Cuban

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I

Last fall I was asked what adjective best described my father. I was sitting in a poetry technique course. At first I did not know what the professor meant, but then he explained: “If your father were reduced to one word, one essence, what would it be?” He was very expressive as he talked, using his hands and making sure he looked at each of us. His eyes moved from one student to the next, so I didn’t dare let my mind wander. I pictured my father, a small man, born in Sagua, which is in the middle of Cuba, but who later moved to the coast. I let his image turn to smoke, and in a way I have trouble describing, I examined it and tried to gauge its nature. The other students responded with more traditional adjectives—Exacting, Proud, Thoughtful—but I only developed a nationality, Cuban.

“Cuban?” my teacher asked. “Why Cuban?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I mean hopeful, yet pessimistic. At least something like that.”

“Cuban,” he said again. “OK, we can go with that, why not.” Then he moved to the next student, a girl named Margie, and waited for her response.

I began to think of that word in a way I had not before, as though the hazy smoke I pictured had always lived inside of him, like blood or air, filling up his skin and giving him life. Cuban. Cubano. Poquito Cubano. A thin frame. Delicate features. Eyes like a dark house. I have a photo of my father when he was my age. He stands next to his own father, the two of them in the family bakery, a silver bread oven behind them, the year 1959, a time when a person could still own something in Cuba, back before the socialismo. They are wearing white bakers aprons, the strings tied around their waists. They have their arms around each other and are looking at the camera, though as I look at it now, I believe my father is looking beyond the camera, his eyes somewhat unfocused, as they are in most photographs. I have been told I
was there on that day, hitched on my mother's hip, almost two years old, but I don’t remember any of it. I have only a few memories of the time before America, which is one reason I took Poetry Technique. I thought words held memories, that they would open up the past, although I knew this was a romantic idea. I knew this as well: romantic ideas gave you a rope to hold on to, when the water starts to rise.

II.

When my father was young, he wanted to be a teacher. He wanted to work with students in the eighth and ninth grades; however, for a long time I did not know why he had this desire. He was a hopeful man who, I thought, wanted to carve out a place of respect for himself, but I could not see him working as a teacher. At least not then. My earliest memories of him are at our house, the large two-storey my grandparents owned but had since surrendered to the government. He would arrive home in the early afternoon, his hands gloved in flower, an apron folded over his shoulder. He would sit next to me as my mother made him Cuban coffee, stirring in extra sugar, as he said it helped his stomach. He read to me from books I could not possibly understand, authors such as Jose Martí, but did so in a soft, sweet voice I liked. In the afternoons, he would go to the University, his notes in a binder, his books heft into a canvass bag. He would leave quietly, kissing my mother once, then continue to the bus stop where he would wait for the 2:15 which was almost always late.

He did not talk about school much, or at least I don’t remember it. Instead, he spent a good deal of time by himself. He read, he walked, he woke each morning at three to go to the bakery where his own father, by then, was baking loaves of sweetbread. On Tuesdays my father would go to a beach, called La Luz, and sit by himself. There, he would read other books, not the official reading for his course, but foreign authors secretly promoted by his professor, Dr. Trujillo. For the most part, my father was frustrated with the novels, distanced by the nuance of language, the subtlety of each sentence. He read as much as he could, copying phrases into a bound journal, but in the end was not interested in most of it. The only reason he stayed at it so long was because
his teacher told him, “My friend, you will someday be a good teacher. To believe in Cuba is to believe beyond the revolucion.”

My father liked this image of himself, a person transformed by language, by thought, the pages of books curved around his soul, and when he tired of picturing himself this way, he turned to drawing. In-between journal entries, my father sketched beautiful images, the sea, the sun, a starfish overturned. At times, he drew figures from the books he was reading, people dressed in elaborate clothes, their jackets newly pressed, their ties perfectly knotted, people like those on the American TV they were not allowed to watch. In one section, my father drew the same character over and over, a thin man, double breasted coat, a fedora tilted over his brow. Beneath this image, he wrote only one word, Gatsby, and from this picture’s frequency, I understood he’d spent a good deal of time with this book, working through it slowly, halted by the density of prose. This figure appears nothing like the Robert Redford I have come to envision as Gatsby. Instead, he has shaded skin, dark eyes, frail hands. In short, he resembles my father.

Sometimes I like to picture my father there, a man a few years younger than I am now, sitting on that beach. Behind him are the sugar mills and chemical plants. Before him, seawater like a barrier, blue across the thin straits, small fishing boats dotting the horizon. He does not live in luxury: school is free; the bakery provides a little money; his wife works at home as a seamstress. When the sun begins to slip into the water, the ocean absorbing its redness, my father walks home. He hears the government radio broadcasts: “The International,” “Go Forward, Latin American,” songs somber in their melody, Russian in their feel. When he arrives, his wife greets him at the door, our dog, Lourdes, tucked under her arm.

III.

