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SO CLOSE AND YET SO FAR:
A NOVELLA IN TWO PARTS

by

Adela Maria Brito

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

The University of Memphis

December 2019

ABSTRACT

So Close and Yet So Far is a novella in two parts, which takes place during two distinct time periods in Cuban history. The first part involves a female protagonist, Gloria Menocal Quintana, who begins her journey toward a singing career during the late 1940s, a time of great excess when the American and Italian Mafias held control of the nightclubs and casinos in Havana. Themes of sexual exploitation of women in entertainment, machismo, political upheaval, and infertility are explored in this section. The second part follows Gloria's second cousin, Pedro Olivares, a young man who escapes Cuba on a raft in the early 1990s and suffers from culture shock and PTSD after arriving in Miami. Pedro visits Gloria in New York City a few years later, and, despite their large age difference, they bond over their past struggles and shared love for the homeland they left behind. While technically not historical fiction, the use of historical events and real settings are included to provide context and, possibly, a sense of relatability to some readers.

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PART ONE:

GLORIA

Songbird on the Run

Cuba, 1946

Gloria Luz Menocal, five days shy of her seventeenth birthday, rushed toward the dirt road, carrying two dresses, some undergarments, a rosary, and a small knife in a potato sack over her shoulder. At this hour, right before the sun came up, a few trucks would travel on this road to make their deliveries of livestock, lumber, or other supplies. She desperately prayed one of them would stop for her and that the driver would be *un hombre decente* and willing to drive her far away from *la maldita finca*, the damn farm that had brought nothing but despair to her family and get her as close to Havana as possible.

The farm's failure was not due to a lack of ability on her father's part. *Papá* really tried, but the blinding headaches the local doctor could not cure and his rum habit to numb the pain drove him to an early grave. Ambrosio Menocal collapsed and died on the field instantly three years ago. The tragedy left Gloria's already-frail mother, who was always depressed, and her sons, who were only nine and eleven, to help fourteen-year-old Gloria tend the land. The task wouldn't have been impossible with some help, if her father's two cousins weren't such perverts, trying to force themselves on both young Gloria and their widowed cousin-in-law. Gloria couldn't count on her mother to remedy the situation; *Mamá*, at thirty-eight, already seemed old, mainly because she'd always been frail and helpless, and, after becoming a widow, more so.

One night, Gloria heard the two cousins outside, one talking about all the nasty things he'd like to do to virginal Gloria. The thought disgusted and enraged her, so she ran to the kitchen cabinet and reached to the very back for the item that would surely keep those bastards away. With the same gun *Papá* had threatened to kill himself with one evening in front of Gloria and her mother after one of his "bad days," she shot between the two men toward the ground.

Her aim was better than she thought; the bullet slightly nicked one man in the ankle. The other man ran, as the injured one limped away. That should scare them away, she figured. She didn't want their help in resurrecting the farm; she rather let the farm go rotten than have one finger of their slimy hands touch her or her mother. But *Mamá's* recent idea to help the family's financial situation was just as terrible in Gloria's opinion.

"No, Mamá. No, no, no!" Gloria had told her mother after visits from three *hombres* who could take care of things for them.

"I won't marry a *viejo!*" To Gloria, the thirty-five, forty, and the forty-two-year-old potential suitors her mother had solicited were *old men*. To make matters worse, the oldest had the same beady eyes as the perverted cousins, at least it seemed that way to her.

Each day at home got worse, with the possibility of another man coming to claim Gloria as his prize. Gloria sometimes wished she was *fea* so that people – men and women – wouldn't gawk at her lush raven hair, dark large eyes, and her already buxom figure. Sure, she enjoyed the attention from boys her age, but not from much older men who looked her up and down inappropriately. She wanted to choose her own husband, one who was good looking, loving, and who would treat her like a *princesa*, not because she was beautiful but because she was smart, funny, and a gifted singer.

Yesterday afternoon, her mother approached the subject again, and, this time, Gloria said she'd think about it as soon as she turned seventeen. This appeased her mother, but Gloria knew her lie wouldn't work for long. She was not going to stay another day and allow anyone else to decide her future for her.

She kissed her brothers' forehead as they slept and silently promised them she'd come back when she had money. She didn't dare enter her mother's room, nor did she leave a goodbye

letter. Gloria knew her departure would devastate *Mamá*, and it broke her heart to do it, but she had to go. She was going to shape her own destiny.

She'd make her way to Havana, and, eventually, make her debut at *El Tropicana* cabaret. After gaining some experience, she'd arrive in *Nueva York* and sing in front of even larger audiences, maybe meet the greatest American *sonora* – Ella Fitzgerald - with her great improvisational abilities.

But first things first. Gloria had to get a ride out of her farm town. She walked for about ten minutes before she heard the hum of a motor.

“*Ay, mamacita linda,*” said the driver. “I’ll take you anywhere you want to go. *Estas deliciosa.*”

Gloria refused to get into a vehicle with a man who immediately called her *pretty little momma* and said she was *delicious*. She was going to wait for an insecure ugly man who didn’t think he had a chance with her. She continued walking, as the morning dew settled on the green stretches of land on both sides of the road. Another driver stopped twenty minutes later.

“Going toward Havana?” she asked.

“*Sí, más o menos.*” Gloria figured *more or less* was close enough.

“What are you running away from, something bad?” the driver, who introduced himself as Emilio, finally asked. He glanced at her; his eyes expressed concern. Gloria took an instant liking to the man. He reminded her of her father, soft-spoken and tired beyond his years.

“I’m running *to* Havana, Señor,” she emphasized. I have always wanted to work and sing in *la capital*. She paused, “By chance, do you know anyone who can offer me work as a cook or maid in exchange for a room?”

“No, not in Havana,” Emilio said. But I know a man, a cousin of a cousin, along the way who might give you work. He has a business. Right before you get into the city.”

“What kind of business?” Gloria didn’t know anyone in Havana, so maybe she needed to make money elsewhere first.

“Like a hotel, and there’s food and music.”

“Does he have a piano? I *am* a singer.”

Gloria has recently repeated the declaration *Yo soy una cantante* each time she hummed or sang. She sang while cooking and washing clothes, while doing everything, really. So now she wanted to declare to others that she was a singer until somebody offered her the opportunity to sing for an audience.

“*Sí*, a piano, conga drums, everything. Men, uh, I mean, everybody has a good time there. Roberto can give you work. I will put in a good word for you, say you are from my town.”

Gloria got a sense that if mainly men had a good time there, this Roberto’s “hotel” was perhaps a *casa de putas*, a whorehouse providing other services as well, like dining and musical entertainment.

“I will wait until we get closer. Then, I’ll decide to get off or continue on with you.”

They drove in silence, which was fine, as Gloria was exhausted and didn’t want to talk. But, still, she was reluctant to fall asleep.

“Do not worry, I am not going to hurt you. You can sleep.”

Gloria wanted to believe the man; her tired eyes certainly did. She fell asleep before they reached the next mile in the road.

A tap on the shoulder awoke her from a groggy state.

“I am sorry,” said Emilio, “but you must see the most beautiful place in all of Cuba.”

Gloria could not believe her eyes. She opened and closed them a couple of times to be sure she was not dreaming.

“*Pinar del Rio*. The best tobacco in the world grows here. So green, so fertile. The perfect place for it.”

“My father told me about this place.” The dazzling aroma of the bountiful land filled her senses and the sweet-smelling flowers from the fields tickled her nose.

Gloria wished her family had land in this province. They’d be prosperous and maybe her father would still be alive. In an area that seemed to extend to eternity, there were palm trees nestled together, a narrow strip of blue water, verdant land that seemed as soft as cushioned clouds, and small rounded mountains, with larger ones in the distance.

“There are also caves and cliffs here. It is a magical place.”

Gloria agreed. The landscape looked like it was painted on a canvas with all the variations of green. She stared out toward the faraway mountains and couldn’t help humming.

“Why don’t you sing? You said you were a singer.”

“Really? You do not mind?”

“Don’t singers have to practice?”

Gloria agreed and began to sing “*Como Fue*,” where the narrator asks how was it that he fell in love, was it her eyes or her mouth... or was it perhaps the impatience of waiting so long for her arrival.

Emilio seemed impressed and called out for an encore, “*Otra!*”

Gloria laughed and said maybe later. She looked out into the endless greenery until her eyes gave out again. This time she dreamed of another endlessly green place where a chorus of angelic voices sang a lullaby.

“We are here,” Emilio finally announced. “But as I would tell any young woman, please be careful. Stay focused on your goal of reaching Havana.”

The gigantic house that this cousin of a cousin, Roberto Quintana, had turned into a hotel was light yellow with wooden shutters covering all the windows; two smaller white houses, still big compared to Gloria’s home, stood at the end of a dirt path behind the main house.

It was late afternoon and hot, and everything seemed quiet, as if people were still sleeping inside. Emilio told Gloria to take a walk around the garden on the side of the house as he spoke to Señor Quintana at the front entrance of the house.

Eventually, Emilio and Señor Quintana came over to Gloria.

“Emilio has convinced me to give you cooking and cleaning work,” said the distinguished man with the thick dark mustache.

“*Sí*, Señor Quintana, I can do that, and I sing, too.”

“*Sí, sí*, he told me that you sing beautifully. I can pay you a little for your work and give you a small room in one of the back houses. My sister Carmela will take you to your room in a minute. Give her your clothes and she will wash them.” The man looked down at Gloria’s threadbare brown-flowered dress, not with disgust, but with pity.

A woman quickly appeared as if she had heard her name from inside the house and handed Emilio a wrapped-up item that smelled like chicken.

“I will go get your bag in the truck,” Emilio said.

“*Gracias*, Emilio, you are a good man to drive me all this way.” She extended her hand in gratitude, and he was quickly on his way.

Carmela instructed Gloria to bathe in an indoor washroom and set out a dress she’d wear as a uniform, beginning the next day. Within an hour, she brought her food and a few books to

keep her occupied. One book that caught her attention was *Romancero Gitano*, a book of poetry by Federico García Lorca. Gloria learned how to read and write at the age of ten from a neighbor, and the woman gave her books whenever she had something new to share. This poetry book looked appealing with its short phrases and form. The more she read Lorca's poems, the more she realized how similar poetry was to songs, especially the love ballads she loved to sing so much.

After nine in the evening, Gloria heard voices and music and ventured outside to sit in the grass. Her suspicions proved to be right; this was a place to entertain gentlemen, but Carmela had solely instructed Gloria on her cleaning and cooking duties and didn't mention any other tasks she might be expected to do. She remained sitting outside under her bedroom window as people talked and drank around the main house.

The next morning, Carmela knocked on Gloria's door and told her to meet her at the main house promptly, so she and two other young women could be trained on food preparation and all the cleaning needed to maintain the main house and the two small ones. They got to work right away and didn't stop until it was two, at which point they ate a bowl of white rice, black beans, and one chicken drumstick. Carmela announced she was going to take her siesta and that the girls could do the same before returning to complete their tasks and preparing dinner.

Once it was dark, Gloria returned to her outdoor spot below her window. She immediately spotted some *cocuyos* flying about, with their green lights flickering.

"*Hola*, I'm Roberto," said a young man not much older than Gloria. She looked up and introduced herself. "Everybody calls me Beto because the other Roberto, the boss around here, is my father." Beto had thick black hair and green eyes, with thick eyebrows and long eyelashes a

woman would be jealous of. Gloria tried to play it smooth but could not help blushing when the young man smiled, and a dimple on his left cheek made his face light up. “Can I sit?” he asked.

“Sure.” Gloria scooted over so that Beto would have room to sit next to her. Gloria didn’t know what to say to this handsome young man, so she looked out to the trees and up at the dark sky, and then back at her male visitor.

Beto started talking and Gloria smiled as they fell into easy conversations about their childhood and aspirations. He’d lost his mother when he was fourteen, the same age Gloria lost her father. Beto wanted to be an architect, but his father pressured him to help with the restaurant side of the business.

“My aunt Carmela is like my mother, I guess, but I don’t like her. I don’t understand how a woman can sell young women, two are younger than you, to any man that comes along. My father is no better, but he’s my father, so…”

“You can leave like me,” Gloria couldn’t help saying.

“I’ve thought of that. I want to attend la Universidad de la Habana and then work there. I don’t mind that it’s quiet here sometimes and that I have a lot of time to read and make my drawings of buildings I would like to build someday. But I really want to be in the city learning and creating beautiful structures.” Beto smiled at Gloria and touched her hand. “You are brave to do what you are doing.”

“Maybe I am, I don’t know. I hope you find the courage to leave, too. Promise me you won’t stay here very long. Follow your heart, Beto.”

Gloria didn’t feel brave. She had not been in any danger, so she wasn’t sure if she was brave or not. She knew she needed to become stronger since she didn’t know what lay ahead now that she was on her own.

“Since we are talking about leaving, I must tell you. Don’t stay here too long. Carmela will start talking about what other job she wants you to do. She does that with the orphan girls who started as cooks and maids. They became pale, their eyes seem empty. But they do not have a family and my father and aunt act like their parents. These girls have no choice.”

Gloria had not given much thought to what forced girls to become prostitutes. Most people just considered them whores because selling your body was a way to make money. She now realized that these girls would otherwise be living on the street or already dead and chose this life out of desperation or were forced into it by people like the Quintana siblings who initially enticed them with a safe place to live and work.

“I expected that would happen soon. Do not worry and thank you for warning me. I will not stay for long.”

“I wish you could stay but not for that.”

Gloria couldn’t help but smile and admitted that she too wouldn’t mind staying for the right reason.

The next morning, Carmela heard Gloria singing as she hung bedsheets on the clothesline and asked her how many songs she knew how to sing. “Several,” Gloria boasted. “I have been singing since before I could talk, Mamá used to say.”

“My brother said he wanted you to sing on Saturday night. Would you like that?”

“*Sí*, it will be wonderful to sing in front of guests. *Gracias*.”

“You will have a couple of days to prepare. A man named Tomás plays piano here and will arrive early that day. You can practice with him. Do not worry about what to wear. I will take care of that.”

That night Beto found her in the same spot as the first evening, and she excitedly told him about her upcoming performance.

“I am happy for you. You will be *fantastica*.”

“How do you know? You have not heard me sing.”

“My father and aunt are business people. They wouldn’t ask you to do something if it wasn’t going to bring in customers.”

“That makes sense.”

“The truth is, I have heard you sing. You might not see me, but I have heard your angel voice while you are cleaning and doing the wash outside,” he said with a smile. “La, la, la, la, la,” he added with a laugh. “I haven’t wanted to interrupt you to talk to you, I just want to listen to you all day.”

Gloria felt warm all over as Beto gave her a peck on her cheek and said *buenas noches*.

On Saturday afternoon, Gloria and Tomás practiced four songs; Roberto Sr. seemed pleased as he watched them finish up. Carmela entered and said she’d left a nice dress for Gloria to wear and that she’d send in a girl later to help her with her hair.

At eight o’clock, the courtyard in the middle of the main house held about fifteen chairs, and all but one was taken by the time Gloria appeared wearing a white and blue gingham dress with a red satin sash around the waist and a matching long beaded necklace. Her long black hair was held back with a white ribbon.

