and he joined them there. His work has been awarded numerous prizes. Among his poetry collections are: *Hojas de cal* (2001), *Collage mientras avanza mi carro de equipaje* (2002), *Sobre un fondo de arena* (2004), *Después de acompañar a William Jones* (2007), and *Viaje de regreso* (2011). In an interview, Domínguez has said: “Memory is a return trip, inherent of course to the human being. In my poetry it is not simply an instrument but also its landscape, that is to say, a poetic event [. . .] It’s not a matter of reducing memory to its individual manifestation because collective memory influences the individual and viceversa.” Domínguez lives in Matanzas, where he also works as a translator. Like so many others, his professional life has been affected by Cuba’s precarious economy; for a number of years, and because he could earn so much more in the tourism sector, he quit a job in his profession to take one as a bellboy at a hotel on Varadero Beach. The experience provided material for a book of poems. Happily, he is once more working in his chosen field.





WHY PRINT / DOCUMENT?

*The Operating System uses the language “print document” to differentiate from the book-object as part of our mission to distinguish the act of documentation-in-book-FORM from the act of publishing as a backwards facing replication of the book’s agentive *role* as it may have appeared the last several centuries of its history. Ultimately, I approach the book as TECHNOLOGY: one of a variety of printed documents (in this case bound) that humans have invented and in turn used to archive and disseminate ideas, beliefs, stories, and other evidence of production.*

Ownership and use of printing presses and access to (or restriction of) printed materials has long been a site of struggle, related in many ways to revolutionary activity and the fight for civil rights and free speech all over the world. While (in many countries) the contemporary quotidian landscape has indeed drastically shifted in its access to platforms for sharing information and in the widespread ability to “publish” digitally, even with extremely limited resources, the importance of publication on physical media has not diminished. In fact, this may be the most critical time in recent history for activist groups, artists, and others to insist upon learning, establishing, and encouraging personal and community documentation practices. Hear me out.

With The OS’s print endeavors I wanted to open up a conversation about this: the ultimately radical, transgressive act of creating PRINT /DOCUMENTATION in the digital age. It’s a question of the archive, and of history: who gets to tell the story, and what evidence of our life, our behaviors, our experiences are we leaving behind? We can know little to nothing about the future into which we’re leaving an unprecedentedly digital document trail — but we can be assured that publications, government agencies, museums, schools, and other institutional powers that be will continue to leave BOTH a digital and print version of their production for the official record. Will we?

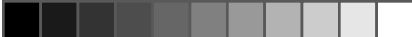
As a (rogue) anthropologist and long time academic, I can easily pull up many accounts about how lives, behaviors, experiences — how THE STORY of a time or place — was pieced together using the deep study of correspondence, notebooks, and other physical documents which are no longer the norm in many lives and practices. As we move our creative behaviors towards digital note taking, and even audio and video, what can we predict about future technology that is in any way assuring that our stories will be accurately told – or told at all?

As a creative practitioner, the stories, journals, and working notes of other creative practitioners have been enormously important to me. And yet so many creative people of this era no longer put together physical documents of their work – no longer have physical archives of their writing or notebooks, typed from the first draft to the last, on computers. Even visual artists often no longer have non-digital slides and portfolios. How will we leave these things for the record?

How will we say WE WERE HERE, WE EXISTED, WE HAVE A DIFFERENT STORY?

*- Lynne DeSilva-Johnson, Founder/Managing Editor,
THE OPERATING SYSTEM, Brooklyn NY 2016*





TITLES IN THE PRINT: DOCUMENT COLLECTION

- Death is a Festival - Anis Shivani [2018]
- In Corpore Sano : Creative Practice and the Challenged Body [Anthology, 2017]
Lynne DeSilva-Johnson and Jay Besemer, co-editors
Nothing Is Wasted - Shabnam Piryaee [2017]
- To Have Been There Then / Estar Allí Entonces - Gregory Randall (trans. Margaret Randall) [2017]
The Color She Gave Gravity - Stephanie Heit [2017]
- The Science of Things Familiar - Johnny Damm [Graphic/Poetry Hybrid, 2017]
You Look Something - Jessica Tyner Mehta [2017]
One More Revolution - Andrea Mazzariello [2017]
- Flower World Variations, Expanded Edition/Reissue - Jerome Rothenberg and Harold Cohen [2017]
[2017]
- Return Trip / Viaje Al Regreso ; Spanish-English Dual Language Edition - Israel Dominguez,
(trans. Margaret Randall) [2017]
- Instructions Within - Ashraf Fayadh [2016]
Arabic-English dual language edition; Mona Kareem, translator
Let it Die Hungry [2016] - Caitis Meissner
- A GUN SHOW [2016] - So Percussion in Collaboration with Ain Gordon and Emily Johnson
agon [2016] - Judith Goldman
Everybody's Automat [2016] - Mark Gurarie
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Talk About Man Proof - Lancelot Runge / John Kropa;
An Admission as a Warning Against the Value of Our Conclusions - Alexis Quinlan





DOC U MENT

/dəkyəmənt/

First meant “instruction” or “evidence,” whether written or not.

noun - a piece of written, printed, or electronic matter that provides information or evidence or that serves as an official record

verb - record (something) in written, photographic, or other form

synonyms - paper - deed - record - writing - act - instrument

[Middle English, *precept*, from Old French, from Latin *documentum*, *example*, *proof*, from *docere*, to teach; see *dek-* in Indo-European roots.]

Who is responsible for the manufacture of value?

Based on what supercilious ontology have we landed in a space where we vie against other creative people in vain pursuit of the fleeting credibilities of the scarcity economy, rather than freely collaborating and sharing openly with each other in ecstatic celebration of MAKING?

While we understand and acknowledge the economic pressures and fear-mongering that threatens to dominate and crush the creative impulse, we also believe that now more than ever we have the tools to relinquish agency via cooperative means, fueled by the fires of the Open Source Movement.

Looking out across the invisible vistas of that rhizomatic parallel country
we can begin to see our community beyond constraints,
in the place where intention meets resilient, proactive, collaborative organization.

Here is a document born of that belief, sown purely of imagination and will.
When we document we assert. We print to make real, to reify our being there.

When we do so with mindful intention to address our process,
to open our work to others, to create beauty in words in space, to respect and acknowledge the
strength of the page we now hold physical, a thing in our hand...
we remind ourselves that, like Dorothy: *we had the power all along, my dears.*

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