What do I remember about those early years? Not much. I remember sitting in our yard, our dog nosing itself into my hands; I remember the warmth of the fall sun cutting across our garden; I remember people talking about how, before I was born, you could find anything in Cuba, anything at all; I remember the
music of our language, the sentences rolled out of people’s mouths like love songs, their accents nothing less than inflections of sweetness. My father later told me that they were living under a false belief. They thought the socialismo would fall, that they would own their home again, their bakery, their lives. They would get TV and magazines and fine French flour used for pastries. The trouble came shortly after my father’s professor was arrested for promoting anti-socialistic ideas, though no one we knew was asked to testify against him. He was simply sentenced to 15 years. His cell window, we later learned, looked out toward his old neighborhood. From there, he could see the top of his apartment building, its roof polished like white shells.

During the weeks that followed, my father would sit at home each night, a copy of Jose Martí not far from him, his two student essays on socialist ideals in Cuban literature conveniently left on the kitchen table. He would stay up late, looking out windows and, on weeknights, he would sit on the porch, the orange butt of his cigar emberring in the darkness. Still, he would rise each morning, no later than three, and put on his white shirt and pants, remove a clean apron from the closet and join his father at the bakery where, by now, there were shortages of flour and milk. At home, my father grew restless and would not look directly at my mother, his eyes slightly adverted from her gaze, though each night, they sat on our sofa, their hands joined.

I have always been told that it was my father’s decision to leave Cuba, to go to Habana and declare themselves Anti-Socialists, though looking back, I believe my mother had a good deal to do with it. My mother was a strong woman: she was not afraid of the government or its officials; rather, she was afraid of the fear they felt, how it made them small, scared people. The following week officials came to inventory our house. We could not take our possessions with us to America, not our books or blankets, not our camera or even our dog, and according to the law, we were not supposed to give these items away, though my father managed to hide one pair of diamond earrings and to give other small items to his parents. Officially these items were the government’s, not ours; that is, they were nationalized. We could only take a few clothes: three pairs of pants, three shirts, some socks stuffed into our luggage. A few days before we left, my
father took us to the beach for a picnic. He hugged and kissed his mother over and over, and when we returned to our house, she pressed a small gold cross into his hand. “With the others,” she said, “hide them in the sole of your shoe.”

“I will,” he whispered, “I will, Mama.”

I have never seen my father as sad as he was that night, his eyes damp, his hands folded in front of him. As he watched my grandparents walk away, I knew his heart was breaking and that America needed to be big and great to support such a loss. My mother stood beside him, her head held higher than his. The last I saw of my grandparents they were turning the corner, their bodies about to disappear behind another building, when my grandmother turned towards us, her cheeks damp with tears. Her voice was soft, like a breeze: “Be good, my God, to my only son.”

IV.

In America we lived with my mother’s second cousin, a woman who shared a name with our old dog, Lourdes, and who spoke down to my father. She spoke about Castro in a way we never heard people speak about him. “He used to say he was not a communist, but he was. He was a liar and a thief. He will destroy Cuba, mark my words, yes, he will destroy it then wipe the dust from his feet.” During these conversations, I saw how my father wanted her to like him. He leaned toward her, his hands folded in his lap, and when she would take a breath, he would agree with her. “Yes,” he would say, “we did not have enough flour at the bakery.”

“Flour,” she would reply. “I hear some people do not even have water. Their wells went dry. But will Castro help? No. Castro only cares about himself. Himself and the revolucion.” Then she would sip her coffee, after blowing a thin stream of air over it. “When I first came to this country, I thought I would be here six months. Six months, you see. I thought things would change back home. Now look at me. Three years. Yes, three years we are in exile here, all of us, without much choice on the matter.”

She would continue in this fashion, talking about how good things had been in Cuba, how you could find anything there,
sodas, cars, French wine, that is, before Castro. She talked about how she missed her other cousins and most of all how she missed Christmas Eve celebrations, the relatives, the presents, the coffee—"Oh, the coffee, yes, and with a good, thick froth"—and the way her father, dressed as Santa, would arrive around ten o’clock and pass out presents to the children.

My father said he missed these things too. He hoped Lourdes would turn his way and say, "yes, how right you are," but that never happened. He simply sat there and after a while became resigned to the idea that he was just a man in a chair, a cousin’s husband who had come to this country in need, a place to live, some food to eat. At the end of each night, we went to our room. We would lie there, all on the same mattress, and look out at stars sprinkled over the heavens, the same stars we once saw from Cuba, but now they seemed farther away, washed out by the city lights.

“We are going to leave here as soon as we can,” he whispered.

“It’ll be soon,” my mother said, “I know.” Then she would curl against my father, her lips pressed against his neck, and they would fall asleep like that, their breathing slow, soft whispers, the room hushed around us.

In the morning, my father and I would go to St. Mark’s Catholic School where I was a student and he was a groundsman. St. Mark’s had made arrangements with many Cubans to exchange tuition for services. Fathers would show up on weekends to help with new portables, would coach the baseball team, would paint the main office, and for those who worked there, such as my father, their children’s tuition was a benefit, free and clear. I liked going to St. Mark’s because many of the other students there also had trouble with English, and while we were in our special class, no one laughed at us: no one looked at our shirts or shoes, no one said, “I just can’t understand what you are saying.” We would sit in room C-1, while our, teacher, Ms. Lawren, helped us with our English. On Fridays, she would let us bring in stories or show-and-tell items, and afterward, she would talk to us about being Cuban-Americans. She was a Democrat, she said, and believed Castro was wrong to treat his citizens the way he did. She told us that here, in this classroom, no one would ever say anything bad about Cubans, that from ten in the morning until eleven,
we were safe and could talk about whatever we wanted, but from eleven until lunch, we needed to work on our English, as that was her job.