Everyone in attendance applauded when Señor Quintana introduced her, and Tomás and Gloria began to perform. She felt so joyful inside as the words just flowed out. As Gloria sang a romantic *bolero*, she noticed two older men whispering. When she at looked them again, they began to snicker and one of them – a blubbery man – looked at her salaciously, licking his lips.

Gloria tried to erase that gross image from her mind immediately by focusing her attention on other side of the courtyard. She caught a glance from Beto, who stood in the back, and was able to return to the elation she was feeling before. He smiled, and when she finished the song, he was among the ones who applauded and called out for an encore, “Bravo! *Otra!*”

She obliged and sang something more upbeat, the recent hit “*Quizás, Quizás, Quizás.*” People sang along and when she was done most of them stood to clap. The man who’d licked his lips earlier remained in his seat, and with his right hand signaled for Carmela to come over.

Gloria instantly knew what conversation would ensue next time she saw Carmela. Her position as cook, maid, and singer, would soon include prostitute.

She lay on her bed and jumped up almost instantly when she heard a tap at the window. She sneaked out quietly when she saw it was Beto.

“You see, I told you you’d be great.”

“*Gracias.* You really think so?”

“*Sí,* you are a songbird!”

“*Ah,* Beto, it felt wonderful.”

“It was wonderful to watch you. You belong on a stage.”

“I feel so alive when I sing.”

“I hope to see you many more times. But, like I said, you must not stay here.”

“I know. I think things will change very soon.” Gloria thought of the creepy man in the audience but did not tell Beto about him. She shivered from the dreadful thought.

“I am sorry. That is how things go here. You must go.”

“I will miss you, Beto.”

He didn't reply, only leaned in and kissed her passionately. Gloria felt as if she was floating in the clouds and didn't want the moment to end. Then he looked her in the eyes, and said, "I feel it in my heart that you will be a bright star someday. I will go to Havana to see you perform, I promise." He wrapped his arms around her and held her a long minute. "I won't forget you, my songbird."

When Gloria returned to her room, she felt a pang of homesickness. Maybe her mother and brothers would have enjoyed her performance, too, even though her mother always said singing professionally was a foolish aspiration. Emilio, the truck driver, popped into her mind, and she remembered how he had complimented her singing. She recalled his words about being careful and remaining focused on reaching Havana. The man was right; the time to continue her journey was fast approaching.

Gloria was scared that Carmela would bring the gross man into the room, so she grabbed the wooden chair from the corner of her room and placed it under the doorknob. She figured if no one came in within the next hour, she'd be safe. Though she didn't hear anything for a long time, she still had a restless night.

Soon after Gloria opened her eyes the next morning, she got up and removed the wooden chair blocking the door and got dressed. Within seconds, it seemed, there was a knock on the door, but Carmela did not wait to be allowed in. She walked in and got straight to the point.

"Eres virgen?"

Gloria knew she had to lie. "No, I am not a virgin."

"No?"

"No, I had a *novio* for two years," Gloria lied again.

“I do not believe you. I have my ways to find out if you are or aren’t.” Carmela came closer and had a look in her eyes that meant business.

This was the moment when Gloria had to be brave and get herself out of this uncomfortable situation. She lowered her head, feigning shame, walked over to sit on her bed to buy time, and told a tale. “I understand, but I fell off a horse when I was twelve, and got hurt there, so your test will not be true. My mother was very upset about it. She said no man would want to marry me. At least I was able to have a boyfriend even if he felt I was tainted and didn’t believe my horse story.”

Gloria desperately needed Carmela to believe her horse story now, not that it would stop her from adding her to the list of available prostitutes, but it might deter that sleazy man from the night before.

“*Muy interesante*, Gloria. I am sorry you fell off a horse, truly I am.” She smiled devilishly and added, “But I know what I know. Be ready for your first encounter with a *real man*, not with whatever boy you claim you were with, rolling around in the hay or whatever you did back on the farm.” Carmela marched out of the room.

Gloria did not want to become one of those unfortunate girls who were forced to lie down with men. She recalled what Beto had said about the other girls, how they had hollow eyes. So far, Carmela had kept Gloria away from the main house, except the two hours she spent collecting linens and such that would be piled up in the morning to be laundered and then replaced early evening by one of the maids.

She had caught a glimpse at one girl who must have been no more than fourteen or fifteen. The girl was skinny, pale, and had the hollow look Beto had described. Though Gloria, based on the reactions she often got from boys and men most of her life, would be popular with

the clients and could make money, of course if Carmela even gave the girls a cut. *No, no, get that out of your head.*

She didn't want to go down that sad path. She needed the money desperately, yes, but she couldn't give up now and vowed to leave while Carmela took her *siesta* at two that afternoon. Her future was not in a whorehouse; she had to go find it elsewhere.

Oh, how she'd miss Beto. She was so taken with him; he could be her first love, the one she'd give herself to. Right now, though, reaching Havana and working as a singer, and as cook or housecleaner, or whatever she needed to do, with no sexual strings attached, was her desire. She needed to accept that Beto might not be part of that dream, even though the kisses from the night before had been marvelous. She'd treasure their shared moments for a long time.

Encounters at El Nacional

Havana, Cuba

Gloria walked on the cobblestones in the middle of the empty avenue. Her stomach rattled from hunger as the yellow orange sun began bursting out of the darkened sky. A bakery would be open soon. She craved a large chunk of buttered bread, flattened and toasted, and a cup of steaming *café con leche* to dip it into.

Her old brown sandals weren't protecting her from the clumps of mud that had formed after last night's rain. After arriving in Havana way past midnight, she didn't feel right about knocking on anyone's door and asking to stay the night. The man who gave her a ride into town had not left her in a busy area, where she could've more easily found a boarding house. It was already too dark to navigate unknown streets, so she figured the morning was better to meet and talk to people about work and living accommodations.

She'd taken three blankets before she left yesterday afternoon and was able to keep warm under a covered entrance of a large corner building. Most people, she imagined, would help a young woman at that late hour, but still, she had to be wary of them, too. So far, since she had left her family's home, she had not been in any serious danger. Though she admitted that getting rides from two male strangers wasn't smart, she had no choice. She hadn't, at least, been faced with something she wasn't able to talk her way out of or get help with, but who was to say her luck would continue.

Two-story gray limestone buildings – all attached – lined both sides of this street, with small windows in the upper levels and large plain doors below identifying another home or shop. Only one outdoor lamp had remained on that night, but it illuminated the narrow street and short block all the way to the church on the corner. A brick steeple with pink ornamentation and a thin

black cross rose above the rest of the structures, and, as Gloria walked in that direction, sun rays peeked through its arches.

Gloria picked up her pace and was disappointed to find the church's large wooden door locked. It was known that, even in the city, churches remained unlocked, welcoming those seeking shelter and *socoro*. Indeed, she was looking for a room and immediate assistance, but mostly she wanted to pray for Mamá, her brothers, and herself. She had not seen or entered a church since she left home twelve days ago, so she crossed herself as she prayed a Hail Mary, *Dios te salve, María, llena eres de gracia, el Señor es contigo*....and genuflected at the steps, promising to return later. God had protected her thus far, and she wanted to express her gratitude in a sacred place.

Gloria turned right at the corner and was surprised by the sharp contrast. This block had colorful buildings – light-yellow, aqua, turquoise, and moss green – with tall painted doors, arched windows above, and black metal balconies with hanging plants and flowers that added more color to the scene. The vibrant sight lifted her spirits, and, soon enough, a heavenly scent – baked bread – made her stomach kick with joy. At the corner, a man was opening the door with a sign that read: *La Aurora*.

After some friendly conversation, the man directed her to a boarding house a few blocks away where she could inquire about a room. She had a little money from her ten days of work at the Quintana place, but she needed to get a job as soon as possible. After she secured a room and cleaned up, she'd walk around the area to look for work at a restaurant. Although she immediately set her sights much higher - *el Hotel Nacional de Cuba*.

Tomorrow, she would ride the public *guagua* to the grand hotel and perhaps get employment in housekeeping. A famous hotel would certainly pay more than a small local

restaurant, and more importantly, a hotel would provide entertainment for the patrons. Gloria aimed to be a maid during the day and, in time, an entertainer in the evening.

At the boarding house that evening, Gloria wrote a letter to her mother telling her she had acquired work and with a little more information about how she was safe and well-fed in a house and surrounded by *buena gente*. She had sent a letter to her family from the Quintana place but, of course, had not included a return address, and only said she was safe; there was no mention of the people, because, as it turned out – except for Beto – they weren't necessarily good folk and things wouldn't have turned out well for Gloria had she stayed.

She wrote a quick note to Beto, too, saying the same things about being safe and in good spirits, though she did not include a return address in case it was intercepted by Carmela. She said she would write him again soon with more updates. She closed the note with *Besos*. His kisses were what she missed now that she found herself alone in a new city.

While on the bus, Gloria's excitement was building as she got closer to *el Malecón*, the wide road, promenade, and seawall along the coast of Havana. She had never seen the ocean before. She'd heard that during a storm, the waves here would reach the top of the wall, but today the water – pale blue and calm – offered her some hope that things would go smoothly.

She stood up with other passengers as the bus driver announced, "*Hotel Nacional*." She almost missed the last step as she looked up in awe of the symmetrical concrete structure, two large crosses joined in the middle, matching steeples at the top with eight small ones at the lower corners. Gloria snapped out of her daze and walked closer, while still looking up toward the steeples. Her eyes returned to the bottom, and then she counted the eight levels back to the top,

where a short decorative wall encased the roof, with small projections that resembled chess pieces from below.

Two rows of palm trees led to the front portico, and she walked through its two lean columns and into the hotel lobby. Gloria straightened her posture, as if appearing taller would make her look older, too. The lobby also had columns, parts of the walls were decorated with coral stone, and along the lower portion of registration counters, there were ceramic tiles with simple kaleidoscope patterns in dark blue, green, and tangerine orange.

“*Buenos días, Señorita?* May I help you?” The bellhop looked down and saw Gloria wasn’t carrying luggage, then asked his next question, “Are you here to visit someone?”

“No, I’m looking for work. I can cook, clean. I’m ready to work right away.” Gloria refrained from saying she could sing. She was going to wait before wowing a manager or whomever with her musical talent.

The head of housekeeping spoke with Gloria and offered her weekend work and said sleeping quarters would be provided, as the shifts would be long. On the weekends, the hotel was usually booked with American tourists and entertainers. The thought of seeing famous people thrilled Gloria, although she had never been to a movie theater in her seventeen years and had only learned about American things, especially the music that she was obsessed with, through radio stations that somehow reached her remote area.

Gloria did not have to report for her first day of training at the hotel for a few more days and was thrilled by the idea of making money and being in a place that was so majestic with a festive ambiance. For now, Gloria didn’t mind being a lowly maid in such a beautiful place; she was a poor farm girl after all. She understood she had to work her way up by proving herself.

It paid enough money for her to save up for two new dresses by the second month, far from fancy but new, something she'd never had before. The celebrities who stayed in the rooms on the top floors tipped generously, and Gloria was assigned those floors twice a month. She wasn't sure who these people were, but their jewelry and attire revealed their elevated status in life. The managers told the workers to treat those people like royalty; to Gloria everyone who stepped into the hotel seemed like it anyway, so she always did her best at the job, never missed a day, and soon began to work a more full-time schedule.

Still, the more time she spent in the rooms, cleaning, dusting, and making beds, the more she envied these strangers and their luxurious lives. She couldn't help fantasizing about being a guest at the hotel and not the lowly maid.

She imagined herself wearing elaborate gowns and donning pearls and gemmed necklaces, and then walking down to the lobby escorted by a handsome man to dine in one of the ballrooms. Or, perhaps, she would wear a less formal dress and nibble on snacks and sip drinks in the terrace, where ionic columns supported the covered area with wicker chairs and low rectangular tables. On a breezy day when the sun was not so fierce, Gloria, the hotel guest, would wear a flower-patterned dress and sit in the courtyard, where palm trees provided a little shade, as waiters dressed in white took her order and brought her cocktails. These fantasies distracted Gloria from her work, and she'd have to shake off the sad feeling that, perhaps, she might always be just a maid.

Aside from this possibility, Gloria feared how this job would affect her body. She was still very young, sure, but after three or four days in a row of long shifts, she didn't feel young at all; she would collapse on her bed in her small room, with little energy left to rub her sore feet, because her hands were dry and achy from scrubbing tubs and sinks. Although Gloria was

usually in a good mood and exuded a positive outlook, it was hard to remain that way throughout the day because of the monotony of it all.

The holiday season was approaching, and Gloria felt homesick, not for her dilapidated farm house, but for the love of family, though she hadn't felt anything but pressure from her mother lately about getting married.

Still, *Noche Buena*, the night before Christmas, was the only day her family was not poor. Her parents found a way to acquire a plump pig that would provide a feast for that evening and leftovers for days. Her mother would simmer black beans she'd soaked the night before, make a large pot of white rice and a small one of *yuca* – the starchy root vegetable that was boiled, then salted and moistened with garlic sauce and served with finely chopped onions. For dessert, they'd have sweetened peanut brittle.

Since her father's death, her mother tried to provide a little extra for dinner that night, but the mood wasn't as special as when *Papá* was around and they danced to music from the radio or he played the guitar so young Gloria could sing. As it approached midnight on Christmas Eve, Gloria would sing the blessed hymns of "*Ave Maria*" and "*Noche the Paz*," two difficult songs to sing well, but Gloria wished that someday she would reach those high notes more easily.

Gloria purchased a postcard that had an image of the hotel with a black border; it looked like a framed photograph. She wrote a note to her mother and brothers as tears rolled down her cheeks. She missed them, she really did, but she didn't feel complete if she couldn't sing or was bogged down with a life that bored her. She enjoyed talking to and meeting new people, and being on a farm day in and day out with only her family was too solitary a life for her.

The hotel staff would be treated to a Christmas luncheon on the Sunday before Christmas; at least those who didn't have families to go home to wouldn't feel so alone. Gloria was asked to work during the holiday week, and she assumed it was because there'd be an influx of tourists and people from the other provinces treating themselves to a vacation at the luxury hotel for the holiday.

"We are hosting a special event, a *conferencia de gran importancia*, something we are not at liberty to discuss with the general public," the concierge informed Gloria and several other employees. "We have selected you to provide services to our special guests, clean their suites, deliver room service, and some of you will be in attendance during their meals in the ballroom."

It didn't seem likely that Hollywood actors would be meeting during the holiday season, or that the King and Queen of England would be visiting during that time either. Whoever these special guests were, it was serious business by the tone of the concierge and other managers who spoke to the workers.

Guests – mostly men – began to arrive on that Sunday evening. Gloria and another young woman were stationed in the lobby to greet them on the way in. The young women talked about how they had never seen suits like these – dark, thick material, some with thin stripes; they were used to seeing linen ones that would keep the men cool in the tropical heat. One thing that stood out even more were the rings these men wore, mostly on their little finger; they were gold with different colored gems. Their watches were also gold.

These men spoke with an accent that was not American. Some words sounded like Spanish, like *grazie*, which she assumed meant *thank you* in Italian or French because that's what they said in response to *welcome*, the English word the staff was instructed to say as the guests entered.

Alberto, an older worker, explained to the young women later and that this event was a summit between the American and the Sicilian Mafias; the man scared them with far-fetched gangster tales, but the young women couldn't tell if they were true. Alberto laughed as he talked, as if he didn't know their validity either. He also said there was a rumor that a famous American singer – he didn't know who - was coming to Havana to perform for them.

