

Sabotage of the Sunflowers

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Abstract

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Sabotage of the Sunflowers is a creative collection of writings inspired by my family's immigration from Cuba to the United States. These stories come from memories, retellings, interviews, and my own imagination. They include some facts, some embellishments, and some fiction. The stories are told in various forms: prose, poetry, first-person narrative, and reworked transcripts taken from many hours of family interviews. These transcripts-turned-narratives remain fairly close to their original form and make up the majority of this thesis.

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Statement of Poetics

The sunflower, or *girasol* as it is known in Spanish, is native to North and Central America. It was introduced to Europe by Spanish explorers. The sunflower is admired and/or exploited, depending on one's perspective, for both its beauty and its utility. It has long been associated with deities and saints, including the Yoruba *orisha* (deity), Oshun and her Cuban-Catholic "counterpart," *Nuestra Senora de la Caridad del Cobre* (Our Lady of Charity), patroness of Cuba . On September 8, 2019, people of Cuba took to the streets calling for democratic change in a movement they call *Revolución de los Girasoles* (Sunflower Revolution), coinciding with the feast day of *Nuestra Senora de la Caridad del Cobre*. The sunflower is also the national flower of the Ukraine and has recently been used as a world-wide symbol of solidarity with the Ukrainian people since the Russian invasion beginning in February of 2022. This is testament to the power of this symbol.

I titled my thesis "Sabotage of the Sunflowers" for symbolic and practical reasons. For me, beyond their association with Oshun, Caridad, and Cuba, sunflowers have come to symbolize the beauty and strength of my mother and her four older sisters, the main subjects of and inspiration for my thesis. The original inspiration for the title came from a family story of my mother's cousin Lalito, who as a teenager in 1962, along with a group of other young men, cut down a field of sunflowers in my family's hometown of Jovellanos, Cuba. The sunflowers were planted as part of Fidel Castro's agricultural reform, for the purposes of extracting the oil from their seeds. The young men sabotaged this operation in protest of Castro's dictatorship. A public trial was held in which three of the young men were sentenced to death and executed by firing squad. The others, including Lalito, who was aged seventeen at the time, were sent to

prison where different torture tactics were used to try to solicit confessions. My aunt Idalia was still in Cuba and witnessed the trial and sentencing. When I researched this incident the only reference I found, other than my family's oral history, was an online comment to a BBC article written in December of 2008 regarding the Cuban government's prohibition of Christmas trees and images of Santa Claus in public places. A man by the name of Alejandro Talaver commented and cited the incident as an example of the government's unfair trials and punishments that far outweighed the crime, in this case, the execution three young people for the crime of cutting down sunflowers. The symbolism of this act of vandalism/protest and the cruel reality of the punishments combined with the lack of its historical documentation is almost too painful and too poetic for me to properly express in words. Yet despite the lack of written documentation, I had the privilege of recording the story from the memory of a living witness, my aunt Idalia.

Conversely, poet, writer, and lawyer, M. Nourbese Philip artistically engages with an atrocity so cruel, there are no words to properly describe it. The history of the massacre on the slave ship, *Zong*, is unspeakably horrific and greatly lacking in archival evidence. In her book-length poem, *Zong!*, Philip, tackles the lack of documentation of the 1781 massacre of the enslaved Africans aboard the slave ship, *Zong*. Philip repurposes language from the legal decision of *Gregson v. Gilbert* (1783), an insurance dispute claim resulting from this massacre. Prior to the publication of *Zong!*, the legal document remained one of the only recordings of this dreadful history. Describing the history and her poetics behind the creation *Zong!*, Philip states:

The case report *Gregson vs. Gilbert*, recounts the massacre by drowning of some 130 enslaved Africans over the course of ten days beginning on November 29th, 1781...*Zong!* explodes the coded, documented silence of the historical text to

become an anti-narrative lament that tells the story of this haunting and tragic massacre: it cannot be told yet must be told; it can only be told by not telling.

(Philip)

Despite the difference in situations, Philip's method informed my work. Like Philip, when researching for my thesis, I adopted an ethnographic sensibility in focusing not only on the context of available documentary evidence (or lack thereof), but also the political and social meanings influencing the context. In Philip's situation, she confronts the task of giving voice to a group of enslaved persons murdered in the late eighteenth century. For source material she relies upon the only remaining evidence of the massacre: legal documents from a disputed insurance claim. Philip approaches this evidence, written in the context of a dispute over loss of *property* (the enslaved persons) and therefore loss of money. Using the very same words of these documents, she offers a new context: the stolen lives of *human beings*. In writing *Zong!*, Philip has added to the literary archive of this horrifying tragedy, making available an otherwise unknown history to current and future generations. In my situation, I was confronted with a lack of official documentation of an historical event of which I've only heard through oral histories. In absence of official "history," I had the privilege of creating my own archive through the memory of a living witness, my aunt Idalia.

German author W.G. Sebald's strategies to describe the horrors of the past have also inspired my attempts to write through history with impoverished or absent materials. In his self-described "documentary fiction," he includes photographs, diagrams, maps, and various historical documents to accompany his stories told from a first-person narrator point of view, yet from a far remove. Sebald's use of distancing creates the effect of the narrator as an observer, imparting an unobtrusiveness to the storytelling. In his work, *The Rings of Saturn*, memories,

images, and place layer upon one another, sometimes creating confusion, though also creating cohesion through the fusion of memories. Even the narrator's voice switches on the reader without warning, with the voices sometimes melding one into the other. The theme of silk emerges throughout the book through the mention of silkworms, silk clothes, and silk carpets. In the end this symbol of silk culminates with the haunting comparison to the Holocaust as evident in the following passage describing a film promoting silk cultivation in Germany. In describing the utility of silkworms:

They could be used to illustrate the structure and distinctive features of insect anatomy, insect domestication, retrogressive mutations, and the essential measures which are taken by breeders to monitor productivity and selection, including extermination to preempt racial degeneration (Sebald 194).

According to the New Yorker article, *Why You Should Read W. G. Sebald*, he chose to write in “documentary fiction” rather than the typical historical texts as:

It was Sebald's conviction that the recent history of his country could not be written about directly, could not be approached head-on, as it were, because the enormity of its horrors paralyzed our ability to think about them morally and rationally. These horrors had to be approached obliquely. (O'Connell)

Unlike Philip, Sebald has an ample archive of historical materials to work with, yet they are still impoverished and incomplete fragments. These fragments he narrates in a new present-tense context related to his activity of walking, which becomes an alternate filter through which to view these sources. Though Sebald's narrator voice is quite different from mine, I learned a lot about alternate strategies of narration related to accounts and evidence that are ephemeral and distant from my lived experience, yet nevertheless impact my present-day life.

There is power and energy in objects and symbols, and sometimes words themselves can be a kind of documentary evidence or archive that holds history within it, as in Philip's "anti-narrative lament," *Zong!*, where she uses the words from a legal document to form poetic fragments in which the voices of the previously voiceless murdered Africans ring through. Sometimes a seemingly ordinary thing such as the silkworm becomes a multi-layered symbol used to describe that which is beyond understanding far better than words alone can do, as in Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*.

Prior to hearing the story of my mother's cousin Lalito and the sabotage of the sunflower field, I'd see a sunflower and think of summer, warmth, and beauty. After writing my thesis, sunflowers became for me a symbol of the strength and beauty of my mom and her sisters, but also a reminder of the cruelty of oppression. My aunt Idalia and her cousin Deisy say that the sight of sunflowers fills them with fear and melancholy. It brings them right back to the day that the young men from their village lost their lives, and their cousin Lalito's life was just barely spared, though he entered prison as a teenager and left as a grown man.

The story of Lalito and the sabotage of the sunflower field is but one of a series of seemingly simple, but symbolically charged stories in my thesis. I did not force these symbols, rather they presented themselves through my writing process. In *Syncretized*, the sunflower symbol takes center stage, as it is the flower of Oshun and *Nuestra Señora de la Caridad*. While the power of this shared symbol is beautiful on the surface, the need for Oshun and Caridad to syncretize is based on a cruel history. During the Atlantic Slave Trade, "Cuba became the largest slave colony in all of Hispanic America, with the highest number of enslaved persons imported and the longest duration of the illegal slave trade." (Iglesias Utset and Gonzalez) The enslaved Africans were not allowed to openly practice their religion, therefore they worshiped the *orishas*

under the guise of Catholic saints. Thus Oshun became Caridad, as the rest of the *orishas* syncretized with corresponding Catholic saints. In essence, the Catholic saints became symbols for the Yoruba *orishas*. Eventually the *Santeria* religion was born from the mixture of the Yoruba and Catholic faiths.

Other flowers make an appearance in the stories as well. In *Jose y Josefa*, I imagine Josefa (my abuela) reflecting on the properties of the carnation and the hybridized rose. This idea came to me as I remembered her love of pink carnations. I also once heard one of my aunts recount their mother (my abuela) saying she did not like roses because their smell reminded her of funerals. Out of curiosity, I looked up “smell of roses” and discovered that in breeding roses for durability, many of the hybridized varieties no longer have a scent. Having already my abuela’s symbol of the “scent of death” in my mind, I was simultaneously excited and saddened to learn of the scentless rose varieties. The scentless rose presented itself as a metaphor for the loss of individuality, or loss of spirit, that accompanies the loss of freedoms my family in Cuba experienced after the revolution. However despite incarcerations, forced labor in work camps, and familial separations across continents; my grandparents, my mom and her four older sisters, her brother-in-law, her niece and nephew all found their way back to each other eventually settling in Seattle, Washington. There, they raised children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and gathered frequently at my abuela’s house on North 52nd Street, just like the older generation had done at my *bisabuela*’s (great-grandmother’s) house in Cuba.

I do not take lightly the great privilege of having been raised in my close-knit, extended family. The tradition of gathering at Abuela’s house found its way from Jovellanos, Cuba to Seattle, WA, thanks to the courage and fortitude of my grandparents, my aunts, and my mom. My abuela’s house was always filled with family. Us kids would spend hours playing while the

adults visited over their evening *café Cubano*. The house was wonderfully loud. I remember having to explain to my friends that my family's chorus of "yelling" I found so comforting did not mean my family was angry. In fact, they weren't really yelling at each other at all. It was just how we communicated. Unless, of course, someone brought up Fidel Castro, then it really was yelling.

It has been a life-long dream of mine to record my family's histories, yet fear and intimidation of getting it wrong has kept me from doing so. My thesis began with the goal to write an accurate collection of my family's migration stories. I began this enormous task by interviewing my mom and her sisters. The first interview was with my mother and took place on Zoom, as it was early on in the pandemic. My mom's interview flowed easily as I asked her to specifically discuss her memories of the year leading to her exile from Cuba (at the age of 12) through the almost five years she and her sister Mimi spent in the United States before my grandparents made it out of Cuba. She spoke for herself and for her sister Mimi. My tía Mimi, who is also my *madrina* (godmother), does not like to speak of her memories of that time. She will insert her opinions often and recollections on occasion when her sisters are sharing, but she doesn't like to remember the bad times.

Later interviews took place in person. The first two in-person interviews were with my mom's oldest sister, my tía (aunt) Nora. We sat at her dining room table, in her home which she inherited from her parents, my grandparents. Abuela's home flowed into Tía Nora's home – It was more of a continuation than a transfer. My interview with my tía Nora was less structured. I was used to her being the most talkative of my aunties and assumed it would be an easy interview. Yet the formality of the matter changed her demeanor. To be fair, she was getting over a cold and not feeling so well, not that she would admit it at the time. Weeks later she would tell

me that she felt terrible, but thought she shouldn't reschedule with me in case she died. She didn't want to disappoint me. My tía Nora is one of the greatest storytellers I've ever met. At barely five-feet tall and the age of 84, she commands the presence of any room she enters. This is the woman who joined the revolution in Cuba and later joined the counterrevolution once it became obvious that the leaders of the revolution had lied about their intentions. My tía Nora is the woman who spent a short stint as a political prisoner in Cuba after being turned in by a friend. She is the woman who charmed her way into the Argentinian embassy in Cuba three different times in order to convince the ambassador to take her three cousins and save them from certain death if they stayed. When the ambassador's patience ran out, he told my tía Nora he'd only agree to take one. So naturally, she snuck in all three cousins and the exasperated ambassador gave in on the condition he never see her face again. My tía Nora followed her little sisters to the United States and worked in various jobs to raise money for the rest of her family to join her. Did I mention she did all of this before the age of 24? Yet something happened when I hit record on my phone's audio recorder. The usually outspoken and chatty tía Nora was somewhat reserved. She eventually warmed up but trailed off whenever a memory was too sad. It isn't that she didn't want to share these memories with me, she just didn't want to cry.

The last interview I conducted for my thesis included the three eldest Fuentes Azpeitia women, my tía Nora, tía Idalia, and tía Nancy. We gathered at my tía Nancy's home and I placed my phone on the coffee table. The three hours that followed were amazing. My tías fed off of each other, lifting each other up in memories and in spirits. They laughed and they argued over conflicting details. They often spoke at the same time. Not one of them held the floor long before another interrupted. It was just like our family gatherings and it was fantastic. It was fantastic that is, until the time came to transcribe the recordings.

I used an auto-transcription application on my iPhone to transcribe my audio recordings, using the Spanish setting. While better than manually transcribing it all from scratch, the transcriptions needed much revision. There is only so much a machine can understand. Though the application did a fairly decent job of picking up my aunts' Cuban accented Spanish, it did not recognize colloquialisms and most certainly did not have the capability to decipher three voices speaking simultaneously. I spent the better part of fall and winter quarters completing the interview transcripts. This process included correcting the Spanish transcription by listening to the audio and comparing it to the written product. Once I completed that portion, I used Microsoft Word's translation feature to translate the transcripts from Spanish to English. Next I corrected the English translations by comparing them side-by-side to the Spanish versions. Beyond the technical corrections, this process included making translation decisions such as whether to keep the text close to the direct translations or to describe the essence of what was said. Much tends to get lost in translation. By this time I was hearing my aunts' voices in my head throughout the day, long after turning off the recordings. I was dreaming of the stories I heard, as if they were movies. I was ready to move on.