I liked Ms. Lawren's class and looked forward to it each day, but knew my father had no place like room C-1. There was nowhere he truly felt safe, nowhere quiet, not even at home. At school, he drove the lawnmower over the baseball field, then he would chalk the baseline. At lunch, he ate with two other gardeners, neither of whom had ever owned a business, as my father had, nor had they gone to college. At times my father would try to talk to the teachers, striking up conversations about authors he had read, Chekhov and Flaubert, but these teachers were confused by his intentions. They treated him as though he were one of us, a student, and not a man who had studied for many years hoping to become a teacher himself. His accent confused them, as did his interest in Jose Martí, an author who my father believed was world-renowned because in Cuba he had been told this. In the end, though, he stopped trying to talk to the teachers. He simply said hello to them in the hallways, his eyes rarely meeting theirs. For a while, he went to our school library and checked out books taught in the 11th and 12th grades, but eventually he stopped this as well. He came home each night and sat with my mother, a bottle of beer in his hands, while they waited for Lourdes to begin once again about the Cuba she missed.

For a while, our lives fell into this routine. My father and I would go to St. Mark's, while my mother worked in a packing room, loading technical books into boxes and shipping them. I would sit through my first two classes, where by then I understood just about everything which was said, and at lunch I would eat with my Cuban friends or, if my father was not busy, I might eat with him, the two of us leaning against a backstop. Those were my favorite times, those lunches with my father. We would eat thick ham sandwiches my mother made, mustard lightly spread on both the top and bottom piece of bread. Sometimes we would play ball after lunch, our hands inside school-owned gloves, but mostly, he would just run his hand through my hair and tell me to study hard.

"I will," I said.
“And when you figure out this country, I want you to tell me about it,” he said, a private joke between us, then he winked. I simply nodded.

“Because when we go back to Cuba, I would like to say I understood America when I lived there.”

“When are we going back?”

He looked toward the sky then, thin clouds striped across the Miami blue. “Soon, I think things will change soon.” But by then I could tell he was beginning to doubt this.

After lunch, he would go back to work, his two workmates, Steve and Hank, lounging by the tool shed, their hats usually folded in their hands. “Looks like a hot afternoon,” Steve would say.

“One on,” my father would say, “let’s just get to work.”

They would walk off to the football field or perhaps to the front of the school, where the ice plant was beginning to unfold into beautiful white blooms, but I could not go with them. I had two more class periods to finish. I found my friends, and together we trudged off to Math, where Mr. Sorvino was beginning to explain imaginary numbers. At first I believed he was making them up, but they were also in our textbook, so I figured it was true. In American, there must be a use for imaginary things.

V.

In May we finally moved out of my aunt’s house. It was a grand day. It made all of us happy, even my father, who was joking with Aunt Lourdes, which was something he never did. We packed all of our things into four large boxes, including the special Spanish-English books my mother bought for me, and then we carried them out to the curb where my father had parked our station wagon. Our car was seven or eight years old, and before we bought it, it had been in a minor accident. Still, I liked being inside it. It was roomy, and it was ours. When we were done loading our things, we went to say goodbye to my Aunt. She was leaning against the doorjamb, her arms crossed.

“Well,” my father said to her, “I’d feel better if you’d let me give you something to help with the rent.”
“We don’t need anything,” she said. “You’re new to America, and we’ve been here almost four years now.”

“Still,” my father said, then held out three one hundred dollar bills. I had never seen so much American money and knew it would’ve taken him a long time to earn it.

Cautiously Lourdes took the money. She unfolded the bills, but did not count them. Amazed, she looked back at my father in a way she had never looked at him before, a new respect pressed into her face. “Where did you get this money?”

“I sold something,” he said.

“You have nothing to sell.”

“He sold a diamond,” my mother said.

“A diamond?”

“One of his grandmother’s diamonds,” my mother whispered.

“He brought them over in the sole of his shoe.”

Lourdes looked at my father again, her eyes narrowed, considering what he had done. “That is very clever,” she said, “hiding them in your shoe, very clever and brave. I left many things in Cuba I wish I’d brought with me. In Cuba, we were very comfortable. In America, we are lower-middle class.”

“We are too,” my father said.

“Yes,” Lourdes said, “we all are. No one but Cubans seem to understand what we left behind.”

In the car, I thought my father would be glad for once because Lourdes had looked at him with respect, but he didn’t say anything about it, nor did he act in any particular way that would have betrayed his pride. Instead, he drove slowly out to the main road, which would then take us to our new home. After a while, my mother said, “You know, you didn’t need to give her so much money?”

“We stayed for many months,” he said. “We should’ve given more.”

“No,” my mother said, “Lourdes is family.”

“Still,” he said, “we should pay what we can.”