“*Bueno*, Alberto, that is all very interesting, but be sure to tell us when you actually know something that is true,” Gloria teased.

A few hours later, as Gloria and a coworker made their rounds picking up trays outside of doors and leaving towels in particular rooms, they encountered a man who made the tales Alberto had joked about seem entirely possible. The man was walking down the hall toward them as they stood outside the last room on the floor. They couldn't help but stare at him. He wore a dark gray suit with a navy and white striped tie; his wavy dark brown hair was parted to the side, his chin was scarred, and his face was, too.

He might have been a good-looking man before all the marks on his face became so pronounced, Gloria thought, but his sinister look with one lazy eye and the gun she spotted at his waist made her shudder. She started to refold the towels on her arm and told her coworker in Spanish to pretend they were entering that last room.

Although Gloria had trouble getting the image of that man out of her mind, she was able to do her work and was looking forward to attending the next evening's big event as part of the welcoming group of women who escorted guests to their tables. She'd be in the large dining area where there was music and dancing, and instead of her uniform, she was able to wear one of her new dresses – a red-flower-patterned short-sleeved dress with bunched up material that created a V-neck. It wasn't too revealing, but just enough, and Gloria felt beautiful wearing it.

Gloria and other young female workers welcomed the guests as they entered the ballroom; a good number of men were accompanied by women, but most came in alone or with other men. Because they were supposed to stay at their post until everyone was directed to their tables, Gloria became nervous about encountering the scared-faced man again.

The man was one of the last to enter, and thankfully was at the left side where one of Gloria's coworkers stood. Though he did look around him, it didn't seem to Gloria that he spotted her.

She was not assigned to serve food, so she waited in the kitchen area until it was close to show time.

The room became energized as the band prepared for the performance. Gloria was standing to the side of the stage inside a doorway that was open as the famous singer was introduced, "Il signore, Frank Sinatra, *uno di nostro!*" That last phrase sounded much like Spanish, meaning "one of ours," and it made Gloria wonder if the announcer meant *Italian like us* or *mafia like us*.

It didn't matter to Gloria if this singer was a mafioso or not, his performance cemented the idea that this was what she wanted to do, too. She had heard him on the radio but seeing the handsome man in person was dreamlike. The way he moved gracefully to the orchestral soaring notes and was able to express feeling with hand gestures as well as his strong voice was something that Gloria would need to emulate if she was ever going to have stage presence, well, of course, if she ever got the chance to perform again.

At the hotel, she had mentioned in passing that she sang, and only one of the other girls had heard her, but after tonight, she was going to continue planting the seeds to her future by

telling the managers directly about how she could sing at the hotel bar, for example. She could start with small groups and see how things went, was what she would suggest.

“Up among the stars we'll find a harmony of life, too lovely tune, east of the sun and west of the moon, dear, east of the sun and west of the moon...” Sinatra crooned, and Gloria imagined herself on the stage.

As she lay in bed later, she continued to fantasize about being a famous singer, just like that *Americano* with the blue eyes.

The following day as Gloria wiped down the counter and changed the towels in the bathroom of one of the elite suites, she heard male voices from the next room. It was two of the Italian men. She had forgotten to leave the front door open to indicate a cleaning woman was inside.

She heard the clinking of ice on glass and wondered if she should make noise from the bathroom, so they'd hear and give her a chance to leave. The voices immediately became more and more aggressive, and she placed her ear at the small gap between the door and the frame, and then alternated between looking, only able to see movement, and listening, though she did not understand what they were saying.

“What do you mean, you take over?” one man said.

“Well, Lucky, like I told you, Truman and the FBI know you're here. They will send you back to Italy, so somebody else should take care of things. Cocaine, heroin, and all the narcotics going *fantastico*. We want to keep it that way,” responded the other man.

The two drug names and the word fantastic were the only words Gloria understood from the exchange.

“*Sì*, and the *Famiglia Luciano* will keep doing it,” said the man named Lucky.

“But I think you need help,” said the other man.

“We’re fine, Vito, plus we’re making other changes as well. Lansky just ordered a hit on Bugsy Seigel,” Lucky revealed.

“This is getting risky. It’s going to be hard handling business from Italy. You know that.”

“I said no, Vito!”

“I don’t know, like I explained—”

“Vito, you’ve explained it enough,” Lucky interrupted. There was a short pause in the conversation, then he asked, “Was it you? Did you rat on me? How’d the *governo* find out? My passports have my real name on them, most people don’t even know what that is. I didn’t attract attention at the airports. You want to take over, *bastardo*, so you ratted me out.”

“Lucky, no, we’re *famiglia*, *La Cosa Nostra* is sacred. I think it’s best...” Gloria again recognized the somewhat familiar words *famiglia* and *nostra*, *family* and *ours* in Spanish.

“You are a *traditore*! I could kill you with my bare hands.”

At this point, Gloria could not resist the urge to open the door a bit more; she wanted to see if she had enough room to run out unnoticed.

“I’m not really going to kill you because they’ll send me back to jail but...”

Gloria heard a glass break and a large crash against a piece of furniture. From then on, it was grunt after grunt, from the man hitting and the one being beaten. Gloria figured this was her chance to run out and so she did, but as she fled, an arm grabbed her. It was the man she’d seen in the hallway, the one with the sinister look wearing a gun at the waist.

“What did you hear? Are you a *spiare*?” the man asked. The other man was on the floor bleeding from his nose and mouth.

“No, no. No *comprendo*.” Gloria said twice.

The man held her arm tighter. “Are you a spy?” the man asked in English.

“No, no, no, *nada, nada.*” Gloria said as she trembled.

“Let her go, Lucky,” the man on the floor called out in a garbled voice.

Lucky yanked Gloria toward the desk in the living room and with his other hand pulled out the pistol she had seen on him the other day. He released her go and pointed the gun at her.

“*Silenzio.*” Through gritted teeth, he repeated, “*Silenzio.*” Then her stared at her with his drooping eye.

“*Sì, silencio,*” Gloria responded as she stared at the gun and his eye at the same time.

He pushed her, and she almost fell. When she regained her balance, she fled the room.

Bésame Mucho

1947

Gloria was shaken up for several days and had difficulty shaking off the image of the mafioso with the scars and the weird eye, especially when she was trying to fall asleep. Since that encounter, Gloria placed the wooden chair under the doorknob of her tiny room each night, as she had done that night before she ran off from the whorehouse.

Every so often, she had the impulse to look over her shoulder, even though she knew the conference had been over for weeks. She knew it seemed unreasonable to act this way, but who was to say, that man referred to as “Lucky” wouldn’t have someone keep on eye on her, even though it was clear she hadn’t understood their Italian conversation and that she wasn’t a spy.

One evening weeks later, exhausted from three days in a row of long shifts, she forgot to put the chair under the door and was able to fall sleep quickly without any thought of the scary man. In the morning, she felt like herself again and decided she was going to continue with her plan to sing in one of the hotel bars if the manager would give her an audition, which she felt confident she’d do well in. She had been practicing as she walked along the seawall during her lunch hour and whenever else she had time to herself.

“Well, we already have Magdalena in the evenings in the main dining room. What are you suggesting?” Señor Franco asked.

“The small piano bar, instrumental music is fine, but maybe a vocalist would get more people in there.”

“And you think you can do that?”

“*Sí, yo soy muy buena.*” Gloria was not embarrassed to say she was very good.

The manager asked her to sing for him.

“I am impressed, Gloria. You are young and need more practice with stage presence, things like that, but your voice, *Ay Dios mío*, it is so wonderful.”

Señor Franco’s compliment made Gloria warm up with joy and determination to keep working on her talent and the other elements that made someone a star. “*Gracias*, Señor Franco.”

“I’ll give you a chance on Friday at the piano bar, so you have several days to prepare. I will introduce you to Miguel, the pianist, this afternoon. Meet me back here at four. Only a few songs in front of the early crowd, and we’ll see from the reactions where we go from there. This is only a tryout, *comprende?*”

“Sí, I promise, Señor Franco, you will be pleased.”

“I already am quite impressed. I hope everyone else is, too.”

As soon as Gloria returned to her sleeping quarters, she took out a sheet of paper and her pen from the top drawer of her nightstand and began composing a letter to Beto.

Dear Beto,

It is happening! I will be performing at the piano bar here at the hotel. I went straight to the manager and told him I wanted to sing there. Can you believe it? *Sí!* I told him I was very good and that he should give me a chance. He must have thought I was crazy, but I don’t care. He was impressed, and that’s all that matters. I will sing a few songs early Friday night. I don’t care if only two people are there or many, I just want to sing, sing, sing!

I think of you daily. But, at the same time, I am scared that you will forget about me, that we won’t be reunited, and that maybe you will find someone else soon.

Gloria

Early Friday evening, Gloria donned her red-flower-patterned dress and pulled back her thick dark hair with a white ribbon. Eugenia, the head of housekeeping, let her borrow a white pearl-

like necklace and some bracelets and recommended that Gloria put on bright red lipstick. As a teenager, Gloria would, at times, use the powder of the hibiscus flower as rouge for her cheeks, but this woman had real make-up to share with Gloria, making her feel more than seventeen, more like a real woman.

Three couples and a group of young men who looked American sat at the small round tables in the dark piano bar, sipping mojitos and daiquiris, when Gloria made her entrance. Miguel had already been playing instrumentals for a bit, but the manager told Gloria they'd wait till more people arrived for her to begin.

“*Buenas noches*, I am Gloria. I am happy to be here tonight. I hope you enjoy my singing.”

Only the men, who appeared to be in their early twenties, were seated close to the front, looked toward her, and she smiled in return.

She began with “*Como Fue*,” and the crowd was receptive enough, applauding lightly at the end. One of the men clapped a little louder, Gloria noticed. With each song, there was more of a reaction from the diners, and from that particular young man, who had cropped sandy blonde hair and blue eyes. Gloria always noticed people's eyes. In Cuba, blue eyes were not so common, so now that she had seen many Americans, including Frank Sinatra, who were blue-eyed, she was intrigued, or something; she couldn't explain it.

As she sang “*Dos Gardenias*,” where one lover offers two gardenias to the other, saying they will hold all the heat of the kisses that were exchanged, she thought of the kisses she and Beto had shared. If they were ever reunited, would their kisses become as heated as this lover spoke of in this *bolero*?

Gloria ended her short set with “*Bésame Mucho*,” where the narrator begs to be kissed a lot as if tonight will be the last time and expresses fear that he/she will lose the other.

As expected, the young Americans were more enthusiastic than the couples, and the one with the blond hair was especially so. He stood up to applaud as she thanked everyone. As Gloria chatted with the piano player, he approached her and tapped her lightly on the arm. The pianist took this as a sign to take a break and stood up and headed for the bar.

“*Hablas ingles?*” he said with an American accent.

“No English, eh, hello, goodbye?” Gloria said.

“*Yo hablo un poquito de español.*” Creating a small gap between his index finger and thumb, he indicated that he knew a little bit of Spanish.

“*Me llamo Benjamin Worthington Ford.*” He extended his hand to hers and when she took his, he kissed hers with moist lips. Gloria blushed as she took her hand away. She admired how crisp his white linen shirt appeared under his tan linen suit. His Spanish was good enough for Gloria to understand. He complimented her on her talent and said some other things that Gloria didn’t quite grasp because she found herself distracted by his blue eyes.

He asked her if she’d like to accompany him on a walk by El Malecón, and Gloria didn’t know what came over her and said yes instantly. Maybe she shouldn’t venture on a night stroll with a man she’d just met. On the other hand, she was motherless here with no supervision, so what harm was there in meeting him outside and away from the hotel in a little while? That way no one would see a young lady leave with a man unchaperoned.

They agreed to meet down the block and across from the hotel at the bus stop in ten minutes, and that Benjamin should depart the hotel first. Gloria went to the washroom in the rear

of the bar, where they had small lockers to store purses and other belongings. She grabbed her purse, retouched her lipstick, and made sure her hair still looked nice.

As Gloria walked through the lobby, now filled with more guests, glamorous Magdalena, the twenty-six-year-old singer who performed in the evenings, stopped her and asked, “*Niña*, tell me, how did it go? I wanted to get here earlier to hear you sing, but I couldn’t get myself together in time.”

Magdalena, with her stunning silver gown and jewels, looked like a queen. Of course, it would take her a long while to get ready.

“*Muy bien*,” Gloria said. “I was nervous in the beginning, but then it was all fine.”

“*Ay*, I’m so proud of you! Tell me what songs you chose.”

Gloria told her, and Magdalena said that, for next time, Gloria could borrow one of her dresses if she wanted to.

It meant a lot to Gloria that such a talented woman took interest in her and appeared to be genuinely happy for her. Then Gloria grew nervous that the woman would want to converse with her further and ask her to attend her performance. She didn’t want to keep Benjamin waiting outside; he’d probably leave if she took too long.

“Magdalena, I feel I have to get some fresh air.” Gloria fumbled with the long purse strapped diagonally around her chest. “I still am feeling, you know, *mariposas* in my stomach, from my performance.”

“Ah, *sí*, I know that feeling, you can’t tell if it was a dream.”

“*Sí, sí*, that is exactly how I feel.”

“*Bueno, niña*, I’m happy for you.” She kissed Gloria hurriedly on the cheek. “I must go. It’s almost time.”

“Have a great show, Magdalena.”

The evening breeze felt nice against Gloria’s still-flushed face; the emotional experience of performing had certainly made her feel warm all over. She took a deep breath and walked between the two rows of palm trees, then veered right and walked diagonally across the promenade toward the bus stop. She didn’t see Benjamin until she got much closer; he was reclining against the seawall, and a group of people at the bus stop had blocked her view.

“*Hola*, Gloria.” Benjamin smiled, and Gloria noticed he had dimples that made him even more charming.

“Ha lo, Benjamin, how are joo?” Gloria said slowly. She smiled and added, “Only *un poquito* English.”

Benjamin laughed heartily and revealed a rose he’d been hiding behind his back. There was a man who sold flowers at the next street corner. “*Para la cantante bonita.*”

Gloria blushed; this was the first time she had received flowers and that someone had called her *the pretty singer*. He signaled by extending his arm that they should begin walking, and as they reached the end of corner, he said, “*Señorita?*” He rounded his arm so that she could place hers in its crook. She didn’t give it a second thought; it felt good as they walked in step.

As they strolled along, Benjamin asked Gloria about her family and he told her about his. She did not know much about the wealthy families in the United States, only that many had visited Havana, though she wouldn’t have recognized them. People left behind American newspapers and magazines, but she hadn’t spent time examining them. It turns out that this young man was related to a family that owned department stores in the Midwest and to the Fords, as in Henry Ford.

Benjamin signaled to a building on a side street and told her he wanted to show her a shop that sold beautiful porcelain doors. He took her hand gently and kissed it, then smoothly guided her in that direction, as he began to sing, “*Bésame, bésame mucho, como si fuera ésta noche la última vez...*”

“*Aquí,*” he said, but Gloria didn’t see any storefront. “Here,” he repeated and walked them toward a wide gap between two structures.