Though relieved of the laborious transcription work, the decision of how to turn the transcripts into stories was only slightly less daunting. The problem with biographies and memoirs is their reliance upon memory. In the case of autobiography, one may question the validity of your own recollections. In the case of family histories, one must contend with the often-contradicting recollections of multiple people. In my case, these recollections came from five stubborn, strong-willed and self-certain sisters. How could I possibly get the stories "right" when I not only had to worry about my perception but when the telling of the stories changed slightly depending on the teller? While predominantly known for her 1973 novel *Fear of Flying*

and not typically cited for her work on historical documentation and biography, I found the following quote from Erica Jong's memoir, *Seducing the Demon: Writing for My Life*, an appropriate answer to my questions. Speaking of memory and narrative Jong states:

Memory is always impure. We need to make up narratives for ourselves that grow stronger with each retelling. Of course they depart from what really happened because what really happened was not fixed in language. Whatever is not fixed in language drifts away. Once we create a narrative, the underlying events diffuse like fog. A great deal of ink has been wasted on autobiography versus fiction, when the truth is that all autobiography is fiction and all fiction is autobiography. The important thing to remember is that we are narrative-making creatures. In making a narrative, one always employs choice (Jong 233).

In addition to sometimes contradicting memories, I observed some interesting manifestations in my mom and aunties surrounding memory and time perception. My mom experienced total memory loss for a small stage of her life. She cannot recall anything for a period following the imprisonment of her oldest sister Nora. My mom was eleven-years-old at the time and now says that it is as if an entire block of her memory was removed. My tía Nora described the retelling of certain parts of her life as if it was an experience that happened to someone else. She mentioned it more than once when discussing her time in prison. She says that not only does the retelling feel like someone else's story, but while in prison, she felt like it was happening to someone else and she was watching it happen. Like an out-of-body "witnessing" of herself. My tía Nancy repeated more than once that she recalls believing something could "never happen," even as she was living those very experiences. She remained in disbelief. Another interesting observation during the interviews was the perception of time and place. Each one of

them would use the terms “here” or “there” to describe the place they were in at the moment in their memory, not where they were physically in the present. For example, my tía Nora would refer to Cuba as “there” when recalling memories that took place when she had already exiled to the United States. However in the same interview Cuba became “here” when the memory included her time prior to exile. Finally, my sweet tía Idalia wrapped up each difficult memory of Cuba by noting the kindness shown by others, even those on the “other side.” She recalled the kindness of a guard who kept an eye out for her sister Nora during her time in prison. She recalled the kindness of the cab driver who took her and her sister Nancy to visit Nora at the prison. She recalled the kindness of one of Castro’s rebels, frustrated with his mandated search of an old lady’s home where she and Nancy had stayed the night. Idalia ran a thread through her memories that tied all these kindnesses which she believes influenced their fates. She followed many of her stories with a distant stare, wondering out loud whatever happened to those she met along the way.

Many of my family’s stories did not make their way into this thesis. For the sake of time and my sanity, I was limited in how many I could select, though I will return to them and build upon this base I have created. I set out to write a thorough and accurate collection of my family’s migration histories but what follows is a creative collection that I can summarize into three groupings.

The opening and closing story and poem, *Syncretized* and *Girasol* are my meditations on my thesis. *Girasol* was actually written first, but became evident it served best as the closing. Both of these writings hit me as a sort of stream of stream of consciousness on days between my “formal” writing sessions. I revised *Syncretized* several times, interweaving a story of my mom between the overlapping and merging maternal and sacred images of women, water, flowers, and

land. *Girasol* remained the same until one of my final thesis revisions, in which I added the last line of the poem as it suddenly became obvious and necessary to me.

Jose y Josefa, the second piece, serves as a prelude to the bulk of my thesis: the stories from the interview transcripts, told from the point of view of my mom and my aunts. In *Jose y Josefa* I tell the story from a narrator's point of view. It is loosely based on real events and real people but the dialogue, scenery, and sequences rely heavily on my imagination weaving together images from stories I grew up hearing.

Finally, the center of my thesis is made up of stories told in first-person point of view from the voices of my mom and my tías. Most of these follow the transcripts quite closely with a few additions of my own, interspersed for continuity and in a few instances, humor. Some exceptions include the stories told from my tía Nora's point of view: *On Discrimination*, *On Making Tea*, and *On Being an Exile*. These do not follow the transcripts as closely, rather I retold most of the details from memory as I've heard these stories many times. I also felt comfortable speaking in my tía Nora's voice and even blending mine in a bit, perhaps because I've spent so much time with her. I added a bit of my imagination to set the scenes in these stories, though they are true, *with a few embellishments*. The most obvious departure in the collection of my mom and tías' stories is in *Mimi – The Silences in Between (as told by her goddaughter)*. This story is written in my first-person point of view in which I list the things Mimi “doesn't like to talk about.”

When worrying about “getting these stories right,” I found both inspiration and blessing in the words of my Tía Nancy, taken from one of our interview transcripts and used within my thesis, which I also quote here:

Well, don't you know, what I was going to tell you is: don't feel bad if you write these stories and then one of us tells you, "That's not what I told you!" ... you see, it's just that when you write, you put your feelings into what you write. And the person who experienced the events has such strong feelings that cannot be expressed on paper. So when he sees it, what he is saying is, "This is not what I felt." (Gonzalez)

What follows are the stories of my family: present members and ancestors. The stories are theirs and they are mine. These stories come from memories, retellings, interviews, and my own imagination. I grew up hearing these stories but also paying attention to the silences in between. If you find yourself disoriented, as I often do, take a cue from the sunflower and turn to the sun. Absorb the energy and take from these stories what you may. That, I cannot dictate, nor would I want to if I could.

Syncretized

The girasol is the flower of Oshun. Girasol is the Spanish word for *sunflower*. Oshun is the Yoruba goddess of divinity, femininity, and sensuality. She is goddess of the sweet waters: the rivers and the streams. To honor Oshun, offer her honey and fill her alter with yellow flowers, sweet oranges, and copper. Adorn yourself in white, in yellows and gold. Oshun is our mother of fertility and of beauty.

When enslaved Africans brought to Cuba couldn't openly practice their Yoruba religion, Oshun was worshiped under the guise of the Catholic mother Mary, specifically of La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre. Nuestra Señora de la Caridad is our Lady who appeared at the bay near the river of el Cobre. She is the Patroness of Cuba. Her nickname is Cachita.

Oshun

is Caridad

is Cachita.

The term is they are *syncretized* .

On my altar stand both Oshun and Caridad. Oshun, adorned in gold jewelry, holds a mirror in her left hand and the fingers of her right hand run through her full, curly hair. A peacock feather crowns her head. She exudes strength and a sensual beauty. Caridad wears a full-length gown of linen. Adorned with a gold crown on her head, she holds the child Jesus in her left arm and a gold cross in her right hand. Her long, black hair peeks out behind a long blue

veil. She exudes strength and a modest beauty. Waves crash at the feet of both Oshun and Caridad, yet both stand calm and self-possessed.

In front of Oshun, I have laid a piece of gold. In front of Caridad, I have laid a light blue rosary. In between the two is a small glass vase, recovered from the Pacific Ocean, specifically from the waters of the Pacific Northwest. In this vase are five sunflowers, though they are not real. The real ones grow outside in my garden and I cannot bring myself to pluck them from the earth. Unlike the real sunflowers outside, the plastic ones on my alter do not turn to the sun. If the sun were to turn to them, he would find five vibrant beings unbothered by the label of artificiality. The sun would see these little flowers, with lush yellow petals all around, looking like little suns themselves. The sun would perhaps wonder if these little flowers do not turn to him because they have become little suns themselves and no longer need him.

Both Oshun and Caridad are celebrated in Cuba with a feast day of September 8th. My mom, Eyda, was born to Jose Leocadio Fuentes and Maria Josefa Azpeitia in Jovellanos, Matanzas, Cuba on September 8, 1949. By virtue of the date of her birth, Eyda Fuentes Azpeitia became Eyda de la Caridad Fuentes Azpeitia.

Eyda
is Caridad
is Cachita.

As sometimes happens with refugees, when Eyda left her land she left behind her mom, Maria Josefa. She left her mom, her dad, and three of her four sisters. She left her home at the

age of 12. Exiled from Cuba to Miami, she and her 15-year-old sister hoped to be quickly reunited with their parents and three older sisters. They planned on reuniting as soon as those left behind could get out.

As happens with working people, it took some time to get enough money for the rest to buy their tickets out. As happens with governments, regardless of their chosen form of corruption, it took some time to get the paperwork gathered and approved. As happens with threats of war and with missile crises, borders closed and Eyda's hoped-for reunification was indefinitely delayed.

Ninety miles of water separated the land on which Eyda was born from the land on which she now stood. The waters of Oshun and Caridad flowed around either side of Cuba, they followed young Eyda and met at the tip of Florida, a land named after *flores*, flowers. Eyda spent the next six months in a refugee camp in Miami, a city whose name means *big water*. Then Eyda and Mimi were sent to live in a foster home clear on the other side of the country, in Yakima, Washington. It was a strange and lonely land with no ocean in sight.

During those indefinite years of separation, Eyda missed her parents. She missed her mother, Maria Josefa. She had a foster mother in Yakima. Then for a short time had to leave that foster mother and move in with another foster mother, also in Yakima. She was eventually reunited with her first foster mother but it wasn't quite the same. It was like being twice exiled then allowed to come back to the first place of exile, once the locals felt comfortable with you and your sister again.

During all of this, Eyda missed her real mom as she grew from 12 to 13 to 14 to 15 and to 16. When she was almost 17 her parents finally came to Miami then to Yakima. Eyda finally hugged her mom. It turned out for Eyda, indefinite meant nearly five years. Eyda said that during

that time, when she missed her mom and was scared, she knew mother Mary was with her - so she was never really without a mom.

She had Caridad.

Oshun.

Cachita.

Maria Josefa.

When Eyda grew, she herself became a mom. A mom to six, all born in Seattle, in the Pacific Northwest. So far from her native land, but once again, near an ocean. By that time her dark brown hair reached all the way down her back. It was long, and shiny, and stick-straight flowy. It framed her big brown eyes and her petite, *pequeña* body.

She looked like a hippie with flowers in her hair - even if the flowers were actually just one flower. And that one flower, that Girasol, was invisible to all but her second daughter. Even Eyda didn't know it was there. But her daughter saw it clearly, though she never said a thing.

Before this daughter grew and became bigger than her little mother, she'd lay her head in her hippie mother's lap and look up at her pretty mother's face. Eyda looked down at her green-eyed daughter and wondered what the silent girl thought.

Her daughter reached her little arm up through the cascading dark hair. She reached behind her mother's ear. And using her little thumb and little forefinger, she plucked an invisible petal off the invisible sunflower and slowly lowered her arm and placed the petal in her pocket as she thought about how much her mamá looked like la Virgen Maria.

Like Cachita,

like Caridad,

like Oshun,

like Maria Josefa.

She looked like Cuba, like Seattle, like home.

Jose y Josefa, a prologue

In the early 1900s, in the small town of Jovellanos, in the Province of Matanzas, in the country of Cuba lived Jose Leocadio Fuentes. Jose hated his middle name. He omitted uttering *Leocadio* in his introductions. It tasted like metal in his mouth. Or like pretentiousness. It was an excess of syllables and he was a practical man. Jose didn't know didn't the name *Leocadio* belonged to him until much later in life. But that is a story for another time.

Jose was fourth of nine children, eight boys and one girl. The eight boys were brought up under the heavy hand of their father. The youngest child and only daughter was spoiled by her parents and her brothers alike. At the age of fourteen Jose was sent to work at the town mill. Finding school work too remedial for his tastes, Jose lost interest in his studies. His dad's solution was to pull him from school and put him to work. He was told it was time to wear long pants and learn to be a man. And that he did.

The Fuentes brothers were known for inheriting their father's work ethic, loyalty, and short temper. From their mother they inherited empathy, class, and harmless mischief. The one Fuentes sister embodied all of these traits, along with a spoiled sense of entitlement, which she used to her advantage in future courtships.

In this same town, during this same time, lived Maria Josefa Azpeitia. Maria Josefa was the fourth of thirteen children, seven girls and six boys. Each of the Azpeitia girls had Maria as either their first or middle name, except for the youngest sister, Blanca Ester. Blanca Ester went by her middle name, Ester, and lived her life free from the responsibilities of her older sisters and the expectations of sharing a name with the Holy Virgin Mother of God. Maria Josefa also went by her middle name, Josefa, or "Pepa" for short. This however, did not free her from the

obligations tied to being one of the eldest daughters. Josefa shared the household duties of cooking, cleaning, and the washboard with her sisters Ana Maria and Maria Lola. And so the eldest Marias learned to mother their younger siblings while still children themselves.

The Azpeitia sisters, the Marias, inherited their father's sparkling eyes and sense of propriety. From their mother they got the unfortunate combination of strict Spanish rules of etiquette and killer curvaceous figures. The Azpeitia brothers also possessed their father's sparkling eyes, but not so much his fidelity. They shared his tall, slender physique and as men, they were less bound by their mother's Spanish customs. Armed with good looks and the freedom afforded to their gender, they fully embraced their Caribbean inheritance: good music, good drink, and plenty of beautiful women. Like the Fuentes men, they understood the importance of hard work, but they also embraced the power of their charm.