Nothing more was said about the money, or about my aunt’s reaction; my father simply let it pass, though I knew it was important to him. We drove quietly to our new apartment, a building called The Palms. We lived in Apartment H5, and for the first time since coming to America, I had my own room, though my
mother sometimes used it for her sewing. For the rest of the day, we felt good about ourselves, being legitimate renters, our own walls, our own roof. It was good to have these things again.

At night, when my father went to bed, he asked me to come sit by him. “Come here, Antonio,” he said. I sat on the corner of his bed, my math book open in my lap. He took my hand, his large calloused fingers curved around mine. For a while, he did not say anything, but just sat there, his breathing heavy as it often was at night, long, deep breaths. “We have been here many months now,” he said, “and I think you should know we may not go back to Cuba for a while.”

“I know,” I said, “I hear people talk about it at school.”

“When I came I thought we would be here only for a short time, perhaps a year at most, but Castro is strong and our people are very afraid.”

“Why don’t the Americans do something?” I asked.

My father looked at me, his heavy brown eyes searching for mine.

“That is what I didn’t understand before I came,” he said.

“They’re afraid too.”

Shortly after that I went to my room, and for the first time since leaving Cuba, I fell asleep by myself.

In the days that followed, I understood that my father was finding a way to accommodate this knowledge, that we might be in America much longer than he planned. At school, he became more quiet than he had been, picking work he could do by himself. Often I would see him putting in new plants around the Administration Office or patching up the rain gutters in preparation for the rainy season. He worked with a firm determination, a certain resignation in his body, and for the first time since he acquired this job, the teachers took notice, often complementing him. Occasionally they would ask him to work at their homes, putting up a new fence or weatherproofing an outdoor deck. My father never refused because “a little extra money would not hurt us at all.”

I did not know what my father did with this extra money, but among Cubans he slowly developed a reputation as a man who was doing well. On Friday nights, we began to have dinner parties at our apartment, my mother cooking beef or pork. Once
she cooked plantains my father said were so good they almost made him cry. They invited people they knew from Cuba, old acquaintances and relatives, including Lourdes and her cousins, all of whom were loud and talkative, like Lourdes herself. “See,” she said to them, “this is the man I was telling you about. He is very smart with money. He was able to keep things from the policía. When the policía came to my house, everything was taken for the sake of the revolution. He has a good job and has been able to get one of his friends a job as well.”

At this, I saw my father raise his hand, beginning to object not only because this last claim was not true but because he was embarrassed. “Let me take your coat, Lourdes,” he said, “and your cousin’s coat as well.”

“This is Helena,” she said.

“Why hello, Helena,” my father said. “I can get you something to drink if you like.”

“Oh yes,” Helena said, “that would be nice.”

Slowly, over the course of a few months, I saw my father change into a new person at these parties. He stood taller, never looked down at his feet, and always had something to say, a joke or a story everyone liked. One Friday, during dinner, a man asked him, “So tell us, what did you do in Cuba?”

My father put down his fork. “In Cuba,” he began, “my father and I owned a small bakery. I mean, we owned it until Castro decided he owned it instead.” At this, our guests laughed. “My father was very good at making pastry. As for me, I simply helped make the bread each day.”

“But bread,” the man said, “that is important.”

“Important, but easy,” my father said. “Anyone could make bread.”

“No one makes good Cuban bread in Miami,” he said. “You should become a baker. We need a good baker in South Miami.”

“I agree,” my father said. “The bread here is not as good as the bread in Cuba. But the Cuban bakeries in Miami are family owned. If they need extra help, they will hire a family member, not me.”

“That is very true,” Lourdes said.

“It is better to be a groundskeeper,” my father said. “People always need someone to tend their gardens, and as long as I work
at St. Mark’s, Antonio can attend for free. It is better he goes to a Catholic school than to a public school where the classes are much larger.”

“Indeed,” Lourdes admitted.

“But,” my mother added, “you also attended the university for many years. You once wanted to be a teacher. You were very close to finishing your degree.”

“I wanted to be many things when I was younger,” my father said.

“Didn’t we all,” our guest added.

“No,” my mother said, “you would’ve been a fine teacher, if you ask me.”

“I don’t think so,” my father said, and after this, he began to talk about other things: small businesses which might do well in our South Miami neighborhood; ways that, if he had known, he might have converted his family’s money into US dollars; how lucky they were to have chosen the United States, as opposed to Mexico, as their place of refuge. After dinner, my father went outside and drank beer with his guests, all of them looking at distant city lights, one of them smoking a cigar which, he claimed, “did not have the fine, even ash of cigars back home.” My father let me sip a little beer—as always I found it bitter—and when I tired of listening, I went inside, where my mother and Lourdes were finishing the dishes.

“You know,” Lourdes said to my mother, “when you first came to America, I thought you had married much beneath you, but I can see I was wrong. You did very well. He is pleasant to be around now that he is accustomed to being here. More importantly, he is smart about work and good with money. He is much more clever than I originally gave him credit for being. Yes, you did well.”

My mother simply agreed, but I knew she was thinking of other things, though I did not know what they were.