Before Gloria realized what was happening, Benjamin said, “*Eres muy linda, Gloria. Por favor, bésame mucho,*” and he leaned in her to kiss her. He was gentle, and she liked it. But after several seconds, she didn’t want to take it any further.

“*Ya, Benjamin. No mas.*”

He asked her why she had agreed to leave with him alone; he was aware of the chaperone rule and how it would appear to others.

But before she could answer, he kissed her again, this time more intently. He leaned his body against hers, she pushed against his chest, but he was strong and kept kissing her.

“*Oye! ¿Que pasa aquí?*” called out a man on a bicycle who was coming toward them.

Benjamin turned toward the voice, and Gloria took the opportunity to pretend she knew the man, “*Hola, amigo!*”

Benjamin released her and pushed her away, “*Adios, coqueta!*”

Gloria regained her balance and took the corner out of the alley quickly and ran to the main street and toward the hotel, while looking over her shoulder. If Benjamin followed her, she’d scream “*Socorro!*” hysterically until somebody would hear her and come to her assistance.

When she arrived at the promenade, she bent over out of breath and from fear. She began to sob. A man approached her and asked, “*¿Que pasa, señorita?*”

Gloria could not speak through her tears, but after finally being able to take a breath, said the words, “*Un hombre... un Americano*” was the only phrase she could manage to say. She looked back toward where she came from and said, “*Todo bien*. I will be fine.”

Still, the man called over his wife to console Gloria. The woman wrapped a large shawl around her and rubbed her back as a mother would, instructing her to breathe. The three walked together with Gloria in the middle; the man and woman protected her as if they were her parents and she was a small girl, so much so that the front desk people who always greeted her, didn’t realize it was her as they walked right by there.

The woman sat with her on a small couch toward the rear of the lobby, and the man went to fetch her a glass of water. There was no conversation; the woman only continued to rub Gloria’s back and make soothing noises and the man stood close by.

“Do you know the *Americano*’s name?” the man finally asked. “The manager can check the reservation book and get information on him.”

Gloria gave him Benjamin’s full name, though she couldn’t pronounce Worthington at all, and said that he appeared to be staying here with three friends.

“Or maybe they were just here for dinner. He probably won’t come back right away if he thinks you told people what happened.”

“Maybe you are right,” Gloria agreed.

The couple stayed with her until she felt she was ready to go to her room. She thanked them, and the woman embraced her and told her to be more careful with men.

When Gloria reached her tiny room, she placed the wooden chair by her bed under the doorknob. She knew Benjamin wasn’t going to come near her, but somehow, she felt safer. As she lay in bed, the crying started again, and the scene in the dark alley replayed in her head for a

long while. She was relieved everything turned out fine in the end, so why wouldn't the sobbing stop? Why did she feel so alone?

She finally fell into a deep sleep from the emotional exhaustion.

Babalú's Blessings

1947 – 1948

Gloria was upset about what had happened; she felt she had been unfaithful to Beto somehow. But it's not as if they were together in reality, and letters didn't mean marriage, though she considered her letters to be love letters and wondered if his letters would become more heartfelt soon. She had expressed her insecurity about their relationship in her last correspondence and now wondered if it had been a mistake.

To Gloria, his letters were more focused on his education and career goals, and being with her, but not the other way around. If the university was not located where she was, would she even be part of his plans?

If they were reunited, would the feelings they, mainly her, had expressed in writing transfer to real life?

She hoped seeing each other again would settle things once and for all. At the same time, she couldn't deny that she liked all the attention she was receiving from other handsome men, though she did not actually want to marry any of them right now either.

She figured she needed guidance. Maybe Magdalena would give her man advice; after all, she was like a queen, attracting the attention of men and women constantly. Or perhaps, she should pray about it. She hadn't been back to church, at least not consistently. Even though she often worked on Sundays, it didn't mean she shouldn't go on another day. But, she had to coordinate practice sessions with the pianist, and often they took place during her afternoon breaks, so God would surely understand, since her performances were now part of her job.

Two days later, Gloria was able to get to the old church about ten minutes away. The large rounded wooden doors led to a dark foyer with a table full of lit and mostly melting

candles, the wax dripping onto a long metal plate. The church was relatively small, with only seven rows of dark walnut pews. The ceramic tile floor was shiny and clean, and the space felt cool. She proceeded to the right front pew and folded her hands in prayer.

She recited a *Padre Nuestro* and three *Ave Marias*, then prayed from the heart. She asked God to forgive her for abandoning her family and for being selfish about pursuing her own aspirations. She knew the expectations placed on women, especially by their own mothers, and, yes, she would like to have a husband and family of her own, but she was in love with singing first. She promised she would write regularly to her family until they could be reunited, come to church more often, and pray her rosary to stay in God's good graces. She felt at peace with her decision to be on her own. While scared of her uncertain future, she was also thrilled at the possibilities.

As Gloria rose from the pew, she heard murmurs, though no one but an old woman wearing a black veil was in the church, in the front row on the left side of the church. Had she simply just not heard them as she whispered her prayers? The noises had a rhythm, but she could not tell if they were words or possibly a kind of drumming, and they seemed to be coming from the right of the altar, from behind a side door.

Gloria crept closer to hear what they were saying, as the old woman in the veil called, "*Niña, ten cuidado,*" causing Gloria to look back. The old woman exposed her wrinkly, paper-bag-colored face, and repeated, "*Ten cuidado,*" then added, "*especialmente de noche.*"

Taken aback by the warning to be careful, Gloria simply responded, "*Sí, señora,*" and rushed through the center aisle and through the darkness of the foyer. She crossed her herself, then pushed open the heavy door and stepped out into the bright sunlight. Breathing heavily, she

wasn't sure if she was scared about the weird noises or the old woman with the white cloudy patches in her eyes.

During her afternoon shift, Gloria sung and hummed, as she always did, but as she scrubbed a bathroom floor, the swish of the brush created a rhythm similar to the one she'd heard at the church, at least in her mind.

Had she heard a light drum and not voices? Why were those few seconds of odd sounds invading her mind now?

She was so intrigued, she decided she would stop by the church later while on her early evening walk. She usually walked with coworkers, but she'd go alone; she didn't want to alarm her friends with her bizarre interest in unknown sounds. The ancient woman, with her witchy look, could've been crazy and just trying to scare a young girl for fun.

Somehow, the second part of the woman's warning: especially at night, completely slipped Gloria's mind.

As she entered the church, Gloria was surprised to hear a small choir practicing as they stood at the back pews. The choir director greeted her and quickly moved her attention back to the singers. Gloria proceeded to the front of the church and sat in the front pew like before; this time she brought her rosary along. She recited some prayers, then began to pray the rosary.

No matter how much she tried to focus, the repetition of the rosary prayers always made her lose her place on the beads and become sleepy. She didn't want the choir people to see what she was going to do: snoop around the back rooms of the church. Resting her eyes, she waited things out.

Gloria awoke abruptly, as if from a nightmare. She felt disoriented and swerved her head behind her; the church was empty now, no choir or old women muttering their prayers. But the

space was not empty of sound, in fact, it was drowning in it; whatever was going on in that back room that afternoon was now much more intense.

Tiptoeing, she approached the door, then remained there listening to the *tumbadora* keeping the beat, as voices chanted. Now it all came to her; these non-words were African sounds chanted to praise saints. There were some *guajiros*, the country folk, who practiced *Santería*, mainly for prosperity with crops and good health. Gloria had no idea if the Yoruba saints were related to the Catholic ones, but then why would these ceremonies be going on in a church? She did know that, sometimes, as her *abuela* once explained, *santeros* did not always have good intentions when they performed these rituals. They sometimes sent the “evil eye” or a curse in the direction of someone who wronged them.

Gloria was still rather intrigued, about the good and the bad, but she was scared to just open the door and interrupt whatever ceremony was going on. She didn’t have time to decide on staying or leaving; the drumming stopped, the door opened wide in front of her, and powerful smells and sights attacked all her senses.

The woman who’d opened the door peaked from behind it, and said, “*Bienvenida.*” Indeed, this was quite the welcome. The word was not uttered in a threatening or caustic way, as if Gloria had been caught doing something bad, not at all. The woman, whose round face was darker than night, smiled widely; she had plump lips, a wide gap between her two front teeth, and was missing at least one tooth on each side of her mouth.

“*Niña*, are you coming in?” the woman asked, now standing in front of the door, with enough room for Gloria to pass through.

Gloria hesitated and simply stared at the enchanting woman; over seventy-years-old and dressed in white from the top of her head – wrapped with a veil-type material – to her ankles,

where her long sheer dress ended. She wore a red sash around her hefty waist. Yellow beads hung from her neck, and various bracelets, also beaded, lined her wrists.

“Your first time.” the woman said as a matter-of-fact.

“*Sí, señora.*” Gloria said shyly.

“My name is Omara, and I won’t bite.” She pointed to her mouth with the hand that held a tobacco. “Not with these bad teeth.”

Gloria smiled, then stepped forward and introduced herself.

She stared at the impressive display taking up most of the wall in front of her and noticed every detail. A low altar held wooden crosses and countless lit candles – tall ones on holders and short ones on metal plates – fruits such as apples, oranges, and grapes, honey, and flowers of all colors – some alive and some not. A glass bottle was half-filled with water with tiny cups next to it, and small bowls contained coins.

Sitting in a half circle were three other dark-skinned women of varying ages and all dressed like Omara, and a man, all in white too, with an upright conga drum – tall and barrel-like, but not as polished as those in an orchestra – and at his feet, a much smaller one.

“What have you come here for? What help are you seeking?” Omara asked, breaking Gloria’s trance.

Gloria wasn’t seeking anything really, so she said, “*Bueno, nada*, I just heard the sounds and was curious about what was going on back here.”

“Sacred things, as you can see,” one of the other women said, as her arm made a sweeping movement showing off the altar.

“*Sí, Señora, muy impresionante.*”

“*Bueno, niña*, look and listen, and then you can make your requests.” Omara told Gloria to side on the side and signaled the man to “hit it,” so to speak. The drumming began, followed by chanting.

“*Ooooh, ooooh, ya / ooooh, ooooh, ya / ma ke ma no / ma ke ma no
ooooh, ooooh, ya / ooooh, ooooh, ya / ma ke ma no / ma ke ma no.*”

As they chanted this first part, each of the women gathered oranges in one hand and bunched up flowers in the other. While bouncing on their bare feet circling about, they called out, “*Oshun, venga, venga, Oshun, venga, venga!*”

Gloria assumed that this Oshun being evoked was a deity and they were telling her to hurry up and arrive.

As they swirled, Omara called out to Gloria, “*Niña, quieres amor, prosperidad y éxito?*” Naturally, Gloria wanted love, prosperity, and success, so she nodded yes.

The women repeated the chant and the dance, as their attention would, at times, turn in Gloria’s direction.

When the dance was over, the women sat on the floor heads-down, as if drained, for almost a minute, and the man also rested. Gloria kept her eyes on them the whole time. Then, almost in unison, they rose and returned their offerings of flowers and fruit to the altar.

“Now, for good health!” announced Omara. “*Gloria, estas enferma?*”

Gloria said she was not sick.

“*Que haces, en que trabajas? Tienes enemigos?*”

Gloria said she worked as a maid and that she sang, and that she had no enemies.

“*Muy bien!* May Babalú Ayé preserve your voice!”

“*Gracias,*” Gloria said.

Almost instantly, a new chant and dance began. This time, different fruits were selected, and the women grabbed stubs of tobacco.

Babalú... Babalú... Babalú Ayé... Babalú Ayé...

This chant was louder, but the dancing was about the same. The *conguero* played more forcefully as he rhythmically tapped his foot; he wore a bracelet of metal pieces around his ankle that sounded like bells. This time, before the women rested, they poured themselves small servings from the glass bottle, and Omara poured a smaller one and offered it to Gloria.

Assuming it was water, Gloria didn't think to smell it and swallowed it fast. The sting made her body feel as if it was on fire, and she began to cough.

The women laughed, and Omara patted Gloria's back and said, "*Aguardiente*, not water."

Gloria had heard of this liquor with extremely high alcohol content, and here they made it with sugar cane and rum and who knows what else. Omara pulled out another bottle and swore to Gloria that it was regular water.

"*Buenas noches*, Gloria. Feel free to come back, but, next time, you can just knock."

That Friday evening, Gloria's second performance went well; several more people were in attendance and Señor Franco said she could add a song or two to her set if the audience was receptive. And that's exactly how things occurred. Afterwards, he congratulated her and said he was considering giving her an afternoon spot singing in the outside lounge area, in the summer when they had more visitors.

Late Saturday night, word spread like wildflower that Magdalena had fainted during her performance, fallen onto a table, and had to be taken home immediately. Gloria felt terrible for the singer; how embarrassing for that to happen in front of so many people. What was wrong?

A letter from Beto arrived on Monday, and Gloria's spirits were lifted just by the sight of the envelope. Within a couple of minutes, though, her mood changed dramatically. Beto expressed joy about her being able to perform again, and then he delivered bad news. His father had recently relented and agreed to send him to university and pay for it, but as of a couple of days ago, the man had fallen ill. The doctor couldn't tell what was wrong, though he suspected it was dengue fever, a virus transmitted by a mosquito. Roberto Sr. had travelled the previous week to buy goods from various farms and returned sick.

Beto said he could not abandon his father now to move to Havana. He closed the letter by asking Gloria not to forget about him.

She couldn't forget him, of course not, but now their reunion would be further delayed. She wished Roberto Sr. would recover quickly. She had no idea how bad this disease was, but Beto did use the phrase *muy grave* to describe his father's condition.

In the backroom of the church, the *santeras* had performed the ritual dance for Gloria's health and prosperity; now she considered going back to ask for them to dance for Beto's father, though she didn't really want to. She recalled her grandmother's comments about how the *santeros* didn't always have good intentions.

Then it hit her!

The white-clad women had chanted for Gloria's success and to preserve her voice, but Omara had also inquired if Gloria had any enemies. She responded no, which was the truth, but had they somehow sent a curse in the direction of another singer that perhaps would set Gloria up for more success? Gloria wished Magdalena no harm and admired her greatly.

Gloria was tempted to seek out Omara and ask her to come clean about the real intentions behind the chants from that night. But she was scared. What if the woman got angry thinking Gloria was ungrateful for the good fortune she had just received: a larger and more receptive audience on Friday and the possibility of another show? Then placed a curse on her?

The next day, Gloria had not heard any more news about Magdalena, was quite worried about her, and decided to check if Omara was at the church, though she had no desire to attend another ceremony. The church was empty, but she asked some people on the street if they were familiar with Omara, the *santera*, and did they know where she lived. It took three people to get the information, and the woman's home was not too far from the church.

"It's the third house from the corner and the door is like no other," an old man explained.

After taking a deep breath, she knocked on the large wooden door that had a variety of carvings on it – a rooster, a goat, snakes, the moon in its varying stages, and a few stars. At first there was no answer, so she knocked again.

"Who is it?" the woman said in a booming voice.

"*Hola*, Señora Omara, it is Gloria."

"Gloria? Don't know a Gloria."

"I'm the girl who was at the church the other night and you let me come –" she started to explain as she heard locks being opened.

"*Niña*, what are you doing here? How did you find me?" Gloria couldn't tell if the woman was mad or simply surprised. "What do you want?" this tone clarified that it was annoyance. Omara was wearing white again, but her kinky dark hair was not covered up, and the waist sash and beads were missing.