The union of Jose Leocadio Fuentes and Maria Josefa Azpeitia though gradual, seemed inevitable. The beautiful, blue-eyed Josefa saw in Jose a kind, intelligent, loyal companion. The humble but handsome, dark-eyed Jose saw in Josefa a quiet and strong woman who would love him unconditionally and keep him in line. They fell in love and agreed to marry, but not until Jose had worked enough to save the money needed to provide a little security. They lived the first part of their lives together as they had begun their courtship: steady and methodical, simply and with love. Jose and Josefa had five daughters, or rather two sets of girls. The first three, Nora, Idalia, and Nancy, were all born within three years of each other. The babies, Mirvia (Mimi) and Eyda, were born six and nine years later, respectively. None of the Fuentes Azpeitia girls had middle names, as Jose still carried resentment towards his own, and Josefa, while a devout Catholic, didn't want to impose the responsibility of being a *Maria* onto her daughters. However, the baby, Eyda, born on the eighth of September shared the day with *Our Lady of*

Charity, the Patron of Cuba. Therefore she inherited the baptismal name of Eyda *de la Caridad* Fuentes Azpeitia. Despite their best efforts, it seems the youngest daughter of Jose and Josefa was destined to inherit the burden of being a *Maria*.

The Fuentes Azpeitia girls were given the best traits of both families. Yes, they were still bound by societal rules of gender of their time and by their *Abuela*'s Spanish customs, but Jose's stubbornness prevailed in his home. Jose loved his girls fiercely and raised them to be independent and self-sufficient. They were each confident, intelligent, beautiful, and capable. The Fuentes Azpeitia daughters spent their evenings in the living room reading in silent communion with their father as their mother prepared dinner in the kitchen. Their father encouraged them to think critically and question authority (other than his and Josefa's). While serving dinner, their mother routinely threatened them with, "if you don't want to spend your lives cooking for and cleaning after your own children, get an education so you can afford to pay someone to do it for you!" Once, Nora, the eldest, made the mistake of complaining to her mother about the sub-par ironing of her school uniform skirt, resulting in uneven pleats. That was the last day her mother ever cleaned or ironed a uniform. She handed the skirt back to Nora and informed her three eldest daughters that thanks to Nora, they could add "uniform wash and press" to their daily tasks. Perhaps before their nightly reading sessions.

That night was a night like any other, Josefa in her kitchen, preparing dinner while Jose and their five daughters quietly read their books in the living room. The girls were avid readers, just like their father. Even Eyda, not yet school-aged, read on her own. Years later, Nora would praise the brilliance of her youngest sister while Nancy would argue that she, herself, deserved the praise. Tired of Eyda's nightly requests for bedtime stories, Nancy taught her baby sister to read at the age of three.

Josefa hummed as she stirred the *frijoles negros*, savoring the silence that only came this time each day. Jose broke the silence in addressing his daughters, “I want you to learn to do everything a man does, so you never marry of necessity, only by choice,” a variation of things he’d told them countless times before. By then an accomplished mechanic, Jose taught his daughters to fix anything, from cars to broken appliances.

“Papi, why don’t you ever buy Mami roses?,” Nancy asked, glancing at the bouquet of carnations in the kitchen.

Josefa had paused from stirring the *frijoles negros* to rearrange the pink carnations in her vase. She answered without lifting her eyes, “because, *mija*, roses are for funerals, their perfume is the scent of death.” Josefa once read that some roses have been so hybridized that they lost their scent. She remembered the overwhelming sense of sorrow she felt at reading that. She thought it is better to be the scent of death than have no scent at all. The whistle of the pressure cooker interrupted her sadness. Josefa wiped her hands on her apron and called her family to the dinner table.

Life in Jovellanos was for the most part, simple and pleasant. Though balmy days were spent in hard work, the breezy evenings brought large extended families together over *café Cubano* and endless conversation. Don Pascual Azpeitia and Doña Antonia Faura Ramos were the parents of Maria Josefa and her twelve siblings. Their home sat on a corner lot, on a relatively busy road in town. It was the biggest house on the block, fit for the biggest family in town. It shared a courtyard with the next-door neighbors. The house was tasteful and modest and filled with life. The home of Pascual and Antonia, more commonly referred to as “Abuela’s home” was the center where everyone gathered. The thirteen Azpeitia siblings, their spouses and

children, their spouses' siblings, friends of the family, family of the friends, everyone gathered at Abuela's home. In the long, hot, overcast summers of Jovellanos, they gathered at Abuela's home. In the short, humid, windy winters of Jovellanos, they gathered at Abuela's home. The men who worked in the mills of Jovellanos, they gathered at Abuela's home. The men who worked the red earth of Jovellanos, they gathered at Abuela's home. The dapper young men, decked out in their linen shirts who strolled outside the village limits of Jovellanos, they came back and gathered at Abuela's home. The beautiful young women, who wore their hair short and wore their hair long, who studied hard in the schools of Jovellanos, they gathered at Abuela's home. The older women who cleaned homes, who cooked meals, who taught classes, who worked the groceries, who read fortunes, who kept the town of Jovellanos alive, they gathered at Abuela's home. And Abuela, Doña Antonia Faura Ramos, mother of thirteen, who was the midwife of Jovellanos, who delivered half the babies of Jovellanos, she welcomed all in her home.

When they gathered at Abuela's home, the older men congregated in the courtyard, the older women sat in chairs, lining the three walls of the living room. The cousins, the young men and the young women, they sat on the front porch and visited and talked and bantered for hours. The young men bragged of their mischief and the young women scolded them. Men would drive around and around the block, to smile at the beautiful Azpeitia girls, and the young Azpeitia men teased their girl cousins. Then the generations gathered in the living room and drank *cafecitos* and talked, all at once, for hours and hours longer. The siblings, and cousins, and friends, and friends of cousins, and cousins of friends - really, they were all *hermanos*, and they gathered together. And when it was time to leave, they'd spend the next twenty minutes giving a goodbye kiss on the cheek to each of each one of their tios and tias. This tradition of gathering at Abuela's

house, it continued through the generations. The young people would go off to Havana to study or to various towns to work, but they'd all eventually go back to Jovellanos and to Abuela's house.

It was an early summer evening in the year 1952. Having finished dinner, Jose, Josefa, and their five daughters walked the few blocks to Abuela's house. Though the hot, rainy season had not yet begun, the evening was warm and balmy. Nora carried a basket of linens her mother had brought home from Abuela's house the night before. Josefa washed them early that morning and hung them to dry in the day's hot sun. She folded them after dinner while her daughters freshened up. Now Nora, the eldest daughter, was in charge of carrying them back to her abuela. Idalia, the artist, grinned in anticipation of the chorus of praise awaiting her from her abuela and her tias once they saw the painting cradled in her arms that she made of a Jovellanos sunset. Nancy, the youngest of the oldest three, or the middle child, depending on how you look at it, brought a container of freshly made *dulce de toronja*. She tore off little bites whenever her mother wasn't looking. Josefa walked hand in hand with her little daughter Mimi, while Jose carried Eyda piggy-back style.

Arriving at Abuela's, the girls greeted each elder hello with a kiss on the cheek. What should've taken no more than five minutes took nearly fifteen. Each tía took turns holding each girl hostage by the hands. They showered them with compliments regarding their beauty while grilling them with questions about their studies. They offered unsolicited advice on topics such as posture, manners, whether or not they could have chosen a more flattering haircut, and so

forth. The never-ending greetings finally ended with a “*que Dios te bendiga,*” (may God bless you) before letting the girls join their cousins outside.

Jose joined the men in the courtyard for their usual discussions and debates surrounding politics, philosophy, and the latest mischiefs of his brothers-in-law. They spent the better part of the first hour in serious dialogue about Batista’s recent coup d’état and arguing as to what was to become of Cuba. Jose paced like a lion while trying to convince his brothers-in-law of the severity of the implications of the military takeover. The more they tried to calm him, the faster he paced. Incredulous at their casual demeanor, Jose yelled, "Cuba has been disgraced! Fulgencio Batista is a disgrace!"

“Yeah, but have you gotten a load of his wife Marta? She’s got a body like a bottle of Coca-Cola!” exclaimed Pascualito and the courtyard erupted in laughter, including Jose.

Inside, Abuela and her daughters, Abuela’s sisters and their daughters, sat in chairs lining all four walls of the living room. They had dark hair and they had light hair. They were slender and they were curvaceous. Their eyes were brown, and green, and blue. They were pale and they were tan. They had long hair, pulled back tightly. They had short hair, hanging loosely. Their hair was straight and their hair was curly. The four walls of the living room were lined with women.

They all talked at once, yet no one missed a thing that was said. Josefa sipped café with Mimi at her feet and Eyda on her lap. Nora, Idalia, and Nancy were outside with the older cousins. The chorus of women’s chatter stopped only for a few seconds each time the door opened to a new guest, followed by explosions of greetings: *¡Hola! ¡Bienvenidos! ¡Adelante!*

It was well into the evening but the strong, sweet café kept coming. Little sips from little demitasse cups fueled the women between discussions of politics, philosophy, children, and

town news. Having stolen several sips of café, little Mimi jumped down from her mother's lap and ran to the bathroom. On her way back to the living room, she ran past her mom to the front door, hoping to evade her mother's notice so she could join her big sisters and cousins outside. Never missing a thing, Josefa sat little Eyda on the floor in order to intercept Mimi's escape. However, this proved unnecessary. Once Mimi opened the door, she looked up to find a pretty, middle-aged woman with olive skin and golden-speckled green eyes looking down at her from the other side. Her jet-black hair was parted in the middle and cascaded down her back in a thick, tight braid. "I could climb that braid," thought Mimi, though she didn't dare try, knowing such a rebellion would surely elicit a spanking from both her abuela and her mamá.

Josefina smiled down at Mimi as if she understood the child's silent whim. "*Hola muñca linda* (hello pretty doll)," she said, scooping her up and planting a loud kiss on her cheek. Mimi giggled and threw her arms around Josefina. Josefina was a close friend of the family, and the town tarot reader. She was known throughout Jovellanos and beyond for her accurate fortune readings. Josefina preferred not reading the fortunes of those she loved, because the cards revealed the good and the bad. Doña Antonia (Abuela), preferred placing her trust in her Catholic faith rather than the Tarot, however she also respected the possibility of other truths and had a cautious attitude of "you don't mess with what you don't understand." On this, Josefina and Doña Antonia agreed.

However Doña Antonia's youngest and most curious daughter Ester (Josefa's youngest sister) could no longer resist the temptation. Despite her mother's disapproval, she begged Josefina to read their cards. The ever-persuasive Ester successfully charmed Josefina into agreement and her mother into reluctant approval. The curious women gathered around the dining room table. At one end sat Doña Antonia with her dark hair pulled back in her signature

tight bun and her bare lips tightly pursed into a perfectly straight line. Arms crossed over her chest, she hugged her embroidered shawl firmly around her shoulders. At the other end of the table sat Josefina, whose braid wrapped itself around the left side of her neck and shoulder, and cascaded down the front side of her body, clear down to her waist. Her own shawl hung loosely around her shoulders and its fringes shook with each shuffling of the tarot deck. At her right sat Ester, wearing a loose linen dress in the same light blue shade of her eyes. Wavy blond hair barely reached the tops of her shoulders, yet she kept brushing her hair back, away from her face as if her mane were much longer than it was. The graceful yet quick flick of her fingers indicated this was more for show than out of habit. Her lightly painted pink lips parted into a crooked smile as Josefina began laying down the cards.

By this time, Nora, Idalia and Nancy had entered their Abuela's house, summoned from the porch by curiosity over the sudden silence inside. In the absence of the familiar chaos of their tías' loud chatter, the silence became a spectacle. Nora watched her tía Ester's right foot rapidly tap as Josefina's cards consulted of present situations, challenges, and past influences. Ester had no interest in introspection. Nora saw her tía's leg become still and her posture erect when she heard Josefina utter the word "future" as she turned over the sixth card. The card showed the backs of three people in a boat. The man stood rowing a woman and a child in the water to a land on the other side. The woman's head was covered with a yellow cloak as she sat huddled next to her young child. Both leaned forward either from cold or somber dispositions. Ester couldn't tell as their faces were not visible. Ahead of the woman and child, the boat was lined with six large swords, standing tall and seemingly staked along the bottom of the boat.

Josefina quickly glanced at Doña Antonia before turning her gaze to Ester's eyes.

The Six of Swords. Mija, this card can be positive or it can be negative. It signifies moving away from something, leaving things behind, breaking with the past... but most clearly, it signifies a journey. The card is upright, which is usually a positive. Now, with the combination of the Temperance card, it seems to suggest you will be moving far away from here. This could be a physical move, a spiritual or emotional move, or all of the above.

With a dramatic sweep of her arm over the tarot spread before her, Ester raised her eyebrows at Doña Antonia. “Did you hear that Mami? I guess I’m moving to Habana and finally leaving this little town behind!” Unflinching, her mother glared back. The tightening grasp of her shall was the only movement she made. “Ana Maria, you next!” declared Ester, getting up and making room for her older sister.

Ana Maria glanced at the head of the table. Seeing her mother’s nod, she walked over and took her seat next to Josefina. With her elbows on the table and palms held together, Ana Maria rested her cheek on the back of her left hand. Doña Maria excused the faux pas of the elbows on the table, seeing the intensity of her daughter’s concentration. Ana Maria’s dark hair framed her delicate face and deep blue eyes. She listened intently to every consult, glancing at her mother with the turn of each card. Josefina and Doña Maria briefly locked eyes after the revelation of Ana Maria’s fifth and sixth cards: Temperance and the Six of Swords.

Next came the turn of Doña Antonia’s second oldest daughter, Maria Lola. Lola took her seat and tucked her short brown hair behind her ears before placing her hands in her lap. Her big brown eyes followed Josefina’s hands and her long lashes blinked at the turn of each card. They stayed wide open however, as the fifth and sixth cards revealed themselves: Temperance and the

Six of Swords. Lola jumped up and made room for her sister, Maria Josefa, to take her place next to Josefina.