At ten o’clock, I went to my room and put on my pajamas. When I got under the blankets, I read one of my school books for a while, but could not concentrate. Instead, I listened to my father’s voice. Even though he was on the porch, his voice filled my room, soft like a summer breeze. “No, no,” he was saying, “Cubans will be fine in this country. There are many opportuni-
ties for us here.” I noticed then the other people must be paying attention to him. Never before could I see my father as a teacher, someone like Mr. Sorvino who taught both math and social studies, but now I could. I saw how he liked ideas, was good at talking, and more importantly knew how to speak in such a way people would listen. I went to sleep holding this image, wondering at its strangeness, how my father had once been one person and now was someone completely different.

VI.

At school, I saw how he changed as well. He was more comfortable in the presence of teachers. He would say hello to them in the hallways and, every week or so, might have lunch with one or two of them. They treated him differently; that is, they did not treat him like Steve or Hank; they gave him respect. They asked him questions, not about gardening or handiwork, but about himself and the things he had done. One day, Mr. Sorvino asked about his years at the university: “Didn’t you say you once wanted to be a teacher?”

“A long time ago I did,” my father said. “I went to school for many years but never finished.”

“What area did you want to teach?”

“I was most interested in Cuban Literature.”

“Cuban Literature,” Mr. Sorvino repeated. “Who was your favorite author?”

“For a long time, I liked Jose Martí, but later I read American and European authors as well. If I would’ve been caught, I would’ve been suspended, perhaps even arrested.”

“I see,” he said. “I can’t say I’ve read Jose Martí, but I’ve heard of him.”

“He’s very well known in Cuba,” my father said, “but not in America.”

“Maybe I should read one of his books. That might help me better understand Cuba.” After this, he touched my father’s shoulder, a very friendly touch, as though they had known each other a good while or had a great deal in common, and after the bell rang, Mr. Sorvino returned to his classroom and my father walked to the tool shed.
In our neighborhood, he became well known among other Cuban immigrants. He would invite them for dinner, and for the first time I could remember, he would go drinking with them. He would always buy his friends a drink or two, and the few times they needed money, he would loan it to them. It was only forty or fifty dollars, but still it worried my mother. One night she talked to him about it. They were sitting in our living room, on the new couch my father purchased from one of the teachers at school. "I know," she began, "you like to be generous, but we can't afford to be generous so often."

"It was only a little money," he said. "Enough to see Martin to his next payday. He will not forget to pay it back."

"Yes," she said, "but suppose we have an emergency, suppose we need the money."

"We are Cubans," he said, "and as Cubans we must stick together. Most Americans do not care about us at all."

"Yes," she said again, but I could see she was giving in, the argument trickling away and leaving only softness. She moved closer to him, folded her arm onto his shoulder. Tenderly she smoothed the hair from his face, and I could tell she loved him a great deal, perhaps more now than when they lived in Cuba. She kissed him softly, the type of short kiss she used when I was nearby, but before she could kiss him again, she heard a tapping on our door. Through the window, they saw Lourdes who, in fact, was looking back at them.

"Oh, you love birds," she said when she came in. "You are very foolish not to close your curtains when you have a scene like that. Why, anyone could see."

"Hello, Lourdes," my father said.

"And hello to you too," she said, walking over to his side.

"Yes, and before I forget, I hear that you are doing nice things for people."

"Nice but foolish," my mother said.

"It's best to be foolish if you can afford to," she said.

My mother was about to say something about this "foolishness," but I saw my father look at her in such a way it made her want to stop. For perhaps the first time in his life my father was well respected in his community, well loved, and my mother did not want to take that from him. Instead, she said, "Why don't
you come with me, Lourdes. You can help me with some sewing. I need help selecting a pattern.”

After the two women were gone, my father talked with me for a while, and later that evening, put on his gray coat and hat and went down to meet some of his friends at a local bar, one named after a popular Habana night club, The Tropicana, though this Tropicana was much smaller, having only three tables and a long bar, above which the owner had fixed a TV. For a while, I wondered why my father chose to wear this gray coat and hat each time he went out, but that night I remembered something I had not remembered for many years. In his reading journal, when he was much younger, he had sketched a well-known American businessman, a character from a book I had not yet read. I thought he looked somewhat like this character, but then again, he did not look exactly like him. He had put on weight, and his face was beginning to wrinkle. From our balcony, I watched him walk to the corner, where he met one of his friends, and together they ducked into an alley which would lead them to the bar.

For awhile, then, our lives were lived on familiar avenues: work and school, social dinners on Fridays. Occasionally my father would meet friends at the local bar. When he went out, he always dressed in his hat and coat, the buttons never done. On one Wednesday, when I finished my homework, I followed him, leaving our apartment shortly after he did. I watched how he walked, long, confident strides, which was slightly different than the way he walked when he was with us. He would look at strangers as they passed, and once or twice, I believe he said hello to people he did not know. Out here, his presence seemed to expand and occupy a larger space. Often when he talked with people he knew, he would touch their arm, an intimate gesture he was just beginning to experiment with at home, his hand firmly planted near his friend’s shoulder or elbow. When he arrived at The Tropicana, I lingered at a magazine stand, pretending to look at newspapers printed in Spanish. I waited for ten or fifteen minutes, until the stand owner began to shoo me away, believing I might steal something, but instead I bought a Spanish comic book about Poquito Pedro then went across the street to look at it.