"Uh, I want to talk to you."

“Go ahead. I was taking my *siesta* and hate being interrupted.”

Gloria apologized and had second thoughts about whether she should continue.

“I’m awake now, so get to the point.”

“Well... I want to know if...” Gloria felt weak.

Omara huffed in exasperation and said, “*Niña*, come in, what’s wrong with you?” Then she pulled Gloria by the arm, forcing her to step up into the foyer.

“Go sit down. Tell me what has you so troubled and pale.” Omara’s tone had softened from concern.

Gloria proceeded to the living room and took a seat on one of the wooden chairs set up in a half circle facing an altar. The display in the church backroom was duplicated, more or less, in miniature in this living room, though Gloria noticed a great deal of white chicken feathers here.

“What are you scared of?”

“I think you put a curse on *mi amiga*,” Gloria blurted out.

“I did?” The woman chuckled, her shortage of teeth seemed more obvious to Gloria in the daylight.

“I think so... maybe.”

“*Interesante*. She is your *amiga*, not your *enemiga*...so, naturally, you didn’t ask me to help you take revenge on your behalf.”

“No, I didn’t but...” Gloria was now regretting having come there.

“But you seem convinced.” The woman then called out in the direction of the bedrooms.

“Nando, come here! We have *un problema*.”

Almost instantly, a gigantic man appeared. He was dark-skinned like Omara and also dressed in white; he wore colored beads, and a large tobacco hung from the side of his mouth.

“No, there is no *problema*,” Gloria said and began getting up from her chair as the man moved closer.

Omara pointed to her as she addressed her husband. “She is *practically* accusing me of putting a curse on her friend or sending the woman the evil eye or something. But she won’t explain exactly what has occurred.”

Nando stood in front of Gloria, towering over her. “What are you accusing my wife of? If she said no, she means no.”

“I simply got confused. I am sorry, there is no issue.”

“Have you had a change of luck?” Omara inquired.

“Yes, somewhat.”

“Are you sick?”

Gloria shook her head.

“Then?”

No response.

“Let me give you some advice. Only worry about yourself. Yes, help others when they ask for it, but otherwise people need to take care of themselves. ¿*Comprende?*”

“Sí.”

“Anything else?” Omara’s husband asked as he backed away.

“No,” said Gloria as she rose from the chair.

Nando made a shooing sound to scare her. When Gloria reached the door, the couple laughed, and as she stepped through it, she heard Omara say, “That *niña* has so much to learn.”

Friday's performance was even better than the previous one, and as soon as she was done, she ran into Magdalena. She hugged the woman and told her she had been worried about her. Embarrassed to mention her far-fetched idea about blessings and curses, she only said, "I'm glad you're feeling better."

"For now, I am. I guess you haven't heard." The glamorous woman gently touched her belly and said, "Within a few months, I'll be big and me and Pepe will be parents. We're getting married next week, just a small ceremony with our families." Magdalena beamed as she spoke.

They embraced, and Gloria expressed her good wishes.

"*Que bendición!* I'm so happy," Magdalena said.

Indeed, Gloria thought, a true blessing, and here I was thinking a curse had been placed on the woman. What an *idiota* I am. She chuckled to herself.

"*Que?*"

"*Nada.* I'm happy about your joyous news."

"I hope you'll be my replacement when I get too big and afterward when my *tetas* are so large from feeding the baby," the woman said with a laugh.

"That would be *maravilloso.*" Gloria said.

In that moment of joy, she decided she wasn't going to worry about a thing; everything was going well for her and would only continue to get better.

Gloria had responded to Beto's last correspondence with a short note simply saying that she hoped his father would recover; she made no mention of how well things were going for her or about how much she missed him, nor did she quote any love poem. She didn't want to add any

pressure to their relationship, wherever it stood. It had already been more than a year since they last saw one another and had only known each other for a few days, so was she fooling herself?

As the *santera* woman had aptly noted, Gloria clearly had a lot to learn. She decided to leave things alone in the love department and focus on her singing, building up her repertoire, and as Señor Franco had first mentioned, improving her stage presence.

No word came from Beto, not about his father's condition or about his intentions to attending school in Havana.

Almost a month later, a letter from her mother lessened Gloria's guilt about leaving the family, and it arrived on the day of a performance.

My dear daughter,

As you know, I have been angry at you since you left. But this letter is to tell you that I am also proud of you. I was selfish for wanting you to stay and it was wrong of me to prevent you from growing, even if it meant you had to leave. Your brothers, though they are young, are wise enough to have seen this before me. I have always known your talent was a gift from God. I am glad you value it enough to share it with the world outside this farm.

I had no idea when I gave you the middle name Luz that you would be such a *light*. I am happy that you did and that you are shining with your blessed angelic voice. I pray that we will be reunited.

Mamá

Finally. These were the words Gloria always wanted to hear from her mother and that she knew she would've heard from her father if he was still alive. He'd been the one to cheer her on since she was a child and wanted to sing and dance. And as her voice developed, he said it was going to take her to wonderful places. He somehow knew; it was happening right now, and Gloria longed to share the excitement with him.

It was then that it dawned on her that she had been angry with her father for “leaving” in the same way Mamá had been angry at her. Both Gloria and her father had left willingly, one out of anguish and desperation, and the other from feeling like a *pájaro enjaulado*, a caged bird who wanted to sing and fly free.

Gloria cried, and the anger she had felt over her father’s suicide evaporated. She’d hold on to the sweet memories of being his *princesa* to keep her strong.

Papá was her *ángel guardián* this whole time, Gloria realized. He had kept her safe, despite her immature judgment this past year. And now that she had Mamá’s blessing, she would not doubt her potential, and nothing would keep her from fulfilling it.

For the evening’s performance, Gloria wore one of Magdalena’s dresses; it wasn’t as elaborate as what the woman wore on Saturday evenings, but it made Gloria feel glamorous. It was longer than what Gloria usually wore and form-fitting – black-and-white flower pattern on the top and a white, puffed-at-the-waist skirt with a black sash.

Tonight, she added “*Aquellos Ojos Verdes*” to her set. Here, the narrator reflects on her beloved’s green eyes, serene like a lake, how in its tranquil waters, one day she saw her reflection, and how she will never forget those green eyes.

And like magic, as she sang this song, the green eyes she had not seen in more than a year appeared in the back of the room.

Thankfully, this was her final song, because her voice got choked up from emotion.

When the pianist played the last note, there was applause, and with a chant of “Otra!” people wanted an encore.

“*Un minuto, por favor,*” Gloria requested as she took a small bow.

She crisscrossed through the tables until she reached the back of the room, where the welcoming arms of Beto awaited her.

“I can’t believe my eyes,” she said.

“I told you I would come see you, my songbird,” Beto reminded her.

“You kept your promise, and I just can’t believe you are here.”

“I’m really here, and I’m here to stay. I will tell you everything. But you must not keep your fans waiting,” he signaled with by lifting his chin toward the front of the room. “I want to hear you sing a whole song. Sorry I got here late. That won’t happen again.”

“Ay, Beto...”

“Go, go,” he shooed her.

Gloria reached the pianist and whispered the name of the song they’d do next. She then asked the audience if they minded hearing her sing a song again from earlier in the set, and they clapped in approval.

After the piano introduction, she began singing but couldn’t keep from looking directly to the back of the room toward the object of her affection.

“Bésame, bésame mucho, como si fuera esta noche la última vez. Bésame, bésame mucho, que tengo miedo a perderte, perderte después...” as she sang that last phrase, Beto shook his head, indicating that she should not be scared of losing him like the narrator of the song feared losing their sweetheart.

As they sat in the lobby, holding hands staring at each other, Beto finally spoke, “My father died, and I’m still in shock over it, but I know I will feel better in time. I left my aunt Carmela and their dirty business. She was a witch about it, of course, but I don’t care. I will miss Papá very

much, but I won't miss that place. My mother would never have approved of the business they were doing there, and I never did. I just wish it had not taken my father dying for me to do something about it."

"You are a good person, Beto. I knew that from the start."

"I didn't feel like a good person, but your courage helped me build up my own courage."

"Well, then it is good we found each other."

"Not just good, it is the best thing to happen to me."

"Ay, Beto, I feel so blessed to have you here."

"You will have me permanently. I am going to be attending *la universidad* here, finally. I have you to thank for that, too. My songbird was wiser than me."

"But you are here now, and we are here together. But I must tell you, I am still a maid," Gloria said shyly.

"And I will be a student. The night will be for singing and for us. If you will take me."

She didn't answer; instead she rose quickly and pulled him up from the couch. "*Vamos*, I must show you everything...*el Malecón*, the gardens... my friends here, all of it."

Gloria's chance to perform more often finally arrived when Magdalena's belly grew and became more noticeable. The woman was forced to take a leave, because it was not glamorous for a pregnant woman to perform, at least in the manager's eyes, though her voice remained intact. The woman was not too disappointed, she confessed to Gloria; her husband had a good job and she was just getting used to the idea of being a homemaker and becoming a mother. She said that singing was now her third priority, after being a wife and, soon, a mother.

In the meantime, Beto was busy preparing to be a student of architecture. He was so excited, he was devouring architecture and design books from the library for months before school started, while working evenings as a waiter at a nearby restaurant. Because he had previous business and restaurant experience, he would sometimes handle other tasks besides waiting tables.

Gloria and Beto would meet during her afternoon break and then on some early evenings prior to his dinner shift at the restaurant. As an unmarried and female employee of the hotel, she was expected to sleep in her quarters, though she'd often sneak out to rendezvous at his nearby apartment on some evenings when he returned from work.

Though Beto initially wanted to wait to get married until he graduated and was working as an architect, he did agree to marry before then, since Gloria was making money and he had inherited money from his father. Beto also inherited his father's house, and, by extension, the business, and decided to retain ownership it, but allowed Carmela to remain there.

Gloria wrote a letter to her mother to alert her of the new developments and her and Beto's intentions of getting married. The response was a joyous one, but she didn't say she was willing to make the journey for the nuptials. Gloria's mother once again expressed her pride in her daughter's talent and determination.

After a couple of months, the young couple decided they didn't need a big celebration or ceremony to seal their relationship. Gloria purchased a simple lace white dress, Beto wore his best suit, and with Magdalena and her husband as witnesses, they wed in a small church a few blocks from the hotel.

Although Gloria was beaming and bubbling with happiness, she missed her family, especially for father, who would have walked her down the aisle.

Rhumba Passions

1951 – 1952

Gloria was quickly overjoyed by the reality that she'd have a legitimate band backing her up. So far, it had only been the pianist, but because the audiences were bigger and were spending more money on drinks and food, the show had to be taken up a couple of notches. The band included the pianist, a guitarist, and a trombone player.

The addition of the trombone was crucial to the Cuban music that was infusing African sounds, and the trombonist playing the *clave*, the five-beat rhythm of two then three strokes, went perfectly with the melodies.

These additions to her act made Gloria feel like a true professional, and the more elaborate outfits, which included a large white flower behind each ear and a blue-with-white-stripes rhumba skirt, made her feel more beautiful, more like a star. The rhumba skirt, worn by dancers, with its multiple tiers of ruffles, was ankle-length on one side and bunched up all the way to the top of the thigh on the other, with only bikini-type garments underneath – a bra and bottom, and usually glittery. For Gloria, who was not quite ready to show it all off, it was modified, and she wore it over a less-revealing skirt and top.

With the band, she practiced more upbeat songs, where the three musicians were given solos, and the songs would be extended to prompt more audience engagement. This was a challenge for Gloria since she was used to singing the romantic boleros, though she was also happy to share the spotlight with the talented musicians. It took a little pressure off her.

It was a good long run at El Nacional; more crowds meant more money for Gloria, and she couldn't be happier, but it also meant longer shows and less time in the evenings to share

with Beto. This was a strain for newlyweds, they both recognized, but they also knew they only had each other and were able to work things out most of the time.

It brought about a jealousy in Beto that Gloria had not known existed. How could she have known? Perhaps, he was unaware of it as well. It wasn't that he was worried about her taking in the attention and acting on it, though that's what he told her, but that, as a man, he knew men didn't know when to stop when it came to beautiful women, or not so beautiful women for that matter, and especially when drinking was involved.

"I have men in my band, I am close with the pianist, you've met him. They can keep an eye out for me, I guess, though that's not their job, but I think there would be plenty of honorable, non-drunk men who'd..."

"Sí, you are right. It just makes me insecure."

"You said you trusted me."

Beto nodded, but Gloria wasn't convinced.

"Do you trust me, or not?"

"Of course, it's just that I'm still a student, not for much longer, but still. All these men are older, have money, and, I don't know..."

"Ay, Beto, I understand, but what would I want with a *viejo*? You are only a little older than me and that's perfect. You're perfect for me."

"And you for me. I'm sorry. I guess I know how men are and felt like I wasn't man enough. Forget it. I'm an *idiota*."

"You're my *idiota*, and I am touched by your concern." She paused, then added, "But I'm very mad at you."

Beto looked at her, as if saying, I thought you weren't mad.

Gloria smiled slyly. “I am so mad, and I won’t be fine until you make it up to me. Right here,” she pointed at their bed.

“Oh, yes, I’m so sorry. It would be my pleasure to work tirelessly for your forgiveness.”

“Remember, *mi amor*, I am very, very, very mad.”

Sure, men coming on to her was a frequent thing, but it was always easy to ignore. Beto came to many of her shows, kissed her on the cheek in front of everyone during intermission, and that seemed to put men in their place on those evenings.

Gloria performed in the lounge and outside, where silk canopies hovered over tables of *antojitos*, like thin pork strips, miniature ham and swiss sandwiches, coconut and guava treats, and trays of a variety of tropical beverages. Her outfit was modified for the setting; she wore more elegant gowns for socialite parties that took place on the grounds. Partygoers wore black tuxes and dark gowns in the evenings and white dinner jackets and lighter dress shades in the afternoon.

Havana’s nightlife was not dependent on the day of the week; at times a Wednesday or a Thursday night was as festive as the weekend. There were plenty of venues to satisfy all types of revelers, such as the Havana Yacht Club that offered a buffet supper with a table stretching several yards in the middle of the ballroom. The Cabaret Kursal Night Club, less formal, was known for young women perching themselves on the bar as they laughed and partook from a variety of drinks; rhumba music played there, and they played some American music, too. At more formal parties, mothers with minks and *mantillas* – silk or laced shawls – draped over their shoulders, with sharp eyes and serious looks on their faces, chaperoned their unmarried daughters.

And of course, the ultimate of all Havana’s nightlife possibilities: Tropicana.

Gloria had risen from her amateur state faster than others had, it seemed. Her popularity at the hotel drew talent scouts, so to speak, to see her, and soon enough she acquired a gig at the Zombie Club on Zulueta Street one evening a week.

Here, she was required to don the full rhumba outfit, exposing her whole right leg – tanned and strong from her years of farm work – and a white fake pearl-textured bra and undergarment underneath, with silvery high-heeled sandals. The band included more musicians with more horned instruments and conga drums.