Josefa handed Eyda to her daughter Nancy and sat down. Mimi sat at her feet and wrapped her arms around Josefa's right leg. Idalia and Nora watched from the corner. Josefa could hear the voices of her husband Jose and her brothers in courtyard. While she couldn't make out the words, she was lulled by the rhythm of their chatter. As Josefina shuffled the deck, Josefa's mind wandered to her home, to her kitchen, and settled on her pink carnations. An eruption of laughter from outside transported her back to her mother's home, the home of her youth, and the dinner table over which she'd shared countless meals. She kept her pale blue eyes locked with the deep brown eyes belonging to her mother. The images on the cards in her periphery became blurrier with each turn, as she held her mother's gaze. Without a word exchanged, they understood each other's thoughts. Without a single tear shed, they felt their shared sorrow. Josefa turned her eyes to Josefina as she flipped the fifth and sixth cards: Temperance and the Six of Swords, reversed.

Josefina stood and removed her shawl, wrapping it around Josefa.

Mi amor, like your sisters, you too have a journey ahead of yourself, for you and for your daughters. Though this spread hints at a more final kind of journey. It may be a relationship that ends because of a death, or a journey away from a familiar, beloved place. Though this change may not be an easy decision to make, the Six of Swords together with the Temperance card indicate it is the right decision for you. Though showing themselves in the reverse, I'm afraid this indicates a journey from which you will never return. I am sorry Josefa. And Doña Antonia, I am so sorry.

Josefina gathered her cards and quickly excused herself, forgoing the customary goodbye kisses.

The Azpeitia women exchanged silent glances. Ester broke the silence. “*Pero está loca esa mujer?* Is she crazy? She’s sending us all away! And Josefa never coming back? That homebody has never stepped a foot outside of Jovellanos!”

The women all laughed at the absurdity. The men entered to find the women laughing and crying ambiguous tears. They weren’t certain if the tears and the laughter came from happiness, sorrow, exhaustion or all of the above, yet they didn’t bother to ask. They were used to the strong Azpeitia women, filled with strong emotions and desires tempered by their even stronger wills. The extended family exchanged their goodnight kisses on the cheek and each family walked to their own little homes.

That night as Josefa kissed her daughters goodnight, she placed her hand on their foreheads, one by one. She asked *La Virgen de la Caridad* to bestow her blessings of protection on each of her beloved girls: Nora *the fierce eldest*, Idalia *the thoughtful artist*, Nancy *the outspoken one*, Mimi *the funny sweet one*, and Eyda *the brave youngest*.

Idalia - On the Cause of What We've Been Through and How Papi Knew

You do know that Nora was imprisoned, right? I can tell you the story from my perspective, because I went along as a companion. When do you want me to start? From when Papi paced like a lion? Yes, yes that is where I need to begin because that's the cause of what we've been through.

It was the year of 1952. It was March 10, 1952. What happened on March 10th of that year, it opened the way to the communism that we still have, now. Batista gave the coup d'état. When we arrived home from school for our lunch break, Papi was like a madman. He had his hands on his head and was walking back and forth like a lion. He said to himself, "Cuba has been disgraced. This is a disgrace." We were all home; Nora hadn't left for Havana yet. That was still a year away. Nora was 14, I was 13, and Nancy was 12. Mimi and Eyda were too young to understand, but us three, we could tell something was very wrong. That's why when we arrived home for lunch and found Papi like that, we asked him, "What's wrong? What's the matter?"

"Batista led a coup d'état."

"Papi, what is a coup d'état?"

"It means that the military took power."

It was six months before the presidential election and the military took power, ousting the sitting president who was likely to be reelected. We didn't like that, none of us did. Neither we who were children, nor did the village either. And at that time the president was Carlos Prío. Some of the army chiefs from our province, and the students from the university, they went to see him and told him that they would fight against the coup d'état. But Carlos Prío said that he didn't want blood shed on his behalf and so he left with his family to Miami. So Batista and his

army assumed power. And then within the year, I don't remember when the Moncada Attack was, maybe it was a few years later... Still, it seemed quite fast. Fidel Castro led an attack on the Moncada barracks. It was a failed mission but it got the attention of Batista's government. Batista was already a corrupt dictator, that was obvious by the way he took power, but he continued taking away rights and taking the lives of those who threatened his power. With the exception of those who benefitted from Batista's corruption, we Cubans wanted to return to the constitutional government of before. There were several groups forming with the intention of taking our government back. People were ready for a revolution.

Well, Papi had worked in the mill from the age of fourteen. He did not go much to school, but he liked to read a lot and was very quick to realize things. The communists in the mill tried to recruit him because he was quite intelligent. So he did what he always did: he read up on it. When he read what communism was, he said it wasn't for him. He said he didn't like it because in communism the person, the individual, was nothing to them. So Papi, he was anti-communist from the start. Although he had two close friends who were communists of the old kind, you know, "book communists." Gauboso and Bausa. They remained constant friends of his though they had a difference of opinion. Later, when Fidel Castro declared himself communist, that is where we saw a certain division between his party and the old communists. Maybe they realized this wasn't the communism of their books. Or maybe they realized this was rubbish.

So, there was the Moncada Attack. Fidel Castro gets taken prisoner along with the others who attacked the barracks alongside him. While in prison, he writes the famous book which he later used in a speech. Oh, the name of the book escapes me. Nancy, what was the name of the book?

“History Will Absolve Me.” That book is beautiful. That man was intelligent and he wrote beautifully. Because Fidel Castro, he was a...

He was a lawyer.

He was a son of a bitch like no other.

Nancy, you don't have to swear, others will read this.

Oh! Sorry!

Well, he was a lawyer.

He was a lawyer and he knew how to speak.

And very intelligent. And he always liked to be number one. He was never satisfied with what he achieved. It reminds me a lot of...you know, Trump. Except Trump doesn't share Fidel's intelligence. Anyway, Fidel is imprisoned by Batista after the attack on the barracks. Then, the Archbishop of Santiago de Cuba, Enrique Pérez-Serantes, he used his influence and saved Fidel. Fidel goes to Mexico and recruits others to go back to Cuba and fight alongside him. Then came the landing of the Granma where Fidel Castro came with Che Guevara. He was also a disgrace, that Che Guevara. So they come on the boat, the Granma... Oh well, what was I getting at?

Well, we were going to land on the story of Nora... when Nora was imprisoned. But you started the story earlier.

Oh, yes, because I started with before... In the year 1952 was Batista's coup d'état. In '53 I went to study in Habana, I was 14 and a half years old when I went to Habana and graduated as a kindergarten teacher in the year 57. But I had always wanted to study painting so I enrolled at San Alejandro Fine Arts school, just outside of Habana. In that same year, 1957, there was an attack on the palace against Batista by the *Autenticos* and of the students of the *Directorio*

Revolucionario Estudiantil (DRE). That is when José Antonio Echeverría, the president of Student Federation and founder of the DRE, was killed. After the attack, the University of Habana closed. Because of this, there were about five students from the university enrolled at San Alejandro. We became close friends. There was Yoel Diaz, who later became the president of the university militia. There was also Abelardo Guzman, who was the son of the mayor of Cienfuegos. There was Danilo Rivero, who was from Pinar del Río, and was studying to be an engineer. The rest were there to study architecture. Oh, and there was the one who was from Honduras, who went by “the Honduran” Raul Castillo. And another one whose name I don’t remember. They were studying there until the university reopened. Eventually many of them left, leaving only Yoel. And when the school year was over Yoel said to me, “I’m going to have to go into exile to Miami.” You see, Yoel had been heavily involved with *Directorio* and had participated in certain revolutionary things, which now meant he was in danger of imprisonment or even death. And so Yoel went to Miami.

I had been working, but since I couldn't get a permanent job, I went back to my village and began working at the San José school as a Kindergarten teacher. It was during that time that the revolution triumphed. Batista left and soon after the revolutionaries from the various groups began to come from the mountains. Those from the *26 de Julio* came down from the Sierra Maestra. The *Autenticos* and the *Directorio Revolucionarios* came down from the Escambray, which was in the centermost province of the island. But the one that was best known in Cuba was the *26 de Julio*. They began to descend little by little, those of the Sierra, and when Fidel Castro arrived, he passed through Jovellanos. And all the people were very happy. The whole village cheered as Fidel and the militiamen paraded through our streets. Well, *not everyone* cheered. Fidel and the militiamen came down wearing rosaries. They refused to accept candy

being offered to them by excited kids in the crowd. Papi watched the spectacle from the side of the road. He removed his cap from his head and held it in front of his waist, not in an act of respect, but rather to hide his clenched fists from the view of the militiamen. *Why wear rosaries around your neck yet refuse the offer of candy from a child? Such puritanism doesn't sit well with me.*

And there was a woman from China, *la China Irene*, she ran to my grandmother's house when she saw the militiamen passing by. My abuela opened her door to find her friend frantic on the other side. She placed her arm around the woman and escorted her to the couch. Handing her a glass of water she wiped the tears from Irene's face. Irene sipped the water and took several calming breaths. *Same as in China, the same as in China.* And I remember thinking that I felt sorry for her as I watched from the kitchen. *She is wrong about this being like China. China is very far away and we are in Cuba. That cannot happen here.* But it gave me pity and that always remained in my mind. I started paying attention and began noticing the signs.

Nora - On Discrimination

I remember before leaving Cuba, Papi's friend, Valdivieso, was at our house. He and Papi had shared many discussions regarding the declining freedoms in Cuba. Eyda and Mimi had already exiled to the United States. We were planning our exile and Papi asked Valdivieso why he didn't want to leave Cuba. He answered, "Here, they persecute me for not integrating, but there, as a black man, they won't let me integrate." You see, even discrimination is different in different places.

Of course there was discrimination in Cuba. My town of Jovellanos had a fairly even mix of white and black residents, and a significant amount of Chinese immigrants too. But we were all Cubans. Not like here in the United States, where people who have been here for many, many generations are referred to as Chinese, or Russian, or German because of a great-great-great grandparent. I never understood that. We were all Cubans. In Jovellanos, most were *guajiros* and proud. But it was the 1950s and while we went to the same schools, worked the same jobs, visited each other's homes, there was still an obvious divide. Interracial marriage or even interracial dating was uncommon and not acceptable. I'm not sure who decided it was unacceptable but it seemed like most everyone subscribed to it and lived by it. Racism is so complicated but also so simple. It shouldn't exist, but it does. Being a small town, everyone knew everyone's business. People knew my uncles dated *mulatas* but they married *blancas* and some still kept dating *mulatas* after marrying *blancas*. Does this mean they are racist? I don't know. Like I said, in simple terms, yes, we were part of the racism. In complicated terms...*how can I begin to explain?*

In Cuba, at least then, prior to the revolution, when you turned fourteen you went to the *secundaria*. It was like what here they call high school. But unlike here, by the time you reached the *secundaria*, you pretty much knew what career path you were to take. My sisters Idalia and Nancy, for example, both studied to be teachers. Then after the *secundaria*, you went to the University if you wished to further focus your studies. Being the eldest, I was the first to go. My sisters joined me the next two years. My parents knew a well-off couple, also name Josefa and Jose, who lived in Habana and who were willing to take us in to their home so we could attend the *secundaria* in the city.

As soon as I was old enough, I got a job in a beautiful department store in Habana. We sold glamorous, high-end dresses from makers like Coco Chanel. They were gorgeous. I was friends with an exceptionally talented seamstress, from a small town like mine, who altered and repaired clothing for the people of Habana. I wore my hair in the short style of those days. At the department store, we were required to wear skirts or dresses and stocking with the seam up the back. I say required, but I would have worn them anyway. Though I was on the skinny side, I had shapely legs like all the Azpeitia women, and I looked quite good in dresses and stockings. I completed my look with bright red lipstick. It complemented my dark hair and dark eyes, and since I wore little other makeup, I looked glamorous, not trashy. I must say, I loved city life! Although my tastes were for haute couture, my budget was more conservative. So my seamstress friend would visit me while I was at work and pretend to be a customer. I'd lead her to the dress I coveted, and she'd take a mental picture. She was that good! Within a week or less, she'd sew me an exact replica. I believe in the U.S. they call it a "knock-off."

Life in Habana was quite enchanted, especially once my sisters arrived. The house we lived in was huge, and right in the center of the city. Directly across the street was a beautiful

cathedral where lavish weddings were held practically every weekend. My sisters and I never tired of sitting on the balcony and watching the young couples and the large, spirited gatherings. One thing was obvious, we Cubans knew how to celebrate, whether in the city or in a small town like mine.

We also liked to hang out in the kitchen with our friend, Serafín. Serafín was the cook. He was our friend, but I think we mostly gravitated to him because he reminded us of our uncles back home. Serafín was older and very tall, like our uncles. He was a dark-skinned black man and a *santero*. His voice was always raspy after a holy weekend as he was *un gallo*, one who would lead the call-and-response. Nancy, Idalia and I surrounded him and begged him to tell us more about his weekend and why his voice was nearly gone. Serafín would shake his finger at us three, *eso no es para ustedes, blancitas (that is not for you, little white girls)*.

Nancy glanced at the corner kitchen nook. She walked over and studied the configuration of sixteen cowrie shells. She ran her perfect red nails in circles around them, careful not to touch the shells. *Please, Serafín. Why won't you read my divination through the caracoles?*

Serafín smiled at the bold and curious Nancy. *Absolutely not, mija. Caracoles tell the truth, and I don't want you to worry about what may come.*

We also shared the home with Josefa's niece, Emilita. Emilita was a beautiful *mulata*. She was one of the most beautiful women I'd met, but it was through her that I witnessed some of the ugliest behavior I'd seen in my young life. For reasons I could not understand, Emilita despised Serafín and resented our friendship with him. She'd insult him every chance she got, calling him things I cannot repeat.

“What do you mean you things you can’t repeat, Nora. Emilita said them, it happened. Not repeating them won’t make them any better and won’t take the insults back from Serafin! She called him negro feo, negro sucio. She told him he only hung around us because he liked blancas.”

“Nancy, this is my story, you’ll get your turn.”

“Then Serafin told her, ‘No, I like spending time with them because unlike you, they have never disrespected me. They bring their dishes to the kitchen. They wash their own dishes and keep me company. And you, young lady, with your insults about my blackness, you are just as black as I.’”