I wasn’t reading it really, but mainly looking at the ads. The
ads were for products popular in Mexico, not Cuba. I knew most white Americans confused Hispanics. They thought we were all alike, interchangeable, no more than reflections of each other. No one understood that we Cubans had come here not for better jobs but because of politics. At times I was beginning to resent this attitude, but right then it did not bother me. I looked at ads featuring famous Mexican movie actresses, many of them wearing only the smallest bikinis. In one ad, the main character, Poquito Pedro, appeared to have fainted after looking at a beautiful red-haired actress who, according to the ad, would star in a new TéléNorela. By the time I finished with the comic book, I was upset, though I could not say why. It was at this point my father emerged from the bar, two friends with him. With bottles in their hands, they sat on a bench and watched cars pass. He gestured with his hands and was very sociable, even more so than he had been at our Friday night dinners. I had never seen him like this and understood if he happened to see me here, one block away, he would stop being this person and shrink back into the father I more easily recognized.

For a while, I stayed there, the sun falling low and casting long shadows across the street. A few times, I was able to hear his voice above the other city sounds, a word of Spanish distinguishing itself or perhaps a piece of his loud, expansive laugh. Most of the time, though, he was simply a man I was unsure I truly knew sitting a block away from me, his empty beer bottle at his feet. When he tired of sitting outside, he returned to the bar, the glass door closing behind him. I walked home slowly that night, my comic book rolled in my hand, and when I arrived at our apartment, I discovered I had absentmindedly crinkled many of its pages. I set it on my dresser and lay on my bed. When my father returned an hour later, he still had the sheen of this other personality on him, a film of his expressiveness covering him like an afternoon shadow, but it quickly went away. His gestures were not as sure, his smile not as broad, a small element of satisfaction missing from his eyes. He took off his hat and coat and hung them in our hall closet, and when he was returned to his regular self, he sat with my mother and Lourdes. When I came out to see them, my mother held up fabric Lourdes
had helped her select: it was patterned maroon and white. "What do you think of this?" she asked my father.

"It's nice," he said, "don't you think?" but this was not the same, exact voice I'd heard float down the twilight street not more than two hours ago. It was different somehow.

Over the coming days, I began to look for the aspects of my father I had glimpsed outside The Tropicana. I looked for it at home and at school. I looked for it when friends would visit our house on Friday nights, suspecting that this personality may appear late in the evening, sometime after I went to bed, but one Friday, long after midnight, when I sneaked out of my room and stood in our dark hallway, it was only my regular father I saw, not the one from the bar. He was tall and good looking, he was good with conversation, but he was not the same somehow as this other person.

Only once, later that month, did I see it at school. From my friends, I found out my father would talk for a few minutes to Mr. Sorvino's morning class. I didn't know why he didn't tell me about this, but suspected he did not want me there because it might make him nervous. During third period, Mr. Sorvino taught 11th grade Social Studies, and during the month of May, they had read excerpts of Jose Martí's work. Shortly after my own class began, I asked Ms. Lawren for the hall pass, but after I left, I did not go to the boy's room. Instead I walked to Mr. Sorvino's class, where I peered in through the back window, my hands cupped around my eyes. I saw my father in front of the class, talking to the students. I did not know any of them because they were much older than me. They were not talking or passing notes as we did when we had a guest speaker. Instead, they appeared to be listening. One girl even took notes. I tried to see what my father was writing on the board; I tried to hear him, but heard only one line: "Martí's work can be used in support of many political platforms, even the socialist platform in Cuba." He said it with such force, such pride, it was as though I had never heard my father's voice before. After hearing this, I began to walk back to my own classroom, my hands in my pockets, my feet shuffling over the cement. When I saw Tom Luiz, the hall monitor, I simply showed my pass and he let me go on my way.

When my father arrived home that afternoon, I thought I
might see traces of this person on him again, but they were not there. Only when he put on his gray hat and coat, did I sense they might emerge. He left, as he often did, after dinner, and walked to the bar. I followed him for a half block, but when he turned and happened to see me, I simply walked off like I was headed to Joey’s house. I did not go to Joey’s but walked a good ways up that street. When I had gone far enough, I cut up a side alley very cautiously because I did not want him to see me again. I walked past the comer grocery, the laundromat, and Mama Concha’s Family Style Restaurant. When I could see The Tropicana, I ducked into a Cuban cafe and looked out the window. Once more, I saw my father on the same bench, a half empty beer at his feet. I could not hear what he was saying, but saw that his gestures, in fact his whole demeanor, were very different than the ones he used around my mother and me. I understood this as well, though I should have understood it earlier that day: he might have made a good teacher. There must have been a time when he had been this person, when his personality had been more frequently touched by this spirit. When the cafe owner said I needed to order a drink or leave, I simply left without answering him.