The new setting was an adjustment for Gloria; the crowd dressed as refined as those who went to El Nacional, but the number of unaccompanied men was larger here, and the attention of the unwanted kind grew as well. The larger ballroom with a larger performing area made Gloria feel more vulnerable to eyes of all kinds – genuine admiring eyes that she appreciated and those with other motives that belonged to men who found their way backstage and stood at Gloria's small dressing room door after her performance and right before the louder more festive rhumba dancers began theirs. Thankfully it was a rare occurrence.

The first two times this happened, Gloria was able to handle things well enough by presenting her wedding band and saying her husband had just stepped out of the room to fetch her a drink from the bar. One time that had been true, though the man had not waited around to see Beto return. Whenever Gloria had a performance at Zombie Club, since it was a longer walk home than the hotel was, Beto would come to meet her outside or sometimes he would wait around in her dressing room if she was taking too long.

The third time, a man, hefty with a strong build actually entered the dressing room, blocked the door, and, after her practiced response, said he'd be happy to meet Gloria's husband.

When a husband didn't materialize, the dark-haired man with a thick mustache and large bear hands reached for her chair and placed it under the doorknob.

That strategy had made Gloria feel safe back in the whorehouse and after the incident with that *Americano* Benjamin, but now she was the one that was being kept in with the predator in control.

She heard the pounding of drums, or was that her heart? She heard the lilt of the singer's voice or it that her own voice begging the man with the words, *Por favor, señor, please leave me alone*. Then came the fanfare of the orchestra, all providing a score to her current nightmare.

The grizzly-sized fellow pounced quickly and towered over her as she was cornered at her dressing table. He began touching her bare arms with firm up-and-down strokes, then he leaned in to kiss her neck. She tried every which way to move her head away from his mouth, and to call out for help, but that only made him grip her more firmly.

"Just enjoy it, *Gloria Quintana*." The tone he used to utter her name made it sound dirty.

"No, stop, *por favor*," she begged.

"I do not want to stop," he said. "I have been waiting for you for too long now." This was a surprise to Gloria, as she had not noticed this man before, who was easily recognizable because of his size. "I saw you at El Nacional two years ago, probably more, when you were just a girl."

During those early days, the lounge was much smaller than this club was, and he might have stood out more, but then again, two or three years ago was not that recent. She felt like a complete *idiota*, because she thought as if she had become adept at recognizing the more regular audience members, especially the unsavory men.

"Now you are a woman, and I want you more than ever." The man began to get excited and breathe more heavily.

When would Beto arrive? She was delayed, and, per his habit, he would come in to rush her, so they could walk home. *Please hurry, my love*, she kept on saying to herself, between telling the man to stop and calling for anyone to force open the door. This back area was usually empty when the main show was going on; the spirited rhumba dancers were the highlight of the evening and all the workers watched the show as often as they could.

The man unzipped his pants, as he kept on kissing her neck and then her lips. She tried to bite his tongue, but it was useless; the man was a beast.

Finally, Beto's usual three quick knocks. "*Corazón*, are you in there? Hurry up, so we can go home."

She tried to talk, but the man's mouth was on hers. She was able to mumble in hopes that her husband would hear her.

Beto tried the knob and the door wouldn't open. Gloria tried to make noise with whatever she could kick with her leg, but there was nothing under the dressing table, and she could not reach one of the table's legs. Beto kept at the knob, sensing something was wrong or simply wanting to get in.

"Beto!" she was able to get out once.

"Shut up." the man whispered as he slapped Gloria hard and started grappling with her skirt to reach her outfits' undergarment, which was tight and could not be reached without untying the side ruffles of her rhumba skirt. It was not hard to do, but the man had no idea, and this was infuriating him.

"Gloria?" Beto said.

"Be—" her attempt was stopped by another hard slap.

"*Que pasa, mi amor?*" Beto called out, but Gloria's face was in too much pain to answer.

The man was finally able to unfasten her skirt, but the undergarment was practically a girdle and Gloria was grateful for that. It was hard to put on, so, surely, the man would get further annoyed by how hard it would be to take off.

Beto was pounding on the door with something; Gloria could see the knob moving.

“Gloria! Gloria!” Beto called with each thrust.

The man let Gloria go, then he grabbed the chair gently and jumped back so that he could have it in hand when Beto made it inside.

As soon as Beto stormed in with a metal garment rod he’d gotten from another dressing room, he lost his footing since the door opened wide quite easily without the chair under it.

“Beto!” warned Gloria, but he had no time to protect his head from the chair that was smashed on it.

The large man rushed out the open door. Beto lay on the floor with some blood seeping from the gash on his head, and Gloria, with red hand marks on her left cheek, was slumped by his side crying.

Gloria left the Zombie that night and never returned. Two workers helped her and her husband that evening, and, through her tears, she told the manager she couldn’t be there anymore.

The manager was not sympathetic at all. He explained, “The whole idea behind the provocative outfits is to entice men, to get them excited so they spend more time and more money at the club. It is part of the business model, in my opinion, and I wish everyone who agrees to work in these places understood that.”

Gloria had experienced too much that night and was simply relieved to be rid of the place and this manager. She had not felt completely comfortable in the place, though it could’ve just been because it was not her usual environment.

Of course, she knew she couldn't let these practices and perceptions bother her and that indeed they were part of the job, but she hated that she was being treated like a *trozo de carne* to be handled and then cooked by these *machistas*.

Gloria had not signed a contract or anything official like that, not that it was the custom in those places. A singer or dancer could be sent packing if somebody prettier or more talented came along, so she figured she would be replaced rather quickly and convinced herself that she did not care.

It didn't matter that she wasn't going to continue performing at Zombie anymore; somebody important had been there and came to see her at El Hotel Nacional a few days later for a prospect in the new year. Transformations were going on in the most glamorous and magical place in all of Cuba.

Tropicana Nights

1953

Tropicana was a masterpiece of architecture situated in a garden of exotic splendor: giant fruit trees, flowering shrubs, and royal palms – a rainforest. It was enchanting, with the starry sky and warm moon outside and music and the dazzling dancers - striking Cuban *mulatas* – on the inside.

It was modern for its time, though it looked and felt like a mythical paradise. The rounded lettering of its sign made it seem like a child had written it, Gloria thought, as if announcing a playground. And a playground it was, for adults to smoke and drink, to mix with the elite, and be captivated by the skillfully choreographed shows. And to gamble, as Tropicana was already considered the most beautiful casino.

El Arcos de Cristal, with its rounded ceiling space for performances, was formed by walls of glass between six slim concrete arches, like garlands in the sky, in a U-shape that became smaller as it came down toward the main stage. Fruit trees grew inside and flowers all over added to the garden decor of the interior. Tropicana was fashioned to be enjoyed at night; it was a paradise under the stars with colored stage lights.

The open-air cabaret was a place of magic, where you felt you were outside and not in a cramped warm indoor place. It was a place of lights and shadows, of beauty, as well as what comes with nightlife and gambling, things that are not always beautiful.

Although it was Gloria's goal, she had always been unsure if she was stellar enough to rise to that stage, yet here she was. Not to dance, not to be part of the elaborate evening show, where the hunting of a panther was simulated with dancers coming out of the surrounding plants and the panther played by another dancer came down a majestic tree, but as the warm-up act.

Gloria sang in a regular gown, although more glamorous than any other gown she'd worn (not in a flirtatious rhumba outfit) and was the pre-pre-show entertainment. It was still the Tropicana, and even stepping in the place was achievement enough for an uneducated farm girl like Gloria. She kept her permanent stint at Hotel Nacional, and performed her early evening two times a week, just as the doors opened.

Like at the Zombie, her performances were mild by comparison to what kept the Tropicana booming till late in the night. Gloria still had a band as before, and the audience was mainly whoever trickled in early for dinner. It was still worthy of attention, as far as Gloria's family was concerned.

An aunt and her daughter, Teresa Calvo, came to see her perform one evening. After that, Teresa attended with friends. Gloria was grateful for the support and for having family members close by. Beto attended when he could, and Gloria sometimes stayed for the well-attended performances of famous American singers like Nat King Cole and Spaniards like Xavier Cugat and Los Chaveles.

Gloria and Beto decided to start a family; they had delayed it because of Beto's studies and because of her career. She had experienced difficulties, and this made her wonder if she was even meant to be mother. Had that chance been taken away from her because she had placed her singing first?

Still, her perception about fame and stardom had not remained the priority, mainly due to all the things she witnessed at the Tropicana and other nightclubs she had gained access to through her work at the famed cabaret. She knew that magical places such as these put on a show – a sex show; sexy and fabulous showgirls got people to feel more uninhibited and attractive and

prompted men to buy more drinks and get more and more horny, enough to make them stumble around the city looking for gratification.

Too many times when she was unaccompanied after one of her performances, she and other young performers were solicited or asked, mainly by American tourists, where more dark-skinned girls could be had for a good time. Gloria was not adept at differentiating between the regional American accents, but one evening as she stood by the bar chatting with one of the bartenders at the Tropicana, she asked him about these men that talked differently than the musicians, movie stars, and politicians who had visited the cabaret.

He informed her that these were *Americanos* from the South of the *Estados Unidos*, and that they desired to be with black girls only. “The *mulatas* sometimes are not dark enough for these fellows. I suppose it has to do with their mindset of the master and servant idea of slavery,” he explained.

In the high-end clubs, prostitution was lucrative. On the streets, these encounters were five-minute affairs, like it was for the likes of sailors and poorer fellows in the *barrios*. Gloria and Beto’s neighborhood was neither upper-class nor a *barrio*, but they witnessed all of it.

Beto, especially, after spending his formative years as the son of a whorehouse proprietor, had a disgust for the matter and felt a sensibility for the young women who, he imagined, fell into this lifestyle.

“I know some don’t care either way and that they just do it for money,” he said, “but I can’t help but think that they probably experience violence and other aggressions from the men. I just have a hard time with it, and I know I’m probably one of the only men who does.”

Gloria did not know how she had gotten so lucky, but she was grateful. After having her fill of inappropriate onlookers and those who considered her just a piece of meat, even though

she wasn't even very provocatively dressed most of the time, she was beyond blessed to have a husband who was not a sleaze.

It was this – Beto's innate goodness – that made her decide to start a family, and if great fame arrived she'd embrace it, of course, but it wouldn't be the end of her. Though, at times, she wasn't sure if she'd be so nonchalant about it. She figured that since it had not arrived in ten years, it might not arrive at all, but she would still work for it.

The Magic Ends

1957 – 1965

On New Year's Eve of 1956, Gloria had an early show, which was basically the equivalent to singing to empty chairs. The festivities were a long way from starting. Beto was there and a couple of their friends joined them, along with Gloria's cousin Teresa; they shared an early supper after she sang. Gloria didn't mind having a small audience, as she was excited to ring in the new year in the most magical place with the one and only Benny Moré, the "Barbarian of Rhythm," on the stage.

As the evening progressed, Beto's green eyes were stuck on Gloria, and she was elated. "Mi amor, you are the most beautiful woman here," he said as they sat at their table.

"Ay, Beto, you're just saying that because you've had a few drinks."

"That is true, but so is your beauty, and I can't wait..." His eyes dropped down to her belly, not yet showing too much. "I can't wait." He caressed her there. "Next year, we will be parents. Our *milagro*. I hope we have a daughter as kind and lovely as you."

"I hope she has your eyes and is as kind and smart as you," Gloria said. "Right now, though, our little miracle is making me go to the bathroom a lot."

"Go, go, but hurry back, the band is getting ready. I will stay here."

As Gloria passed by the bar on her way to the bathroom, she heard the band start up and looked back. In that moment, and from the corner of her eyes, she spotted a slim dark-haired girl of seventeen or eighteen, walking only a step or two behind her, get lifted off the floor. That was the last thing she saw, as a bomb ripped through the bar, a bomb that seemed to come from the purse of that young woman.

In a sleep-like state, Gloria could hear terrifying screams from everyone, as shrieks from Beto and Teresa, both calling her name, stood out from all the others and drew closer. She did

not feel anyone's touch or know if they had even been able to reach her before everything went completely dark and silent.

Everything changed for Gloria during those first seconds of 1957. In fact, all of Cuba began to change that year with early efforts to overthrow President Batista. That bombing was an early incident, along with several homemade bombs and Molotov cocktails going off in clubs and other public places.

The child that Gloria and Beto envisioned did not arrive, and she gave up performing altogether due to her grief. She went back to her maid work at the hotel a couple of afternoons a week at the request of her manager, who insisted that being cooped up at home was not going to help her feel better. He revealed that his wife had also lost a baby, two as a matter of fact, and that he understood her situation; he also said that whenever she felt like singing again, that spot would be open to her, too.

For months, Gloria suffered greatly from bouts of insomnia, inconsolable crying, and loss of appetite. Beto would run back and forth from work to check up on her, cook for them, and keep watch as she sometimes slept in the afternoon. On the days when she was not focused on the loss of her child, her thoughts turned to her career.

Gloria had reached local fame and was proud of that. She looked back at the naïve girl she had been at seventeen, the one who was convinced she'd become a great star. What she'd give to have that optimism now, regarding the country's fate and her own future as a singer. Gloria had arrived at the Tropicana as she had always yearned for, and yet it all ended in mere seconds. She had gotten so close, and, at the same time, felt so far removed from it now, as if it had all been a dream.

One day, Beto finally asked her, “*Mi amor*, what do you want to do? We are living in a dangerous time, so much violence, but right now I am more concerned about you, about us, about this sadness we cannot shake. I will do anything. What do you need?”

It took Gloria a few moments to articulate what she thought might fill this emptiness. Finally, she said, “I need my mother. I need you and my family.”

According to Gloria’s mother - Mercedes, who immediately responded to her daughter’s letter about miscarrying the baby and about wanting to reunite, things on the Menocal farm had apparently improved slightly, but it was still collapsing. Gloria didn’t want to return there, and Mercedes expressed her willingness go wherever they could start fresh.

“There is an easy solution to this. I don’t know why it didn’t come to me sooner,” said Beto. “We are less than two hours from my house, the house my father left me.”

“Yes,” Gloria said slowly, though she didn’t want to go back to the whorehouse either.

“Hear me out. I know what you’re thinking. I don’t know how the business is going, but it is my prerogative to do what I want with it. Carmela has no say in it. If I can still run the restaurant side, then I will, but I want to free those girls, or help support them, find them other places to live, whatever.”

“That all sounds...” Gloria didn’t know what to say.

“Hold on, I’m almost done.” Gloria nodded that she’d be patient. “I hate my aunt, so do you, but that’s her home, and she can stay if she wants so I’m not going to boot her out. There is room enough for us, for your mother, and for your brother. If your other brother and his wife choose to come, we will make room for them.” His eyes darted from all the things that were swirling in his head.

“That’s all wonderful, Beto, but your job.”

“Well, *querida*, the future is uncertain. Our country is suffering greatly, things have been at a standstill at work, and the political corruption is not going to make things any better, unless we are in on it, unless we are part of the elite. It is becoming clear what will happen to my job, to our existence, really, if we aren’t part of the corruption. A war is coming, something is coming, and it isn’t good.”

“I have a bad feeling, too. It’s scary here in the capital. I’m scared to go out or walk by the university with all the student protests.”

“Exactly, I think we will be safer outside the city. What do you think?”

“I don’t know what to think.”

“*Bueno*, Gloria, do you think I’m crazy?”

“Only a little. But I trust that you are crazy, I mean, wise enough to make the best decision for us.”

“I think it is the right one under the circumstances.”