“Oh my I remember that. Emilita was furious. She told him, “I’d rather marry a low-life white man than a high-class black man.”

“And if I recall right, she went on to do just that!”

I have to tell you, that made me so angry, and now that memory makes me sad. I remember wondering how a person, especially a lady, could treat another so badly, especially a man as kind as Serafin. We had been raised to treat others with respect.

One day, about a year or two later, I stopped by the kitchen to wish Serafin a nice holiday, as I was headed home to Jovellanos during our school break. Idalia and Nancy had left days earlier, but I had stayed back to work a few days at the department store to assist with the holiday rush. I was sad to find the kitchen empty and figured he’d caught an earlier train. As I exited the front door, I put down my suitcases to lock up behind me. I heard Serafin call from the street. “Nora! Are you headed to the train? So am I, let me carry your bags for you.”

At that moment I caught myself thinking, *what if someone I know sees me walking with an older black man?* I was ashamed at myself for thinking it, but I also understood the repercussions of perception.

“Oh, Serafin, I couldn’t ask you to do that. I’ll carry my bags. Or maybe I’ll call a taxi to take me to the station.”

“Chica, no, don’t be silly. I’ll gladly carry them.”

Well, what could I do now? I couldn’t decline his offer a second time, he would surely catch on to my hesitation. “Gracias, Serafin, that is very kind of you.”

“Claro que si, Nora.” And at that Serafin grabbed my bags and I started walking toward the train station when I noticed he was no longer beside me. I turned to see what had happened and noticed he intentionally placed himself several paces behind me, to keep up my appearances.

“Serafin,” I called, “what are you doing? Come walk with me!”

We walked together to the station and each caught the train headed to our respective little towns. I cried the entire way home, understanding I was someone who could hurt a man as kind as Serafin.

Idalia - Revolutionaries, Communism, and a Pact with the Devil

I never finished telling you about the day Nora went to prison. Where did I leave off? Oh yes, the revolution triumphed and almost everyone I knew, was celebrating. But not Papi, and not *La China Irene*.

Nora, Nancy and I travelled to Habana and met with Yoel and the others to hear Fidel speak. And when Fidel first came...ah! When Fidel Castro arrived in Habana, during the first speech he gave, he called the leaders of the other revolutionary groups, *lidercillos*, little leaders. We looked at each other in disbelief. He said it right in front Chomón, one of the founding members and leaders of the Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil. Also present were fellow founding members of the DRE, including Cubela, among other revolutionary leaders. Chomón, who was always "Mr. I don't put up with anything" just stood there and took it. Not one of these revolutionary leaders said a thing. They stayed and they just took it. I remember the shock on your face, Nora.

Shock and disgust! I couldn't believe my own ears and eyes. I was disgusted by Fidel's contempt, but I tell you one thing, the others proved him right. I looked around the room, expecting argument, but they just took it. They were lidercillos after all.

And then a few days later, addressing the same groups he said, "and weapons, for what?" He wanted to take away the weapons from all the other groups, who had fought for the same thing. He especially wanted to disarm the students and the DRE. Do you remember that, Nancy?

Yes, well, because he had already killed. And I say "he" because it was the communist party, they had already killed Echeverría..

Yes, Echeverría was killed in the attack on the palace.

And Echeverría, he had been a man of integrity.

Yes.

And Fidel had killed one of the Moras.

Yes, from the Mora brothers.

I don't know if Menelaus?

Yes, it was Menelaus.

Mora. He had killed him...

Yes, in the palace attack, right Nora?

Yes, Menelao Mora was killed, in the Ataca Palacio. But Nancy, you need to quit painting such an abstract picture. I despise the communists as you do, but Echeverría and the Mora boys were killed before the revolution triumphed, and well before Castro declared himself communist. Batista was still in power. José Antonio Echeverría was President of the Federation of University Students (Federación Estudiantil Universitaria - FEU) and another founding member of the DRE. Batista's regime killed him as a result of the attacks on the palace. They attacked the palace and then, knowing they had a small window of time, they went to the national radio station during a popular music program. Echeverría interrupted the broadcast and gave a three-minute anti-Batista speech. He escaped the station before Batista's army arrived but was killed in a shoot-out with them blocks away. Echeverría was a man of integrity and bravery. I don't think he would've accepted being called a lidercillo.

No, Nora he wasn't killed by Batista. Communism, when communism takes over, it has all these contradictions.

No Nancy, you cannot blame this on communism. José Antonio and the Mora boys were killed by the Batista government, the communists were not yet in power.

And the Humboldt 7 too?

Yes. The Humboldt 7 were killed by Batista's government. The police were told that those responsible for the attack on the palace were hiding at the Humboldt 7 apartments. They found four unarmed members of the DRE and executed them. Batista's regime was brutal, don't forget that.

But the one who snitched to the police on those four, he was a communist! You remember that, don't you, Idalia?

The one that handed over those of Humboldt 7, who let Batista's men know where the students were hiding, he was later publicly tried by Fidel's government. When Fidel Castro took power by playing the role of the puritan, they were going to shoot that man for having been a snitch. I don't remember how that ended, but I know that they gave much publicity to the fact that they had caught him and were going to sentence him. So that seems to contradict your theory, Nancy, but it doesn't mean the communists were innocent.

Because when there is communism, everyone tries to encourage the grudge between one and the other. And even those of the same "side."

That is true. Even now, here, we couldn't get behind one democratic candidate and we ended up with Trump. I never in a million years thought in the U.S., we'd end up with a man so similar to Castro. I felt like crying. I felt like *la China Irene!*

Listen, you are not la China Irene, you are la Cubana Idalia. And don't come at me with the Trump-Castro comparisons when we both know the real communist is Bernie Sanders.

Nancy, I did not vote for Bernie, I voted for Hilary!

Also a communist.

Nancy, you are ridiculous!

Idalia, this conversation is ridiculous. I was talking about Cuba, not about here. Do you remember after José Antonio Echeverría's murder, his post was taken by Chomón?

Yes, Faure Chomón.

But Chomón had neither the personality, nor the respect that Echeverría had. Do you understand? Echeverría was respected by the students and by all the other groups. He even talked to Fidel Castro, you know. He spoke with Fidel Castro.

Yes, he went to Mexico when Fidel Castro was in exile, and planning the Granma Attack. José Antonio Echeverría, who was then the president of the Students Federation, went to Mexico. And when he returned and the story goes that he said of meeting Fidel, "I have made a pact with the devil."

Well, at least we didn't end up with Bernie. Talk about a pact with the devil.

Nancy, if by the devil you mean Trump, then yes, a pact was certainly made.

Nancy - Even When You Live It, You Don't Believe It

Idilio, my cousin, he was a policeman in our province of Matanzas. He had been a part of the revolution against Batista. So when the revolution triumphed, he was given a post as a policeman, alongside a commander of the revolution from our province. One day, one of Idilio's brothers *se alzó*, he ran away to the mountains with the counterrevolutionaries. When the others found out about Idilio's brother, he was transferred to smaller police station with almost no weapons. Idilio understood the danger he was in - by that time Fidel Castro's government had captured and killed many counterrevolutionaries. So Idilio *se alza*, joining the counterrevolutionaries in the mountains.

But within about two months they are found. Fidel's rebels surround them, kill two of them, and capture the rest...

—

Well, don't you know, what I was going to tell you is: don't feel bad if you write these stories and then one of us tells you, "That's not what I told you!" Because my cousin, Deisy, she had written Idilio's story according to what he had told her. And according to Deisy when she showed it to Idilio, he said, "I didn't tell you that!" And I read what Deisy had written, and it was just as I remembered. But you see, it's just that when you write, you put your feelings into what you write. And the person who experienced the events has such strong feelings that cannot be expressed on paper. So when he sees it, what he is saying is, "This is not what I felt." And that cousin of mine, I have a lot of pity for him. He was 20 years a prisoner, and when he got out, he

believed he was once again young, you know? Poor thing lost 20 years and he wanted to recover them. And in life you do not recover anything. What happened, happened and that's it.

Back to Idilio's capture...

He was with a friend known as *el Sheriff*. So Idilio, *el Sheriff*, and seven others are captured and loaded into a dump truck used to transport them to the barracks. They shot *el Sheriff*, opening a hole right in his chest. One of the other captured, Enrique Revoredo found a sack in the back of the truck and holds it to *el Sheriff's* chest, saving his life.

They were all imprisoned. Idilio and *el Sheriff* were sentenced to death. With the invasion of *Playa Giron*, or the Bay of Pigs, Fidel and his army began shooting many of those that were imprisoned. Word of these killings spread throughout the world and the United Nations protested, even the Pope protested! So the killings slowed, but people were being thrown and kept in prisons for years and years and years. The prisons were overflowing. Idilio and the others did time in La Cabaña, then in San Severino, and from there they took him to the Isla de Pinos. Idilio spent his youth in prison. He remained in Isla de Pinos until sometime in the 80s, when they started releasing prisoners who had family in the United States and reuniting them. They were given asylum.

There are a lot of things that do not make any sense. There are many things that happen that you just *cannot believe are happening*. There are things that even though you are living them, you believe that it is not possible. Like, there was a time during Playa Girón (and I think

they did it again later) that the military came in tanks, on war trucks and everything, inside our little village. They came during the night. We woke up to them all over. When the invasion began they parked the flatbeds full of munitions in the cross streets throughout the town. That way if someone came to attack they'd have to blow up the village to finish off the munitions. In this way they weaponized us villagers against our will. That's why to this day, when I see the news and I see villages being attacked, and I see people yelling and screaming and not understanding how anyone can attack innocent civilians...I know. I know because we were those innocent civilians and we were set up to be attacked. You don't know unless you live it. And even when you live it, you don't believe it.

Nora, Idalia, and Nancy - El Morro

Idalia

I keep meaning to tell the story of when Nora was imprisoned. It was during the Bay of Pigs. Nora and I were in Habana. I was 22 years old at the time, and Nora was 23. Nora was working at the department store and I was at Josefa's house. Josefa is a friend of the family who we lived with when in Habana. Nora called me on the phone and said, "*It has happened. They landed on Playa Girón.*" She told me to prepare to return to Jovellanos. It was known that an invasion was coming against Fidel's people. There were rebels in the mountains awaiting the invasion, ready to join the Americans and the Cuban exiles who were coming to fight. Most of these rebels were Cubans who had fought for the revolution against Batista. Many had joined *el Movimiento de Recuperación Revolucionaria* (Revolutionary Recovery Movement).

Nora

I was part of el Movimiento. I was working my shift at the department store as usual. I was to await a signal, a phone call indicating that the invasion had come. We anticipated the invasion coming soon, but the phone never rang. I heard nothing. When suddenly I heard the loudspeaker, "the invasion has come!" I said to myself, "is it possible?" No one warned me. You see, the people of the movement were supposed to let me know. There were certain houses that were prepared as a relief house to help those fighting for the movement. I was part of a network of communication. Someone (unknown by real name to me) was to call me at work to let me know the invasion had come. In turn, I was to call another contact. We had a sort of phone tree going on. So, I'm in the store. And that blessed phone... it didn't make a sound. I thought it was

just me they didn't tell, but it turns out no one was told. Fidel's people knew before we did. Anyway, when I heard the announcement come on the loudspeaker I said, "hmph!" And then I thought to myself, "I don't even know where I am supposed to go now." I decided to go to Jovellanos, that is where my family lives. I called Idalia and told her to call our friend Ramon and have him drive us to Jovellanos. I said I'd wait for my lunch break to avoid suspicion, and then we'd head out. Lunchtime arrived and I did my best to act like everything was normal. I smiled at my coworkers as I walked out of the department store. Ramon and Idalia had arrived. I entered the car and said, "let's go to Jovellanos." And then it turns out that Jovellanos was the center of the operation.

Idalia

Yes, that's right. Our town is right near the Bay of Pigs. It is in the center of Cuba and the center of the province. From our village you could see the fight at Playa Girón. It looked like lightning. There were cannon shots and everything.

Nora

So I arrived at Abuela's house in Jovellanos. The people from Fidel's militia had come looking for me at the store where I worked. Not finding me there, they somehow knew to come to Abuela's house. I was standing on the porch when they arrived. I saw a bearded one approach, a commander from Fidel's militia. I said to him, "Authority? You have none! No one is taking me prisoner!" And then came the son of...what was his name? I don't remember. He was just a child and never did anything for the revolution! Do you remember his name, Idalia? The chubby one that...

Idalia

He was the one that lived in the little walkway. I don't remember his name either. The name does not matter.

Nora

Well, I remember thinking, "this guy is coming to apprehend me? Nah." And this other man came, a militiaman... what was his name? And what was it he said? Oh yes, he yelled, "chicken thief!" Give me a break. He was a so-called militiaman but I don't remember him doing squat when we were working towards a revolution. And then to have the nerve come to the home of my abuela, where Guillermina had worked so hard for the revolution. And at that time, Guiller was imprisoned. They made her mayor when the revolution triumphed, the people of 26 de Julio, and now they imprisoned her. *My aunt Guiller was already imprisoned. All my cousins were imprisoned. Everyone who was not sympathetic to the revolution was taken prisoner. They even took some only on the suspicion that they were not sympathetic to the revolution.*

Idalia

Yes. They would go to your home and if you didn't agree with the government, or if someone said you didn't agree with the government, they would pick you up. In Jovellanos they put you in the ball stadium. That's where they imprisoned my cousins. And with machine guns they passed over every now and then with a *rat tatatatata* to keep people scared and under control. The prisoners had to throw themselves to the ground. Anyway, when they came looking for Nora, it was her friend Elda who showed them the way.

Nancy

Yes, she was a friend of Nora's. Nora's friend! I said, "Elda, could it be possible for you to do this?" She didn't answer me. She didn't say a thing. I couldn't believe it, she had been Nora's friend!

Nora

She was a coward, that is all.