I began to think about this a good deal, who my father had been before I was born. I had not imagined that he could’ve been someone significantly different from the person I knew. I had thought he was the same person throughout time, a constant line darting back to his own boyhood, but this understanding must have been wrong. Now I pictured his body like that of a wooden Cuban doll, the kind where the doll opens, hinged at the side, so that you find another, smaller doll inside, and then, inside of that a third doll, a trail of personalities, and right now one of these earlier personalities was working its way to the surface, one I very much admired. I was fascinated by it, how this other person was unlike him but at the same time was him. In time, I thought, this other person would overtake him, that he might become a teacher or a business owner, something that would make him feel more important and, therefore, more satisfied. When he came home that night, however, he simply took off his hat and coat, setting them both in the hall closet before going to bed.
ON THE AFTERNOON OF LOURDES’ birthday dinner, my father left a little early for The Tropicana, wearing his coat and hat, but I did not follow him. Instead, I stayed with my mother who was preparing a cake. It was not officially Loudres’ birthday—her birthday was the following Wednesday—but they thought it would be a good idea to invite her over, an early celebration which would lead up to a proper party three days later. I watched him walk down our stairs, a Spanish newspaper folded in his hand, and when he reached the bottom, he waved to me. “Help your mother, Antonio,” he said, then walked off. I knew that two blocks later he would turn into a slightly different person, but I thought tonight, because Lourdes was visiting, this person might stay with him, lingering like a fine dust, and, for once, he would not wish it away.

Inside, I helped with the cake and later diced vegetables for a type of spicy chicken soup my mother knew how to make. While she was cooking the meat, I asked, “Why does father go to The Tropicana?”

“Oh that,” she said as she turned the meat over. “Men need some place to go. You’ll understand some day. It is a very old saying that men like to wander in the world.”

“But why The Tropicana? Why not someplace else?”

“What do you know about The Tropicana?” she asked.

“I’ve walked by it a few times.”

“It’s just a little, neighborhood bar. I imagine no man likes to be around the house all day.”

I considered asking something else, but did not know how to phrase what I truly wanted to know, if she understood my father was somehow different when he was away from us. Moreover, I sensed she did not know the answer and would not be able to help me. I began to content myself with her company, as I often liked to be around her, and when Lourdes joined us, I began to notice the different ways men and women moved in the world. I do not mean to say I had not noticed this before—I had—but I had not noticed it in fully conscious terms. For the first time, I understood that I would someday join my father’s mysterious
world, that its hazy brilliance might encompass me. As I thought about this, I began to look forward to my father’s return. I thought this piece of information would help me see my father for who he was. He was my father, he was Cuban, but he was connected to me in some other way I did not understand.

We waited a long time for my father, and when my mother began to worry, Lourdes said, “Oh let him be. A man like him needs time to relax. Besides, it’s nice for us to visit by ourselves.” They talked for a while more, about my mother’s work and how bad conditions had become in Cuba, and around six o’clock, my mother went to answer the phone. When she returned, I saw she was concerned, though at the same time she was trying to hide how she felt. I saw, too, that Lourdes did not see this in my mother so, instead of asking about it, continued as she had before.

“I bet that was him, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” my mother said.

“You see, in Miami, you shouldn’t worry. Miami is much safer than most cities I knew in Cuba. A man like him can take care of himself. He is fine, isn’t he?”

“Fine,” my mother said; however, her voice was not quite as it should be. I knew right then something had happened to him, but also knew not to ask. At least not until we were alone. “He’s just sorry he can’t be here for dinner.”

“That’s quite all right,” she said. “It would be nice for the two of us to spend the evening together. Rarely am I allowed just the company of women. It will be nice, yes, a nice quiet evening. He can join us on Wednesday for my proper birthday.”

For the rest of the evening, I saw my mother put on a performance no one would see through. No one, that is, except for someone very close to her: my father, perhaps her own parents, and me. She served the soup and then the sweet bread, all the while asking Lourdes about herself so that she would carry the burden of conversation. She spoke in a light friendly voice almost identical to her regular voice, but in some crucial way, it remained different. Before dessert, however, Lourdes noticed that something was bothering my mother. “Yes;” she said, “you must tell me if something is upsetting you.”
“It is nothing,” my mother said, waving her hand before her face, “a small headache. I believe it will go away shortly.”

“Yes, I know how those are,” she said, and for some reason, she began to make small ruminations that meant she would leave soon, much earlier than I had expected. “My headaches now that I am thirty-seven are much worse than those I had only a few years ago,” Lourdes said. “I know of a good Cuban doctor if you’d like to see him. Of course he is not licensed, but does good work.”

From the top of the stairs, we watched Lourdes walk to her car, her purse tucked under her arm. We waved goodbye and only then, after we were inside, did I ask my mother what had happened to my father. She absorbed this question as though it had tangible weight. When she was near the sofa, she collapsed onto it. She looked out the window, where the moon was centered in the top pane, before turning back to me. “Oh Tonio,” she cried, “you must not tell anyone. This must be a family secret.”

“What?” I asked.

She turned again to face the moon. “Your father was arrested—arrested for drinking beer on the street. This country has many crazy laws. Crazy laws that make no sense. No one could possibly know them all. On the street or in the bar, what’s the difference?”

“Are we going to get him?”

“We can’t,” she said. “We don’t have enough money. He doesn’t want anyone to know. He’s a proud man, your father. He’s foolish and prideful, but I love those things about him. He believes he can come home in the morning. He will talk to a judge.”