“I agree.”

“Yes?”

“*Si!*” She rose from the bed to embrace him, and said, “Wherever you go, I will follow.”

It took some time to set the plan in motion, for Beto to quit his job, to coordinate Mercedes’ move, and to pack their own things. Beto mailed a note to his aunt Carmela that read: *My wife and I and her family are coming to live in my father’s house, which belongs to me. You can stay only because you are my aunt, or you could go. I do not care either way. But I am warning you now that everything will be different the minute we arrive.*

It was not a warm welcome for Beto or Gloria. Carmela was cordial enough to her nephew, in fact, she pretended she was happy to see him. Gloria walked behind him and, it took Carmela a few seconds to recognize her.

“Oh, I see you followed that little *puta* to Havana.”

“Tia, I will tell you once and only once: respect my wife, and her mother and whomever I bring to this place, this is my place.”

“Hard to respect trash, but I will try,” Carmela said.

Beto, the man least likely, at least to Gloria, to disrespect a woman, slapped his aunt as he reiterated, “Like I said, I will only tell you once.”

The woman was not fazed and bounced back without even touching her cheek. She looked toward Gloria, still in shock from her husband’s action, and said, “I hope you have not fallen off any more horses, though I imagine they are rare in the city.”

Beto did not understand the reference. Gloria laughed, then her face turned serious. “You are right, there are no horses, but I was injured...by a bomb, and it killed my unborn child. Does that sound more exciting than my fake horse tale?”

This left the woman without a retort, but she didn’t move from her spot.

“Excuse me, Carmela.” Another first for Beto; he didn’t used the aunt title when addressing the woman. “We must eat something, then rest from our travels. Be ready for a business meeting tomorrow after breakfast.”

Beto and Gloria didn’t know what to expect, so they brought towels and bedsheets, a fair amount of fruits and vegetables, and anything else they thought might be scarce there. They headed to one of the larger rooms that one of the maids rushed to prepare once she saw them on the premises. The woman brought them a warm meal soon after.

While Beto didn't walk around the premises to see who was still around, it appeared to them to be rather quiet, no music, no men lounging in the courtyard. Had the girls left Carmela over the years?

Maybe there weren't that many changes to implement after all. Beto would get a better idea of everything in the morning.

It was a night of restless sleep for both of them. In the darkness, Beto assured Gloria that they'd figure out a way to make a home for themselves and make the necessary adjustments for her mother and brother to feel at home as well.

While prostitution was quite lucrative in the city, it had dwindled in the countryside. Poverty was a bigger concern than getting a sex fix. Still, Carmela explained there were three young women, new ones, in residence, and men still came to eat and drink. Business was just enough for Carmela to live, for there to be one maid and one cook, and to feed those who came to eat to and be entertained. But nowhere near years past.

"Well, no more girls here," said Beto.

Carmela's sour face had not yet made an appearance during their talk, but after Beto spoke those words, it came out in full force. "But that *is the* business," she said. "You know nothing about business--"

"You may be right, but it is my prerogative to do what I want with the business that I inherited. Honestly, we have no idea what will happen to the country, to businesses, to our whole existence as Cubans, so, for now, what we do with this business is my call, and for that reason, I will help the girls find other places to live or they can live here for free."

Carmela grumbled at this idea of charity.

“This exploitation my father and you began and lived off of after my mother died is disgusting, and I am putting an end to it. I will plant more seeds of I-don’t-know-what or figure out how to do things for myself to support my family – my *new family*. You can stay but watch yourself. Or you can go straight to *el infierno*. I don’t care.”

There was no response from his aunt.

“Is everything clear?”

Still nothing.

“Did you become deaf while I was away?” Beto waited a couple seconds for a response.

“I asked, is everything clear?”

“*Sí*, Beto. “Whatever you say,” Carmela finally responded.

Mercedes and Enrique arrived three days after, and, to Gloria’s surprise, her mother seemed quite happy. The woman, while having aged, seemed at peace and not at all nervous as she had always been. Both of Gloria’s brothers had made the journey for her wedding almost eight years ago, and now Enrique, the youngest, was a grown man with facial hair and a much deeper voice. Gloria couldn’t help but think about him as her baby brother.

Surprisingly, things with her mother were much better than when Gloria was a teenager. Maturity on both sides and a shared sense of loss was what Gloria attributed it to, but she didn’t question how good it felt. It was no surprise to Gloria that Beto welcomed his in-laws as he would dear friends of his own.

Beto left for a walk with Enrique as Gloria helped her mother settle into her room. Carmela kept out of their way but did manage to greet Mercedes, saying she looked forward to

getting to know her. Beto had revealed the details of his business meeting to Gloria, so she knew Carmela was behaving herself and did not want to stir any trouble with her nephew.

When Beto returned he was smiling. “Well, I think with your brother’s help – I had forgotten he is a farmer – I think we can make something of this land, a little more than a few of the workers around here have done. Your brother has foresight and brought some seeds and good ideas with him.”

This gave Gloria hope, hope that the beauty and peace of the country would create better conditions for her and that perhaps she could become pregnant again. But another miscarriage during their second year there convinced Gloria that being a mother was not in the stars for her.

It appeared that stability in the government was not in the future either. On the last day of 1958, President Batista fled.

La Revolución began and the tyrannical reign of Fidel Castro would follow; homes, property, and human dignity were confiscated, and men were imprisoned for simply speaking anything that was deemed anti-Castro.

Amidst the chaos and the uncertainty of whether there would be American intervention, Gloria had lost all hope for Cuba and for their future as a family. She even told him that he should go find himself a wife to have children with.

“Oh, so I should have two wives then?” he said.

“No, just one who could give you children.”

“She will be jealous then, because I only love you and will not give you up so easily.”

“Ay, Beto, I’m serious.”

“So am I. You are the only wife I want. Why would I want a second? Only a crazy man would want two?” He laughed. Then, he added, “*Mi amor*, if we have one child, or two, or none, then we have to accept that it is God’s will. I know you are worried because of the problems we’ve had, and because you are getting older, you keep telling me, but I think there will be another miracle for us. Soon.”

“I don’t know, Beto. I am losing hope.”

“Don’t. There are still wonderful things awaiting us. Despite all the bad things happening, you and I will be fine and happy.”

Beto always seemed to know what was best; he was positive, no matter the circumstances, so Gloria figured she’d try to be as well.

Late in 1964, their miracle finally arrived: a baby boy.

Freedom in a Strange Land

1966

Gloria and Beto and their two-year-old son boarded a plane to the United States, after waiting almost one year on the list for the Freedom Flights. Gloria's mother and her brothers stayed behind and believed, as many others did, that this new regime was temporary, so why should they go to a new country?

Beto and Gloria knew they could not come back. But it had been impossible for them to convince others to believe the same. Gloria had cried as she rode to Havana but hoped that her mother and brothers would come to their senses soon and join them.

Teresa Calvo, Gloria's cousin, was among those who stayed behind. Now married with a daughter, who was also two years old, and another child on the way, Teresa came to bid Gloria farewell before her departure to America. The cousins had gotten close after the New Year's Eve terror at the Tropicana and would stay in contact via letters, though infrequent, for some time after Gloria was living in the United States. In the first letter Gloria received from her cousin almost a year after parting, Teresa shared the news that she had given birth to a boy who she named Pedro.

After arriving in Miami and being processed at the Freedom Tower, they spoke to people who were going to make their way to New York, where there was apparently more work available. After discussing the possibilities of Beto learning English and figuring out how to become an architect in America, they decided to take the chance and head north. While on the flight, Beto reminded Gloria of her talent, the one that she could soon show off to new audiences.

With assistance, they were able to get to a boarding house in Washington Heights, where many Puerto Ricans had settled. Beto began waiting tables at a nearby restaurant during lunch

and dinner time as Gloria took care of Roberto Jr. She worked the morning shift at a bakery, as Beto and their son slept. At the same time, Beto was taking English classes at the local church, and Gloria would sometimes attend if their son was cooperative with their neighbor Lucille, the Irish woman who sometimes babysat for them.

One afternoon during the lunch rush at MacNaughton's Steak House and Bar, where Beto worked, Gloria arrived with their son in a stroller and a big smile on her face. She stood near the door, trying not to block the entrance as a few business men entered and waited for a table. All the woodwork of the bar and the tables was dark, and the ceiling was made of gold-colored art deco tin molding. The tablecloths were dark green.

Once the group of men were led to a table, Gloria could get a better view of the waiters, all dressed in black slacks, white shirts with black bow ties, and dark green jackets to match the tablecloths. She finally spotted Beto coming out of the kitchen carrying a large tray with plates of thick steaks, baked potatoes, peas and carrots, and small bowls of salads. It appeared that most of the waiters were serving the same thing; it must be the Wednesday special, Gloria thought.

She got closer so he'd see her, and he smiled and indicated with his index finger that he'd be just one minute. As he walked toward her, she waved an envelope she had just fished out of her purse

"I think this is it!" she exclaimed.

"Let me see." Beto carefully opened the envelope and read the letter inside. "Patrick, come here," he called to another waiter. "Read this. It is in English." As the young man read, Beto asked, "I think I got it, but I want to be sure."

"Roberto, yes, indeed, ye got it, lad," he said in an Irish brogue as he patted Beto on the back. "You won't be working in this stinkin' place for long."

“Gloria, I did it. I passed. I can’t believe it.”

“*Ay*, Beto, so exciting.”

“I must get back to work, but we must celebrate tonight.” He took out some cash from his pocket and gave it to her. “Buy some *vino*,” he said. He kissed her lips quickly, then leaned down to kiss his son’s forehead.

Beto had arrived at the decision that instead of imagining and helping build new buildings, he’d work with structures that already existed, and studied feverishly to get a real estate license. By the following year, he opened his own real estate office with Gloria as his secretary.

It was located in their Washington Heights neighborhood, where their two-bedroom apartment was spacious, and they had neighbors who become like family. Irish, Jews, Italians, Puerto Ricans, all who, like Gloria and Beto, had who’d left their homelands seeking a better existence.

On the weekends, Gloria sang at the Flamingo Club and, while it was nowhere near as glamorous as the least glamorous spot in Havana, she was truly happy. She felt as uninhibited as she had felt all those years ago singing at the hotel and the cabaret.

The happiness was not to be permanent, though. In early 1975, Beto began suffering from stomach cramps and, on the first day of spring, he collapsed on the stairs of the A-train. Months of doctor’s appointments and tests at the hospital finally revealed it was stomach cancer. By late summer, Gloria could not keep the real estate business going on her own and closed its doors permanently.

Songbird Sings a Dirge

February 1976

“Promise me you will not mourn too long,” said Beto.

“*Ay, mi amor*, let’s not talk about this,” begged Gloria. “You need to rest. That is what the doctor said.”

“But we must,” he insisted. Gloria simply nodded her head and let him continue. “You don’t need to wear black if you do not want to. I want you to meet other men, have fun with them, have them take you dancing. And you mustn’t stop singing, my songbird. Promise me you will never stop singing.” Beto struggled to sit up in bed, and Gloria helped him and adjusted the pillow at his back. “Promise me,” Beto said again.

Gloria was too choked up to respond. “I promise,” she finally said reluctantly.

“Maybe there is a man who can be a good father to Robi.”

“Nobody but you can be that,” Gloria said as her eyes watered.

“Well, try to find somebody who might come close. He will be at a difficult age soon.”

Gloria would agree to everything her dying husband asked her to do.

“I am sorry this has left you with little money,” Beto said.

“Money comes and goes, *mi amor*. You are more important than money. I needed you to stay as long as possible.”

“I tried, you know that. For you and our son. But my body cannot take any more.

“*Sí*, I know. I am sorry I could not let go.”

“I did not want to let go either, but it is time. You know this.”

Gloria simply nodded in agreement.

“Songbird of my soul, you are strong, you are smart, though you doubt yourself. Do not doubt that you can and will survive it all.”

“Oh, Beto, I do not feel strong right now. But for you two, I will, I will get through this.”

“I know,” he said, but Gloria could barely hear his fragile voice.

“Rest, Beto,” she said.

“Will you sing to me? I feel cold, but I will warm up and rest easy if you sing.”

Gloria placed another blanket on top of the three that were already on him. After she tucked them under his weak body, she acquiesced and began to sing “Aquellos Ojos Verdes,” the tune she was performing when Beto came back into her life that night so long ago in the lounge of El Hotel Nacional.

“It was your eyes that gave me the sweet theme of my song. Your green eyes clear and serene, eyes that have been my inspiration.” She caressed his face as tears began to fall, but she continued. “Those green eyes with a serene look left in my soul an eternal thirst to love...” Somehow, Gloria mustered enough strength to reach the end, “...those green eyes that I will never forget.”

Within seconds, as they held each other, Beto fell asleep. Not long after, he took his last breath, and Gloria’s heart broke in two.

Songbird Struggles

1979

Gloria lugged three bags of groceries up the dark creaky staircase of her five-floor walk-up building. The freezing February wind outside had left her breathless already, so she dropped her bags at the door of her third-floor apartment, took a deep breath, sighed, and said, “*Ay, Dios mio*” from exhaustion. She’d been calling out to God a lot lately, from frustration, sadness, and just out of feeling at a loss in all aspects of her life.

February was Gloria’s least favorite month; it was the coldest, the gloomiest, it was the month when Beto had died three years ago. Though it was the shortest, it was the most brutal. It had been three degrees that day, it would be zero over the weekend, and the weatherman predicted over ten inches of snow for Monday. She wanted to crawl under the covers and not come out till March.

Gloria spent her days in wealthy people’s homes, cleaning their prized possessions, dusting their antique furniture, polishing their hardwood floors, making their beds, and washing their dirty dishes from which they ate good steak, shrimp, and other delicacies that Gloria sometimes cooked for them, while Gloria ate way too much *pollo* with white rice and black beans. She’d grow white feathers soon from all the poultry she consumed, which she bought at the less-than-sanitary *carnicería* down the street.

The Manhattan apartments, five or six a week, where she spent most daylight hours, were all below 72nd Street, and it took her, at times, almost an hour to get down there, and getting back during rush hour meant she didn’t get a seat on which she could rest her aching back or give her swollen feet a break. She would spend part of the evenings soaking her feet, so that on Friday and Saturday nights she could fit into her dress shoes to sing at *Fiebre Latina*.

As for her sex life, well, she had one just this past year. Women approaching fifty still could, especially a woman like Gloria who didn't look a drop over forty-two. At times, it had been romantic, but things just hadn't panned out with anyone. She was still lonely.

She did have that very passionate three-months-long fling with Hector, the Puerto Rican. He wined and dined her, not at high-end establishments, but still, he dressed up for her and took her dancing to Roseland and some of the other dance halls in upper Manhattan. He was a Latino Valentino, with his ability to sweep her of her feet, literally, when they danced, and he was spectacular in the love-making department. He was not the type of man to just slip it in and be done with her once he was done, no, the man knew how to drive her to madness first before even thinking of himself.

Naturally, Gloria fell in love with him, or enough anyway, but as it turned out he had eyes for other women; she spotted him with a much younger one at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where he pretended to know every artist on display. Gloria couldn't help but laugh as she heard him incorrectly pronounce all the French artists' name while the girl was quite impressed. Gloria slipped away before he spotted her. Then she went home to cry, because she knew it wouldn't be long before Hector would stop calling.