Nancy

No, she was an hija de puta!

Nora

Well, I remember being on that porch, and my tía Lola, skinny as she was, she stood between me and the militiamen. There was no way she and the rest of my family were going to let them take me. But then here comes Papi. And they threaten to take Papi. When the commander said, "either you come with us, or we take the old man," I said, "no, no. I'll go."

Idalia

The militiamen told Nora she had to report to work. But I whispered to her, "take clothes because you're going to be taken prisoner." I ran into the house and packed Nora a small bag of clothes. That's why I wanted to go with her in the vehicle. I knew they were lying and we needed someone to have eyes on her. I said to the militiamen, "if she leaves, take me too."

Nora

So Idalia and I got in the vehicle, but I said, "I'm not leaving Jovellanos. I will be taken where my family is. Take me to the barracks of Jovellanos." When we arrived at the barracks, one of the militiamen there in the office looked in disbelief at the others who escorted me in. He said to them, "what is this woman doing here?!" I said, "look, they come for me at my abuela's home and tell me I need to report to work. With the situation as it is, this is no time for me to go to work. And furthermore, my family is here. So if what you all want is to imprison me, then put me with my family. " To this he yelled back, "put you in prison! Why you?"

Just then his secretary, or whatever she was, interrupted and said, "ask her what her name is." And I said, "Nora Fuentes." And another of the soldiers prompted, "And what else?" And I said "Azpeitia." The militiaman yelled, "Not another one!"

Idalia

He said, "that's a family of alzados!" Alzados is what they called those who rose up in rebellion. Like rebels. I said (with a click of my tongue), "no, not everyone, no. Not the whole family. I'm not alzada!" He answered, "Well, I don't want one more of them here!" Then looking at Nora, he told the other militiamen, "Let that one go wherever. I don't want her here."

Nora

So you see, I've been thrown out of a lot of places.

Idalia

They wouldn't take Nora at the Jovellanos barracks, so they had to find another prison. Castro's regime had made a prison of the largest theater in Habana. The Blanquita theater, it was huge. There they had plenty of prisoners. They had a number of prisoners in the Castillo del Morro, where they took Nora. They had prisoners in the ball stadium of Habana as well. There were prisons in all places. Filled with people. The Cabaña too. And the local police stations. All the prisons and makeshift prisons were filled with those suspected of involvement with the counterrevolution.

Nora

Well, I remember Idalia and I were in the back of a van, as they drove us from Jovellanos to Habana in search of a prison in which to place me. Suddenly we felt the van come to a halt. We later found out that a plane had passed by, and the militiamen, thinking bombs were going to be dropped, jumped off the van and left the two of us back there. They actually teased us about it when they later told us what happened. I can laugh about it now.

Idalia

Yes! I laugh about it now. They just jumped out of the van and ran! And we were in the back, sitting on the floor. Those militiamen ran and hid in the ditch, on the shore, leaving us in the back where we couldn't get out. We didn't know what was going on. We heard them yell, "the Americans!" And they left. But it wasn't an attack after all. They came back and we continued the drive to Habana. When we arrived in Habana they first took us to the department

store, apparently to try to get information to convict Nora. They took Nora and I don't know what happened, or what they talked about, because I was not allowed in.

Nora

They escorted me into the store and the first one to come out was Bilba. She was a seamstress, and everyone knew she was a life-long communist. One of those Galician communists. And when I arrived, she said to the militiamen, "How is this possible, you bringing her in like this? We all know Nora!" She is the only one who spoke in favor of me. Bilba liked to read, just like me. And I, as you know, I get along with everybody. Bilba and I chatted all the time. I knew she was against Batista, and I was against Batista as well. I was Catholic, I went every Sunday to Mass, everyone knew it. And she knew I wasn't a communist. Still, she was the only one who stood up for me. She said, "Accuse Nora... of what? I can't believe this!"

Well, from there we were taken to a station that is close to the capitol. Around the Prado. And it turns out the guard there was the boyfriend of someone who worked with me. I knew him well. But the station was full, and anyway, it was filled with *marihuaneros*, and with *prostitutas*. The funny thing is the prostitutes in Cuba were against Fidel because he said was going to purify the country.

Idalia

I didn't see any of that. But I saw the bars, and how very dark it was and I said, "Oh Nora, I hope they don't leave you here." I was glad that they didn't. From there we went to el Morro. I remember when we passed over the bridge I looked down at the huge pit, the moat underneath. The Morro is there from the time of Spain. It had a drawbridge that crossed over the old moat,

which was now filled with imprisoned men. It was filled with men and campfires. The moat is like a hole, so everything is out in the open to the surroundings of the castle and there they had the men imprisoned. There were so many of them! And to warm up they had a campfire. They looked like beggars.

And so we crossed the bridge and arrived at the office, occupied by the one that was in charge of the of the Morro at that time. I don't know if he was a captain, or what. When he saw the militiamen escorting Nora he said, "I don't want women here!" It's the first thing he said. "I don't want more women here, especially if you don't have papers to process them."

Nora

And because they had no formal accusation to make against me, the militiamen had to go get papers. Meanwhile I was to stay at el Morro. Before they left, the man in charge of the Morro says to the militiamen, "And this one (referring to Idalia), take her home and don't leave until she enters safely." See, we've been lucky in that regard, even in bad times, we have found ourselves with good people throughout life.

Idalia

The militiamen drove me home, to Josefa's house. No one was there, but I had the key so I let myself in. I could hardly sleep that night, all alone. The next morning I called Abuela's house to tell her that Nora was in el Morro. Papi sent Nancy to accompany me. I asked Nancy to bring more clothes and whatnot. We were going to stay at Pedrito's house, who lived in Vedado. I said to Nancy, "Let's go to the university to see if we find my friend Yoel. Maybe he can let us know what they accuse Nora of." What I wanted to know, was what in the heck charges they

were bringing against her. Yoel was my friend from my days of studying at San Alejandro. Back then, we had grown very close. He was involved quite heavily in the revolution, but I knew he cared for me and I was sure he'd help me find out. Nancy and I arrived at the university, and when we climbed to the top of the stairs, we arrived at the square, I think it is called that. And just that moment there arrived a jeep with two or three young men, and among them was Yoel. As soon as he saw Nancy and I he said, "Where is Nora?" "She is in prison," I answered. Then he says, "I figured. That's why I stopped visiting you all. I am no longer the same person you once knew, because I have seen death..." He had been, it seems, at Playa Girón, fighting. "I am not the same because I have seen my companion die."

I said to him, "Well I am the same and if one day you need me, you know I'll be there." I told him that all I wanted was for him to find out what they were accusing my sister of. Yoel said, "call me tomorrow morning." But he also told me something I'll never forget. He said, "Idalia, you have to adapt or perish." I told him, "You know well that we've never adapted." He stared at me in silence for a while. Finally he says, "So, call me tomorrow."

I knew then I was not going to call him. Nancy and I turned and walked away, and with tears running down my face, we ran down the stairs. A rebel soldier at the bottom of the stairs saw me and said, "Oh, so pretty and crying?" Nancy, do you remember?

Well, then we took the bus and went to Nena and Pedrito's house. From there we called a taxi to take us to el Morro to visit Nora. We told the driver, "We need to go to el Morro, because our sister is there." He said, "I didn't know there were so many people against Fidel." I said, "Oh yes, there are many people. Here in Habana people are afraid but in my town, almost all the people who were originally with the 26 July movement are now against Fidel." The driver did not charge us the fare. He took us for free. And it was pretty far away.

Nora

Meanwhile in el Morro, the commander took an interest in me. He really was quite kind. He was a revolutionary, but he was not with those other guys, the militiamen who brought me. At one point he came by my cell and said, "Come here, I think I know you." And I thought to myself, "damn." During those times, you didn't know if it was good to be known or not. I said to him, "You've probably seen me in the store. I work in the store."

"No, it's not from the store."

I don't know if he really knew me from somewhere or not. He sent the sergeant away to get him coffee, leaving the two of us alone. Then he said to me, "I'm going to tell you one thing. If they bring an accusation, I have to keep you here. Now, tomorrow I will pass your cell. When I pass, remember me, and yell out to me, 'you have to take my picture and my fingerprints!'" I don't remember what else he said except, "you're going to be one of the first ones to get out of here."

The next morning he passed by and I didn't say one peep. Then he took three steps, turned around, and said, "Sometimes, the pride is misused... come with me." Perhaps I was being prideful, but it's humiliating to be fingerprinted and photographed.

When the papers finally arrived, the commander told me, "The only accusations they brought is that you didn't go to the mandatory meetings [at the store]." You see, at the store they would sometimes would hold meetings. After the revolution, a communist came to speak to our staff. They had taken over the store, like everything else. When the revolution triumphed and they took the store, they asked if I wanted to be the floor supervisor. I said no, giving the excuse that I was going to go study. After the revolution, the people in the government appointed people

to positions throughout all businesses and organizations. When they asked me to participate, I said I was going to go back to school, though I wasn't really sure if I actually would. I knew I didn't want to be a part of it, of the takeover of businesses. For me that was stealing from people. If the shop owner was honest, then why take his store? The communists would say, "thief steals from thief, ten years of forgiveness." Oh, no. I believe if you stole, you stole. If you steal from a thief, you are still a thief. You stole. Because you bring yourself to their level, you make yourself the same. Now of course I did not say this to them, because they would've taken me prisoner (which they later did). So instead I declined, saying I was going to school.

Anyway, back to the story of my time at the Morro. All of the accusations they brought against me were things such as "she didn't attend the mandatory meetings, her aunt was 'this and that,' her cousin was 'this and that.'" There were no direct accusations. There was no charge. There were many suspicions but no formal charges. Then the commander said to me, "You will get out of here soon. When you do, go present yourself at work. After two or three days you get sick, or find another excuse to leave, because they're going to sink you."

Idalia

He was right, they were going to keep trying to bother her. When Nancy and I brought Nora her things from Jovellanos, the commander said to Nora, "How your companions love you!" By the time Nancy and I arrived back at Nena and Pedrito's house, it was quite late. We were on the couch, watching television, when their neighbor from the third floor came down. She asked Nancy and I if we were staying the night. When we confirmed that we were, she turned to Nena and said, "I'm all alone, why don't they come stay with me?"

Nancy

Listen. Listen. We arrived and that woman had the television on and a rosary in her hand. She prayed, she cried, and she watched TV. We didn't even know her name, but the poor woman was obviously suffering. We sat and watched TV with her, while she continued to pray and cry. We didn't go to bed until like 2 o'clock. And it hadn't even been an hour since we were lying down, when the woman appears at the bedroom door and says, "Get up girls, because here come the police looking for you." We jumped out of bed, put on our robes, and scurried to the door. I was in front, Idalia was behind me, and the lady behind Idalia. I was terrified. But when I open the door, they asked for a man I do not know.

Idalia

They said, "Does Mario Santi live here?"

Nancy

And the woman asked, "The son or the father?" Turns out that was the name of her ex-husband, and of their son. She was hoping they were looking for the father.

Idalia

And that's when I realized we were in the home of the former wife of Professor Mario Santi, a professor of mine from San Alejandro. He was very good to me. After all that mess, I returned home to Jovellanos and didn't finish his course. He sent me a letter to tell me, "If you show up at school one day, I will give you the grade to pass the course." So I went, and he gave me the grade. I still have it. I have all my reports from San Alejandro.

Nancy

Back to that night. So at the door there is a *barbudo* and three young militiamen. The *barbudo*, he was a real solider, not like the young ones. Well, he explained that they were there to inspect and record the inventory of her home. Her son, Mario, worked at a radio station. And it seems that he was known to be counterrevolutionary. Idalia and I sat on the couch and I swear they could hear the *takatakatakataka* from our shaking. And the woman, poor thing, she said, "I'm going to make you coffee!" And the *barbudo* said, "Okay." He realized that she was nervous and he let her make him coffee.

Idalia and I sat quietly on the couch. We were hoping he wouldn't question us because we didn't even know the woman's name. And I didn't want to say that we were staying at Pedrito and Nena's house. Because if they knew why we were there, Pedrito and Nena would be taken prisoner for assisting us. Oh, because at that time everyone was being imprisoned.

The *barbudo* looked at the two of us and said, "come," as he motioned us to follow him. He entered the bedroom belonging to Mario Santi, the son. We followed him and I sat on the bed. Idalia sat next to me on the bed. The *barbudo* and the young militiamen began searching the room. The young militiamen began making noise. Obviously annoyed, the solider commanded, "Do not make noise. It is enough that we have awakened this family, we do not need to awaken the whole building." Just then the woman appeared at the bedroom door. The *barbudo* had his back to her while he and the militiamen searched near the bed where we sat. The woman looked at Idalia and I and gestured her finger across her neck, as in the motion of slitting a throat.

They searched for anything incriminating or illegal, such as weapons or money. All they found were newspaper clippings of articles (about a bomb that had been set), an address book, and letters from the woman's daughter, who had moved to the United States. They found

nothing else. The woman entered the bedroom and handed the *barbudo* a cup of coffee. She addressed him, "Please, are you going to get my son now?" To this he answered that yes, they had to go get him. "Well, will you let me call him?" she asked, followed by "don't take my address book." The *barbudo* told her, "Well, call your son, and take the addresses you need." So she called the son and warned him.

The *barbudo* finished his coffee and thanked the woman. He stood back up and facing the young rebels he said, "Letters from the mother for the daughter and from the daughter for the mother. How tired I am, so much that we fought, so that they would not come knocking in the early morning, and we are now doing the same." He said, "I'm tired of it."

At last the soldiers left. Again in a line, the three of us escorted them out and locked the door as they left. As soon as they left, the woman took us to the bedroom, kneeled where the *barbudo* himself had been, and from below the bed on which we sat, she took out two bags filled with silver coins.

Nora

Back at el Morro, the men from the moat would come up to get food at mealtime. It so happened that I was looking in that direction, and then I saw Gabrielito and Sazi, two young men from my neighborhood. When Gabrielito saw me, he yelled, "Nora, if you get out first tell my dad where I am." You see, he had been studying in Habana at the university and was staying in a guest house. And from there they picked up all the students and took them away.