All that night I pictured my father sleeping in the type of jail I saw on TV, a small cell with one loud roommate who kept him awake. I understood it would be cold and dark, a bare yellow lightbulb dangling from the ceiling, but also understood that my father was there in his gray coat and hat, that he might have his friends with him and that they might talk like they did outside the bar, their beers at their feet, the bottles half finished.

When I saw him the next day, however, I understood it had not been like this at all; it had been difficult for him and had shamed him in a way I knew he would not talk about with me.
On Tuesday, we went to school together, and instead of going to the teachers’ lounge as he usually did, he walked to the tool shed, where Steve and Hank were surprised to see him. He took out his tools and began to work on his Monday chores, even though it was Tuesday. He cut the baseball field then chalked it, before finally weeding the plants which lined the teachers’ parking lot. From what I saw, no teacher treated him any differently—they said hello, they invited him to lunch, they asked him to work at their houses—but there was now a stiffness between them, an invisible barrier which had not been there before and which clearly frustrated my father. He had set it there and yet could not take it away.

At home, he did not go to The Tropicana. Instead, his friends came to our apartment, each of them carrying a six pack, which was something they had never done before. They did not ask why he didn’t join them and, more importantly, never asked him for a small loan again. From this, I understood they knew—they knew my father was not quite the man he had hoped to be—and despite my mother’s encouragement, he did not put on his gray hat and coat and go out with his friends any more. To my knowledge, he only wore that coat one other time. It was early summer, a cool breeze moving through town. When he thought he was alone, he removed the items from the closet and slowly put them on. He admired himself in the mirror, and then stepping closer, he examined his face, the small wrinkles, his eyes a deep, inquisitive brown. When finished, he stepped back to better view himself, and then as though he were conversing with his reflection, he made small gestures, moving his arms much the way he had outside The Tropicana, pleasant, expansive motions, but he must have seen how these gestures were forced now. Slowly he took off his coat and hung it in the back of the closet, then wearing just a white shirt and slacks, he walked down to The Tropicana. Inside the bar, I knew his friends did not sit around him as they once had; instead he joined them and together they sat around some new man and listened to the stories he had to tell.

For most of the summer, he stayed around our apartment on weekends. He planted an herb garden; he grew pumpkins and summer squash. When Lourdes came to visit, she did not look at my father the same way. Still she respected him, but her respect
was distant and tentative, different than what she offered him earlier that year. When school started that fall, he did not talk to the teachers very much, only occasional words to Mr. Sorvino who later told me he was grateful for my father’s presentation. “It was very well informed,” he said, “and interesting to hear.” Because of these things, I understood that our lives had fallen onto a new path, one where hope was placed at a distance and more tangible securities piled close. I understood my parents were at an age where they needed to rethink their lives and where my father’s earlier personality would not do them as much good as it would have even a few months before. I was confused why this personality disappeared for good, hidden like the gray coat in the back of the closet, and can only offer this one, small explanation, though I know it is not enough. At a winter party later that year, I over heard my Aunt Lourdes explain my father’s situation to two of her friends: “Yes, I believe it was my own misunderstanding. I blame myself for that. I thought his shoes were filled with many diamonds, but I do not think it was that many after all.”

VIII.

A YEAR LATER, WE MOVED TO ANOTHER PART of Florida, and a year after that we moved to Huntington Beach, California, where my mother knew relatives twice removed. After each move, I expected my father’s old sheen to return, but it never did. He was a hard working man, a man who in later years returned to reading, though this time he preferred non-fiction because of its factualness. He held a number of jobs: he was a groundskeeper for Dade County and later for a large church; he was translator and a TV salesman at JC Penny’s; for a while, he was even a bread baker again, a small Cuban bakery in Costa Mesa his employer. Eventually, he returned to being a groundskeeper for a private school because that was his favorite job and one he found manageable after he turned fifty.

When we moved to Huntington Beach, I enrolled in ninth grade, and later, after graduating with a fairly good GPA, I was accepted to UCLA, which was the college I most wanted to attend. I am a business major, as are most of the Cuban-American
students I know. I do not know all of them well, only two, and we have been taking most of the same classes since the winter quarter of our freshman year. This last fall, I took a poetry workshop which was where I began to reconsider of my father, much encouraged by my teacher. I had not thought of him like this in many years, as Cuban in some larger sense. His country took away not only his land and his house, but also part of his hope which should've been his birthright. I was looking for words which would hold my father, or perhaps more accurately I was looking for words which might hold the hidden aspects of him, the ones I glimpsed as a boy.

I have never told my father I saw him outside that bar, never told him I saw him give his presentation on Jose Marti. My words are becoming smoke much like the smoke inside him. They are thin and changing, difficult to get my hands around. My father was a proud, careful man, a man who might have been many different things, but in the end chose not to be some of them. From college, I know sons tell stories to redeem their fathers’ lives, but this one is different. I am his son, and he is my father. Someday I plan to give him the things I have written, my poems, a few pages perhaps. I would like to write a story about those times I saw him as a boy, but have not figured out how to do that yet—that, or perhaps I am just too chicken to try. When I do write this, I will give him a copy. I will let him read it when we are alone, my mother out with her friends, and I will watch his face, believing it might reveal some spark or sheen of that other man I was not able to meet, back when we were new immigrants to the country that, fifteen years later, has become our permanent home.