Idalia

No one knew where anyone was. And that's why I wanted to be with Nora until I knew where they left her. I knew there was the possibility that they would keep me too, but I had it all planned. I thought, if they're going to keep me, I'll start crying and screaming at them. I will yell, 'I'm innocent!' I'll make a big scene. I wanted to be able to let my family know where they placed Nora, so I was willing to take that risk. I was lucky it didn't come to that because other people who had accompanied prisoners had also been imprisoned. It was luck and it was kindness. Because of that man, yes. Aha. The head of the Morro.

Eyda - Jovellanos to Miami to Yakima

It had been years since I thought about the fishbowl. This year marked 60 years since my arrival in the United States. I've never returned to Cuba, though visiting Miami this year felt like a step closer. Maybe in another sixty years I'll make it to Key West. Then in another 60, I'll travel the extra 90 miles to Cuba. My trip to Miami this year was surreal. It felt good to live full-time in Spanish, if only for a week. Hugging my cousins felt as natural as it had the last time we hugged – 60 years ago. I listened to Cuban music, ate Cuban food, and not once did someone ask me where my accent was from. Don't get me wrong. I couldn't live in Miami. Seattle is my home. It is home to my sisters, my kids, and my grandkids. But hugging my cousins also felt like home.

I visited the American Museum of the Cuban Diaspora as I'd heard they had an exhibit in honor of the 60th anniversary of Operation Pedro Pan. It was surreal realizing my immigration was part of a museum exhibit. It is a strange phenomenon to realize the loneliness I felt leaving my parents at the age of 12 was shared by over 14,000 other unaccompanied Cuban child refugees. It was even more surreal being led on a tour of the exhibit by a fellow child of Pedro Pan. We were 60 years older with heads full of grey hair, yet we were still the same children of 1962.

I entered the building and was greeted by the kind hosts of the museum. They were all Cubans and were all younger than me, having immigrated here much later than the Pedro Pan years. I bet some were even born in Miami. They asked me what brought me to the museum, and I explained that my daughter and I traveled from Seattle. I told them I'd come to the U.S. sixty years earlier through Pedro Pan. It hadn't dawned on me until that moment that I was visiting the

museum on the exact date of my 60-year immigration anniversary. They asked me how old I was when I travelled alone in 1962. I said I wasn't all alone, I was twelve and had my fifteen-year-old sister Mimi by my side. Suddenly the group of adults young enough to be my present-day kids looked at me with such tenderness, I was now twelve once again.

Next came the man who was to guide me through the exhibit. He was a handsome well-dressed man who was well over six feet tall. A fellow child of Pedro Pan, I learned he arrived in Miami at the age of eleven, and was housed the same refugee camp as I, though a month after Mimi and I were placed in our Yakima foster home. So it was that he, now eleven again, led me, now twelve again and my 43-year-old daughter through the exhibit. Each room contained photos and artifacts of the migration, including a large wall covered in the names of the migrating children. There were historical videos, and documents and walls covered in quotes. There were dolls, and suitcases, and clothing, and shoes – both replicas and originals belonging to the children of Pedro Pan. Memories flooded back and my 12-year-old chest felt the enormity of a lifetime of feelings felt by a 72-year-old woman. I was ok though, until I turned the corner and saw the exact replica of the fishbowl. That was the only moment that I lost my breath and thought I might break down in tears, though I didn't. I remembered how it felt to keep the look of sadness and fear off my face so as to not upset my Papi, who barely fought the tears himself. I instinctively recalled my brave face and it came back to me so naturally that I couldn't cry now, even if I wanted.

The fishbowl is the glass room in which we were placed those long hours before our plane was to take off from Cuba to Miami. On the far side of the room, the window separated us from the tarmac. The other window separated us from the rest of the airport, specifically from the room where our families and friends stood and watched. We could see them and wave goodbye,

but we couldn't touch them. Some children planted themselves at the front, holding their hands to the window while their parents held theirs on the other side. I wanted to sit in my Papi's lap while I waited, but instead I look through from my place in the middle of the room and waved at him with a smile. I didn't want him to worry and I'd also convinced myself I was going on an adventure. Like summer camp. Summer camp in February. Part of me believed I'd be back soon. The fishbowl replica contained suitcases torn at the seams, where they'd been searched for valuables prior to letting the children leave. All valuables belonged to *the State*. If the suitcases were made of premium material, like leather, they were confiscated all together, as premium material belonged to *the State*. Dolls were torn apart at the limbs and the neck, to check for hidden valuables.

It seems I had suppressed the memories of the fishbowl, at least until a couple of years ago, when my daughter asked to interview me for a school project. In preparation for our interview and in attempt to refresh my memory, I looked through some papers from when I came to the U.S. and I found an envelope with the papers that *Madrina* had given me. They were my immigration papers. Well, I was looking and it appears that they my parents begun the process of applying for my papers a lot sooner than I ever realized. I saw that my passport says August of '61. It was during the Bay of Pigs when we were still in Cuba: Mimi, and I, and everybody. It was then when we realized that things were getting worse. Fidel Castro had captured the rebels. And those who had come to help us from the U.S., did not triumph. They lost. So we knew that it was too late for a coup or a revolution. There still remained a little hope that maybe the United States could do something in the future. By then my parents had already started the process of my exile.

In September of '60, I went to school for a few weeks, or something like that. I was entering a new school and had to take a test to be able to start the seventh grade because I was only eleven years old. I passed, so they let me start the seventh grade that year. I had gone to San Jose through the sixth grade. For the seventh grade, I went to La Superior. This was still 1960, but my aunt Guillermina had already resigned as Mayor, in either August or September. She had been appointed the mayor of our town, Jovellanos, by the revolution due to her intelligence, leadership, and support of the revolution overthrowing Batista's regime. Not much later, Guillermina, like many others of the revolution, realized Castro was quickly positioning himself to take over the role of the tyrant he'd so valiantly overthrown. Though many went into hiding in the mountains to plan a counterrevolution, my aunt Guillermina tried to simply quietly resign and distance herself from Castro's regime. Despite her best efforts to avoid causing waves, upon resigning as Mayor she was marked as anti-revolutionary, you know, a counterrevolutionary.

So it began. That's why I quit going to school because they began speaking badly of my aunt. They shouted insults through loudspeakers and I could hear each word from my desk. The main square where people gathered was in a park in front of the school. And they got on a loudspeaker to say ugly things about my aunt. One day we were in math class and the students were talking about this and that. I stood up and said, "can we please go back to talking about math? Because this is math class." In front of everyone, the teacher told me "No." She said that the revolution was first and everything. So when I got home I told Papi that I would not return to school.

But without my knowing, it seems that in Spring when the Bay of Pigs happened, they came to my house and told my parents that since I was a minor I had to return to school. By then it was already known that the school children, "volunteers" supposedly, had been taken to

camps. It was suspected this was going to be made mandatory within a little bit. Sure enough it was made mandatory shortly after I left Cuba. I had just missed that happening to me.

The fact is that I no longer wanted to go back to school. Even Papi was worried that I'd fall into trouble because you couldn't even speak freely at home about anything. So what I realized while I was looking at the passport dated August of '61, is that by then my parents already knew they wanted to send me away. Or at least they thought about it. Because they got me my passport and I imagine Mimi's too. I don't know where Mimi's is, so I can't check the date on hers. You know she doesn't like talking about it.

I remember that on September 8th, I think of that year, we went to one of those big masses for La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre. You know that is her feast day. I don't know if it was in '61 or if it was in '60 to tell you the truth, that we had the last big mass for her. But I remember it because there were a lot of people and upon exiting the church we saw that *they were watching us*. There were people surveilling who had gone in and who was exiting. And I remember that because of how it felt. The mass was so beautiful and we always sang a lot, and afterwards upon exiting, that was such an ugly contrast. It was so sad to a certain extent. And like I said, I don't remember if it was that year or the prior year.

I also see within the papers, there was another document my parents obtained in October. They started the power of attorney which is what gave permission for me to leave the country. Since I was a minor, I couldn't leave without permission from my parents. I have two or three copies of that. And also the copy of the immunizations we were required to have. And all of that, it seems, was obtained in October. I arrived here, in the U.S. on February 4, 1962.

I remember something happened the 2nd of February. I don't know if there was a festival in Cuba of the communists or what the heck, but there was something going on. I kind of

remember the 2nd of February. The date is unclear, but the memory is etched in my chest. It tightens when I think of it though I don't know why. I know we spent the night of the 3rd at the home of an uncle and aunt. I say uncle because in fact he is brother to Guillermina. He and his wife lived in Habana and they said we could stay with them. And I think something happened that night, not directly to us, but someone came to their door to say something about us needing to be careful. That we needed to watch out.

It was an apartment home in Habana. The airport from which we left was in Habana too. It is called Jose Marti. It's the same airport that president Obama flew in to, when he opened the borders.

Anyway, what I remember about that day is not much. I remember being in Jovellanos and getting ready to leave. We were allowed to take a 60-pound suitcase, I think. I don't remember if that was the limit for the both of us, or separately. I don't know if it was one or two suitcases. But I know that Tía Luisa made me some clothes to bring with me to Miami. It was a very thin suitcase so we could fill it only with what we were allowed to bring. You weren't allowed to take jewelry at all. I did keep a pair of earrings with me that my aunt Guillermina had given me when I turned 10. And that is all I took with me.

So, when we were in the fishbowl they separated us from our parents. Or from whoever brought us. Basically it separated people who were staying from those who were leaving. They put us behind glass. That way you could see the others through the glass while waiting for the time to leave. That's why they called it the fish bowl. But we couldn't touch them. When it was time to go, we couldn't kiss or hug goodbye. With us was also the daughter of – *ay and now I don't even remember her name*, but she was from our village. She was only, *the poor thing*, only

six or seven years old. And her parents told us to take care of her, that she was in our care. And she gave me a little ring to wear. To see if I'd make it through with the ring.

I'd never been searched, not ever before. I remember they took us individually to a bathroom, and there we had to... now I don't know if I had to take off my clothes or not, because I was apparently really nervous. But what I do remember is they did not take my earrings from me. They left me with my earrings. They asked me something about them, and I told them, "My aunt gave them to me." And she, the military officer said, "is that all you have?" And I said, "yes, it is all I have." And they searched me and I didn't have anything else. And I think they did the same to Mimi, but it was different military officers who searched us.

Then we boarded the plane. Oh, the little girl's name was Ailii, I remember. And Ailii, I don't remember her precisely on the plane. Mimi must remember, because Ailii was very scared and I think she latched on to her. The only thing I remember is there was a young man that I came to notice once we could see the lights of Miami, or the buildings of Miami. We came by plane and when we could see the buildings of Miami, he said something like "Thank God that we made it here!" He didn't even have the papers. His papers were falsified, and he was scared that they'd figure it out and would make him go back.

It was daytime. We left early in the morning, I think. I mean, the sun was already quite strong so it was about ten in the morning when we left. But we had to arrive early at the airport. You know, so that all these things could take place. They looked over your papers, and all of those things.

There were many kids leaving at that time. I think to an extent, during those times what the communists wanted were to keep the people they could change. People who could be rehabilitated. But the ones that they considered couldn't be, were *gusanos*, worms. They called

us gusanos. That I remember clearly. After Playa Girón was when you heard the people at their most shameless. They started more shamelessly calling us gusanos. They went out in mobs. Big groups of people they went out and they screamed in front of my grandma's house which was where my aunt lived. Abuela's house is where the family gathered all our lives, so we were also there. And they would come by, they'd stop, and they'd start screaming things.

¡*Cobardes!* Cowards!

¡*Salgan, gusanos!* Leave, worms!

and all of those kinds of things.

And during the day it was constant. A loudspeaker above a car, playing the martial music of the government and the international, the communist hymn. Passing by all ends of Jovellanos. And also the groups of militants would pass by marching. That's why Papi used to say, *Uno, Dos, Tres, Cuatro, Comiendo mierda y rompiendo zapatos*. (1-2-3-4, Bullshitting and ruining shoes). The loudspeaker would go by saying all of these things and the militants would go "*uno, dos, tres, cuatro,*" marching and marching and marching. They really were *comiendo mierda y rompiendo zapatos*.

Well, I remember the airplane taking off. Like I said the sun was out and it was shining brightly. You could see the people on the balcony, on top of the airport. So we could see them. And to board the plane, it's not like where we board from inside, you had to go down to the tarmac and you climbed up to the plane. And when we turned around and looked outside what

you could see is the people waving goodbye. And although you couldn't see your family, you knew that within that great big bunch, they were there.

We landed in Miami and when we exited the plane this boy, and others, began kissing the ground. So they kissed the earth, or you know, the asphalt. And for us, there was a man with a sign that said *to the kids arriving without parents and custodians, come with me*. So we went with him. I don't remember much. I know Mimi was with me the whole time. And they escorted us into the building and I think there we turned in our papers so they could check our names and everything. And they asked us if we had people there in Miami. We told them we didn't have anyone to live with, but that we had cousins there, who were young bachelors. Because we had two, three... two or three cousins. Two, I think at that time. Bachelors who lived there. So from there they took us to Florida City. They separated us into three groups. The girls and the boys younger than twelve, we went to Florida City, a place which had been like a big motel but with little houses like, you know, the motels which are only one story high. And it was fenced in so we could be inside. So they took us there. The boys from ages twelve to eighteen went to a place called Matecumbe. I don't know where Matecumbe is because I'd never been, but the boys when they turned thirteen were taken there. Some were taken upon arrival in Miami.

And our cousins, I don't know if they met us in the airport. I think so, but I don't remember seeing them there. I remember that after we'd been in the camp, which was what we called it, *el campamento*, they called and asked for permission to take us out to visit, to spend the weekends with them.

From there, we had school but imagine it, kids arrived and they tried to place them in different places. They tried to find them foster homes or schools. Some kids even ended up in the homes where the nuns...*what do you call it?* Orphanages. Some of the boys would say that the

Americans who were sent to orphanages were bad boys whose parents had abandoned them. Our boys they would send there because there was no room anywhere else. And our boys were scared to go, because the majority of the little Cuban children that came were from good families and they'd never been in trouble with anyone, you know. They sent them there depending on the day and how many arrived. There were days that hundreds of children arrived. When the camps were overfilled with kids, they had to send the newly arrived elsewhere. They always tried to send them to good places and I imagine that they wouldn't send them anywhere bad. I don't know how many thousands of children passed through there in the one year and a half of our influx. I'd like to find out.

In the little house where we stayed, we had like bunk beds or *columbinas* one on top of the other, like soldiers. And we came to have up to twenty-five kids in a home. That is a bunch. We had anywhere from twelve to twenty-something. And when the houses filled up to twenty-five they had to vacate, you know, they tried to always have movement. It was Catholic Charities that looked after us. Mimi and I were there from February through June. We were one of the ones who were there the longest. The majority of the people they sent away but they had been trying to see if Ailii could be placed with us. It was very hard to place three together. So, poor Ailii they sent to a state south of here (south of Washington state). New Mexico or somewhere like that. And when they sent little Ailii there, I kept her little ring. And then it was easier to find a place for two sisters. And they sent us here, to Yakima, each diocese bishop had to give permission to accept the Cuban children. Mimi and I were in the first group to go to Yakima. There was another group that came later. We flew directly from Miami to Yakima. At least I think that it went directly. Maybe it stopped for gas, because it was a little four engine plane. I tell you, I loved it, in spite of it all. I've always liked adventures, you know.

I remember when the kids let me sit where I could look outside. And below you could see where it was sown field. It was so beautiful – you could see the difference between Georgia and the rest. Georgia had red soil which reminded me of Jovellanos. And you could see the squares, where people had sown. I could see it in all of the United States because we came here by day too. It took about ten hours I think, because just imagine, it was a little four-engine plane.

Nancy - Sabotage of the Sunflowers

People just don't know, no matter how much you tell them, what communism really is. What it really looks like and feels like. Because you have to live it. You can read about it in a book. You can hear about it on the news. But unless you have lived it, you don't really know. Because even as you live it, you're living it but you don't believe it. Look, when they cut sunflowers in Cuba, among them was a cousin of mine who cut sunflowers. They killed...

Nancy, you have to explain why they cut the sunflowers. Fidel Castro planted sunflowers as part of a government project, of planting sunflowers to...

Yes, Idalia, I was getting to that. The government planted sunflowers in our town in order to extract its oil. Then a group of young boys cut down the sunflowers. The boys are captured, well, because someone spoke, you know. Well, the story goes, that the lady who knelt in front of the rebel to ask that they spare her son's life, refused afterwards to talk to our family. Fidel's men killed her son and afterwards she refused to talk to any of us.

Because she was surely afraid that the same would happen to her other children. She had lost one already. Do you remember that, Nora?

I remember that well. Nancy, she refused to speak to us because our cousin was not killed and her son was. She had other children. Everyone defends their own.

Nora, I'm not criticizing. No, no, I'm not criticizing. What am I saying is a fact. Simply a fact.

Yes. I remember when uncle Manolo arrived at our house and told our mother that the other boys were talking about what they did, about the sabotage of the sunflower field. They were in the market bragging and pretty soon they were all taken as prisoners and questioned by the authorities.

And Lalito, our young cousin, was the only one who refused to talk. He wouldn't snitch. And the rest, they sang like birds. There were like seven or eight of them detained and each one said *Azpeitia*. *It was Azpeitia who talked to me. Azpeitia was the one who told me this and that. Azpeitia. Azpeitia. Azpeitia.* Everyone one them snitched on Lalito. All of them. All of them. Yet Lalito remained quiet. Don't you remember, Idalia?

Yes. I remember clearly. When they tried them, Lalito refused to snitch. All those years in prison, with all their torture tactics, Lalito stayed quiet. Before the trial they sometimes took him out and said they were going to shoot him. They stood him and everything, and they shot bullets at him...

With blanks.

Yes, with blanks. So he wouldn't know if one day they'd be actual bullets and he was going to be killed for real.

That cousin of ours, that Lalito. After the sabotage of the sunflowers, he was caught and imprisoned. He spent many years in prison, and they discovered he was sick of the heart. He refused to have surgery. He was eventually released because they didn't want him to die in jail of heart failure. So one day he tells me:

Nancy, don't you know that we were taken from our cells and they stood us against a wall. They'd raise their guns at us to try to get us to talk. I refused. The first time this happened to me I decided right then I'd rather die than talk to these bastards. I faced the soliders with their guns pointed right at me and I closed my eyes tightly and heard the blasts. I remember thinking to myself, if only I could tell my family that dying is the best thing there is. It was so peaceful. I was finally

totally relaxed. Then I hear the voices of the soliders and realize these motherfuckers can't be with me in heaven, so I must be alive!

You know, so he says they took him out like seven more times and he came to realize that in some of these prisons they sure don't mess around! They were trying to get the boys to talk. They wanted to find out who had planned it. If they pled guilty, they took them out and executed them for real. And they were guilty, they all were. But they were guilty of cutting down sunflowers. Three young boys lost their lives the day they were caught and confessed. Lalito never confessed and he never snitched. He said, "I don't know why, but I got it in me not to speak, and I didn't speak." Even the threats of execution didn't work to make him speak. He figured, if they kill me, they kill me. They can shoot me, they can cut me down like I cut down those flowers (he thought, but never confessed). They weren't going to extract one drop of information from him. He was 17 years old when they took him to prison and he remained there until he was 24 or 25 years old. By that time his heart problem had gotten worse and it was assumed that if he did not operate, he would die. His brother Meyo brought him to the U.S. through Mexico. They both ended up in Miami. His doctors insisted on surgery and he refused. He also ignored their warnings against his drinking. He didn't get surgery and he got drunk every day and didn't die of it. He was killed by a truck at work. He was working with trucks and one of them inadvertently reared and smashed him against the wall. That's why my cousin Nelson says, "We Azpeitia don't die – they have to kill us."

Nora - On Making Tea

I was hired as the cook for a houseful of Irish-Catholic priests in Moxee, WA. Mami, Papi, Nancy, and Idalia were still in Cuba and I moved there to be close to my youngest sisters, Eyda and Mimi. I couldn't stay in Miami and leave them alone in Yakima, but I wasn't old enough to take care of them myself. So I moved to the neighboring town of Moxee. They were living with their foster parents, the Brownings. I'd go stay with them on the weekends. Anyhow, I needed work to support myself and to save enough money to get Mami, Papi, and the others out of Cuba. I knew so little English, but I had a knack for figuring out what people were trying to say, by their mannerisms or their expressions. I was also good at pretending I understood. The priests were very kind and patient with me. If only Mami could see me now, pretending to be a cook! I was given a cookbook and an English to Spanish dictionary. I was hoping they wouldn't figure out just how little I actually knew. Back home, Mami did all the cooking. In that way, we were quite spoiled.

I remember the first time Fr. McHugh asked me for a cup of tea. I asked him if he was sick. In Cuba, we only had tea when we were too sick to drink *café*. "No, I'm not sick, I'm Irish," was his answer. Sarcasm became our shared language and we became fast friends. "But the recipe book doesn't show how to make tea," I informed Father. That is the day, at the age of 24, that I learned to boil water.

Mimi – The Silences in Between (as told by her goddaughter)

My madrina, Mimi, doesn't like to talk about her exile from Cuba. No one asked her, if at the age of fifteen, if she wanted to leave her family and friends and her country. Though no one asked her, she tried to make her displeasure known, and it was only met with insistences that this was best for her and her little sister. And later when she did try to talk about this pain, she was reminded to be grateful for her freedom.

Mimi doesn't like to talk about the fact that she quickly made friends at the refugee camp in Florida, only to be told she'd have to leave them behind too, to leave to a strange land of dry summer deserts and winter snow storms, with absolutely no ocean around her. She doesn't like to talk about the fact that her foster mother, who claimed to love her and her little sister as her own, kicked them out of the house when her real son and his jealous wife moved back home. Mimi doesn't like to talk about the fact that it wasn't her fault she was pretty and funny and so easy to like. Deep inside, she actually wasn't sure any of that was true.

Mimi doesn't like to talk about the cute, charming boy she met while living at her new foster mother's home. She doesn't like to talk about it because though he made her happy and they had so much fun together, his Irish-Protestant family didn't approve of their son dating her. They didn't like that she was Cuban and they didn't like that she was Catholic. Mimi doesn't like to talk about the fact that the cute boy left her brokenhearted and pregnant at the age of nineteen to face her brokenhearted parents upon their arrival from Cuba.

Mimi doesn't like to talk about moving to Seattle and meeting a fun man who she would marry and spend some brief happy years together while he raised her baby as his own. She doesn't like to talk about the fact that she named their next baby after him, only to have the beautiful healthy baby become sick at the age of seven months. She did talk about his being sick

and taken to the hospital emergency room, only to be told he had a virus and sent home. She doesn't like to talk about going back to the ER when his fever wouldn't go down and coming home without him after he died of bacterial meningitis. Then again, no one around her would talk about it either, even when she wished they would.

She doesn't like to talk about her older son, still a child himself, becoming such a protector of his next little brother as he never got over losing the previous baby brother. She doesn't like to talk about her husband coping with excessive drinking, fidelity, and eventual abuse. She doesn't like to talk about the fact that he had the nerve to leave her, not the other way around. Mimi doesn't like to talk about the fact that there is a large period of her life that she simply can't remember, even when she tries.

I probably shouldn't talk about these things either. I am struggling with the decision on whether to include this portion in my final draft or going back to honoring Mimi's silences in between the happy moments of her life, not mentioned here.

Nora - On Being an Exile

The day I became a citizen of the United States, I felt guilty. It is something that everyone dreams of but for me it was a very sad day. I never thought I would go live in another country. More than anything, I became a citizen so I wouldn't have to fill out more papers. It was time to renew my green card, something I'd done once every ten years for the past thirty years. That may not seem like much, three times. But each time meant proving my lawful status after a decade of living here. Each time was a reminder of what I went through to get out. And each time meant another decade that I hadn't returned. At that moment, when I decided to become a citizen I realized I was not going to return to my homeland. Depending on how you think about it, I either waited a long time or I fooled myself for a long time. I try not to dwell on it too much, on my past dreams. Everyone dreams of becoming an American citizen and how can I describe one's dream. Not that it weighs on me but...

I loved Cuba. She was my home. Jovellanos gave birth to me and raised me. Habana refined me. My island gave me everything I needed. That's why I fought for her. I never gave up. I was still a child when Batista overthrew the government but by Papi's reaction my younger sisters and I understood - something bad has happened to our Cuba. I remember people wanting to fight against the coup, alongside the president. But Presidente Prío didn't want blood shed on his behalf, so he exiled to Miami. As I grew into my teens I remember the energy all around: the towns, the universities, everywhere! Even Batista's cruel tactics, even death didn't scare us. We

would fight for our Cuba. There were several movements, all with the same goal: overthrow Batista and bring back our constitutional government. No more corruption. We wanted justice. We fought for the people, we fought for our island. You know, I've always considered myself a practical person. Just like Papi. People say that's why he and I would argue. Yes, we are both stubborn. And yes, we could both come across as cynical. But sometimes you turn on your brain to drown out your heart. Because if you simply go by your heart, people can deceive you. But you can't just turn it off. It still hurts.

So, I never gave up. Even when I realized we'd been lied to. Even after being imprisoned. After the Bay of Pigs I knew the fight wasn't about Cuba anymore. It was about Russia and the United States. And that broke my heart. Why did I leave Cuba? Not because I'd given up on her, but because it was impossible living under communism.

The day I filled out my U.S. citizenship application I realized I was never going back to my Cuba.

When you are an exile at a certain age - you don't belong anywhere. You are a foreigner everywhere. And sometimes, just when you think you belong, someone asks, *where are you from?*

But don't feel sad for me. I live a wonderful life. Leaving my Cuba was hard, but being separated from my family was harder. After years apart, we all made a home together in Seattle. Mami, Papi, my four sisters, and I. And my sisters married. And they had kids. And then their kids had kids. And we'd gather together at Mami and Papi's house just like we would at Abuela's house in Jovellanos. And the little American-born kids run around and speak in

Spanish, and laugh in Spanish, and cry in Spanish, and they fall asleep in Spanish too. We give them a piece of our Cuba.

Seattle is my home. After Mami died, and then ten years later after Papi died, I stayed in the house that belonged to us. I've had sisters live with me. I've had nieces and nephews and great-nieces and great-nephews live with me. I swore I wouldn't ever own a dog but now I even have Toki the chihuahua living with me; everyone says she's horrible, but since living here, she's *pura dama*, I swear. Even if things changed now, I wouldn't move back, not after being so long gone and having so much life here.

Girasol

Girasol is the Spanish word for sunflower.

It is a combination of the words *girar* (to turn) and *sol* (sun).

Some grow the flowers for their beauty,
then cut them and place them in a vase.

Some let them grow and grow and grow
until left with a field of flowers, towering over the growers.

Others grow them for their utility: for their seeds, their oil,
or their roots and stems for dye.

Some offer them to *Nuestra Señora de la Caridad del Cobre*
and to *Oshun*,
propped in vases and surrounded by honey and gold.

As for me, I gently stroke their petals between my thumb and forefinger
whenever I am lost.

I simply reach in my pocket,
or open a cupboard,

or cut open a box received in the mail,
or draw open a curtain,
or look under the bed,
or power up my laptop,
or unravel my scarf,
or pour out some cereal,
or braid my hair,
or ask the Northwestern Steller's Jay
and he'll tell me to turn to the sun.

And when I turn to the sun, he'll tell me to look to the women around me.

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