There had been others, who'd taken her out to dinner, but most didn't want to get too involved with a woman with a teen son. Most recently, there had been Bernardo, with whom she wanted things to work out. He had the qualities a woman would like in a second husband: smart and stable. He brought her flowers, but they were carnations, he took her to the park for fresh air, not for romantic walks, and to the museums, but never to the dance clubs; the man was not good on his feet and quite dull horizontally.

Many men she'd met lacked the passion she craved, the passion she had shared with Hector, and the passion and love she had shared with her beloved Beto, whom she couldn't help but daydream about.

As for her son, sometimes he was fine, sometimes she had no idea. A fatherless fourteen-year-old, and an angry one at that, was a dangerous thing. Gloria had not been able to find a replacement role model for him, mainly because the men who came in and out of her life had no interest in being fathers, or even father figures, to someone else's child.

Things came to a head for Gloria and her son one afternoon, just as she arrived from work. Roberto was not home, but she didn't think anything of it. It was cold and instead of being at the basketball court he might be at a friend's apartment, she guessed.

She had just kicked off her shoes and changed into house slippers as the buzzer from downstairs rang. It made her jump, as they rarely had unexpected visitors. Maybe Roberto forgot his key.

"Hello?" Gloria said into the intercom.

"Mrs. Quintana, this is Stan Levine from the pharmacy."

"Come up!" she said immediately, though she had no idea why the pharmacy owner was coming to her apartment.

She waited at the open door, as the man came up with Roberto in tow. The look on her son's face told her the unexpected visit wasn't about the man offering her son a part-time job or that Roberto had saved an old lady at the store or anything good like that.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Levine, if my son stole something I will make sure it never –," she said instantly, even though she only guessed that was the issue.

“Mrs. Quintana, you have nothing to apologize for,” the man interrupted. “Roberto, here, took some things from the pharmacy, yes, but I have chosen not to call the police, mainly because of you. You are a hard-working woman, and I wouldn’t want to bring you any grief.”

“Oh, that is kind of you. But I must pay you.” Gloria said, then realized she was being rude to the man by having this conversation in the hallway, but, more importantly, she was at risk of exposing her *ropa sucia* where neighbors could hear. “I’m sorry, Mr. Levine, please come in, sit down, let me get my purse.”

As the man entered, Gloria gripped Roberto firmly by the arm and dragged him into the apartment as she closed the door behind them.

“The money isn’t the problem, Mrs. Quintana, it’s what Roberto stole and what he and a friend have been doing in the back alley with what they’ve stolen or sometimes actually purchased.”

“I don’t understand. But, like I said, I will pay you or Roberto will work for you, and I guarantee you this will not happen again.”

“I hope not. The problem is more serious than just shoplifting. Roberto and several others in the neighborhood, for that matter, are combining medicines, like the ones for cold and sinuses and allergies to make what I would call a cocktail that gets them high.”

“Getting high, like with marijuana?” Gloria asked.

“Yes, I guess like that,” Mr. Levine said. “But a problem could arise when someone has an allergic reaction to a medicine or some ingredient, or their combination. We’ve known each other for a while now, and I know Roberto has an allergy to some of the cold medicines and that he has a mild heart condition. I found him in bad shape the other day, with a nose bleed and his eyes darting everywhere. I didn’t say anything to you then, but today...”

“He was doing it again.” Gloria said.

“Exactly, so I thought it best to come to you. I want to help Roberto if I can, because last week I saw his friend trying to sell tiny bottles to younger kids, and, well, I think he sells other things. Not Roberto, I mean, I have not seen him sell anything.”

“I see,” she said, then she turned to her son. She had not noticed her son’s bloodshot eyes until that moment, and hesitated before asking, “Is this true?” Roberto, who had been standing behind the couch the whole time, just nodded. “I asked you a question, is this true?” she asked more loudly.

“Yes, Mami,” Roberto answered.

“Okay, Mr. Levine, thank you. I think I know who this friend is, and I will make sure my son cuts his connection with him and makes it up to you by volunteering at the pharmacy for you on Saturday mornings, so you can go to temple. I know you make that sacrifice for the neighborhood, but Roberto can help Susan on those days, if you are okay with that. Please trust that he has learned his lesson about stealing.” She turned to Roberto again. “You have learned the lesson, haven’t you, *my son*?”

“Yes,” said Roberto. Then he looked at Mr. Levine. “I’ll help you, Mr. Levine,” He knew working at a drugstore would be the easiest part of whatever his mother had in store for him.

“Thank you,” said Mr. Levine. The man turned to Gloria and added, “I will speak to Susan about it, but I think Roberto and I can work things out, so that maybe he can work for wages soon. I know he is an intelligent young man, and I don’t want him to go down the wrong path.”

When they approached the front door, Gloria said, “Thank you for keeping this private between us. You will not have any more problems with Roberto. I promise.”

As soon as she closed the door, she turned to Roberto, stared him down for a couple of seconds, and took off for his bedroom. She returned saying, “I couldn’t find anything there, but I didn’t feel like messing up the tornado I always have to clean up for you. So, if you have some *drogas* there, get rid of them! Did you hear me?”

Roberto did not answer immediately.

“I said, if you have drugs, get rid of them!”

“Okay, Mami, I will,” which confirmed that there were some drugs in her home.

Roberto had made himself vulnerable by sitting on the couch, and before he knew it, Gloria had grabbed her *chancleta* from one of her feet and was whacking him on his upper arm and his shoulder blade, while yelling about what an embarrassment he had just put her through and asked if he wanted to be a junkie who was strung out on drugs. And that his father would be so ashamed of him.

As soon as Gloria spoke the last words, she started crying. “I don’t know how to do this without your father. He was always the smart one, the one who was patient and thought things through. I am impatient and just do what I have to do.”

“It’s not you, Mami, it’s me. I guess I’m mad that Papi is gone, and I hate my school and this neighborhood.”

Gloria loved their spacious apartment in Washington Heights, but the neighborhood had changed and not for the better this last decade.

“I just want to escape sometimes.” Roberto said.

“I understand. And you might think drugs or pills or whatever you’re doing are an escape, believe me, I want an escape, too. You think worse *mierda* hasn’t happened to me? I work like a dog on my knees and clean people’s expensive shit, every day.”

“I know, I know, you haven’t had an easy life.” Roberto said, as if he didn’t want to hear the stories again.

“But escaping isn’t going to make you feel better, because after the high is gone, you still...you still...” She seemed to lose her thread. “*Ay*, I read something in a card or I think an old Chinese man said it, maybe it was one of those little cookies, I don’t know. Wherever you go, there you go!” Roberto looked confused and held in a laugh. “No, no, there you *are*! Yes, wherever you go, there you are! You can try to escape, but you still must take care of things or the problems never go away.”

“I understand, Mami. And that’s a good saying.”

“I try to solve problems as they arrive, but it is hard because I am tired. I can clean houses to make money and sing, but that’s it. And now, people don’t want to even hear the old songs, so....”

“You’re a great singer, Mami. I don’t like those songs, but I guess old people do.”

“Thanks, Robi,” Gloria said sarcastically. “I had to learn Elvis’ romantic songs, and that seems to be working.”

“Isn’t he dead?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure. But that *mierda* newspaper the *National whatever* likes to resurrect him every other month. *Ay*, that man was soooo beautiful.”

“Mami!”

“*Ay*, Robi, I can dream, can’t I? That’s my escape”

“Yeah, I guess so. Anyway, I’m sorry.”

“I know. I am sorry that I am not smart like your father was.”

“You’re a different kind of smart.”

“Oh, maybe I am, I don’t know. I am not sure I can provide all that you need, but I promise things will get better. We will get out of this neighborhood as soon as I can manage it. I want to send you to college, but I don’t know if I can. Oh, so many uncertainties... I’m sorry, but I am trying, honey, I really am. It’s just you and me and we need to figure things out.”

Roberto sighed in resignation, indicating he certainly didn’t know how to make things better.

“You disappointed me, and this drug thing scares me. But, at the same time, I feel I have been a disappointment, too.”

Again, Roberto didn’t know how to respond, but finally said, “I know you do your best.”

“Yes, I do, but it may not be good enough, and I cannot lose you, too. So please, please, be patient with me. Don’t stop being like your father, smart and patient.”

Gloria looked her son’s drugged-up eyes. In that moment, she realized they had changed from bright and kind to sad and lost.

When had that happened, and why had she not noticed sooner? She wasn’t sure if she could figure things out on time before he went down the wrong path.

PART TWO:

PEDRO

Mambo Farewell

Havana, Cuba, 1991

Pedro Luis Olivares stood by the outside counter of *La Flor* luncheonette sipping espresso and getting crumbs from his guava caramelized pastry on his white *guayabera*. On any other day, he'd brush those crumbs off immediately, but today, the twenty-four-year-old wanted to savor it all as he bid a final farewell.

He'd taken a walk around el *Parque Central* before coming to his favorite lunch spot for a snack. While he felt nostalgic and excited, he couldn't shake the anxiety that had become a constant in his life for the last several months. As he walked around the perimeter of the park, Pedro tried his best not to look at anyone directly for fear that they'd somehow know of his plans. He stood at the foot of the statue of José Martí and asked the national hero for courage and strength. The gesture calmed him a bit, and he continued walking until he reached *La Flor*.

As he took the final sip of his *cafecito*, he looked at the rusty light blue Chevy Bel Air that was perpetually parked on the corner of *San Rafael* and tried to recall how long it'd been there. About ten years was his guess. One of its front tires had been flat for almost as long.

Conga-infused music seeped through the large to-go window and the pair of wide-open wooden slats that exposed the dining area. Pedro moved a few steps to his right to take a last look at this place where he and his friends had spent countless hours eating, chatting, or just listening to music.

The mustard walls had long faded and so had the fake flowers attached to macramé snakes dangling from the walls, though the black-and-white checkered floor had gracefully survived the times. Seated at small wooden tables, women used fans to stay cool and a large man with a gray rounded mustache fanned himself with a worn-down Panama straw hat, all the while

sipping piping hot espresso from tiny cups of all colors. Chipped plates of white rice and fried sweet plantains – the only meal available that day – were being served by Dulce, the solitary waitress.

In the center of the room, a dark-skinned gentleman, wearing a beige four-pocket shirt like Pedro's, twirled a much younger woman. His greased hair, mostly gray, still had streaks of black. The woman's brown hair reached the waist of her knee-high skirt and swayed along with her. Their faces glistened with sweat.

A few passersby gathered to watch the noon ritual of Ibrahim, the seventy-six-year-old Cuban Fred Astaire. From the rumors, old Ibrahim, who always had a willing cha-cha-chá or mambo partner here at *La Flor* and at another restaurant in the center of Havana, was a womanizer.

He reminded Pedro of his own grandfather. His *abuelo*, Rubén Calvo, was a smooth dancer and talker in his day and had seven children with three women. Pedro's beloved *abuelita* was the last wife, at least in Cuba, and birthed four of his children. Pedro had seen photos of his grandfather but had never met him. Rubén left his various families for Miami in 1960, right after *La Revolución*, claiming he wasn't going to wait around for the glory days to return.

Through the years, in the early to mid-sixties, then during the Mariel Boatlift in the spring of 1980, most of the family followed suit. Most relatives lived in Miami, but he did have some in New York and Union City, New Jersey.

One of his mother's cousin, Gloria Quintana, lived in New York City; she'd been successful in Havana as a young woman, singing at the world-famous Tropicana cabaret. Pedro's mother, Teresa, had seen her perform there in the mid-1950s. He didn't know how the woman's singing career turned out in the United States, but her life in Cuba had been exciting; Pedro had

heard tales about the mafia that ruled Cuba before the revolution in 1959 and how Gloria worked at the hotel where mafiosos congregated.

Pedro remained transfixed by the music and the swirling hues of the young woman's skirt, or rather, her perfectly shaped bottom and her strong mocha-colored legs. A tap on his shoulder made him jump, bringing him back to the moment and to the anxiety he had been feeling earlier.

"*Que pasa?*" Pedro said to his friend.

Marco told him to lower his voice and to switch to English, and they moved toward the old car to get more privacy.

"Me and Lázaro been looking for you for an hour," Marco said. "We have *problema.*"

"*Coño*, did somebody find out?"

"No, no, thanks to God. We have problem with the...the..."

"*Que?* What do you mean?"

"You know, the..." Marco gestured, starting with his two fists together, then bringing them out a couple times to indicate something long.

Pedro's eyes opened in recognition. "I think the name is...*soap?*"

Marco laughed at the mistake.

"Why do you laugh? You don't know the name." Pedro jabbed his friend's shoulder.

"Sorry. *Soap* is the name for *jabón.*"

Then Pedro chuckled, too. Soap was the farthest thing from what they were speaking of.

"Okay, okay, I know what you mean." Still, he whispered to confirm, "*La sogá?*"

Marco nodded. "How you say? Some big... Mickey Mouse bite them."

"Shit."

“And they made a hole in one tire. I think we can fix that easy. Don’t know if we can get those things today, you know, good ones, eh, stronger ones.”

Pedro was relieved that at least the inner tube could be easily repaired.

They had learned their choppy English from watching VHS tapes of American action and gangster films. Their favorite movie was *Scarface*. It had been a big blockbuster in the U.S. but a giant embarrassment for Cuban exiles because of Tony Montana’s foul mouth and his portrayal by an Italian actor, aside from the whole drug-trafficking thing. They watched these films over and over again, all obtained through family members who visited from Miami.

The only VCR available to them was at their friend Lázaro’s house. Their friend’s grandfather was a Castro sympathizer and, even though his wife had left him because of it, he still indulged his family when he could with electronics, books, and meat, luxuries only available to those who supported the communist regime.

“Lázaro found someone who can help, but he had to take money from his *abuela* to pay the man.”

“Shit.”

Aside from their close bond of friendship, Pedro and Marco could pass as brothers. They’d been born a week apart, had dark thick hair, were about the same height, and lived one block from each other. As young classmates, they were practically attached at the hip until they began chasing girls as teens. Lázaro had nicknamed them Rambo and Rocky because they looked like tanned Stallones without the cleft lip. They were both on the skinny side, but Pedro had earned the moniker Rambo because he was slightly stronger. Lázaro, twenty-six, was Marco’s cousin but looked nothing like him, with straight light brown hair and green eyes.

The two friends started walking toward their neighborhood and reviewed their plan step-by-step for the hundredth time. For more than six months, they had been planning, observing, calculating, doing thousands of push-ups to build arm strength, and, mostly, hoping all their efforts would pay off. Lázaro had been the mastermind behind their current escape plan.

There would be a fourth young man joining them – Freddy. They sensed a chance of cold feet on his part, so they gave him information after the fact to keep him calm. Freddy was a little younger, twenty-two, and had only become a close confidant within the last few years.

As Pedro opened the door to his home, he had the impulse to call out to Marco who was almost at the corner, but he refrained. He had suddenly recalled the English word neither of them had known earlier – the item that needed to be strong, needed to hold wooden planks together and keep the oars in place, the crucial item that meant the difference between floating to freedom or drowning somewhere between Cuba and the Florida coast. *Rope*.

Later that afternoon, Pedro sat on the stone slab below his front door – aqua-colored slats of wood with a wobbly gold handle – as Lázaro gave him an update. Lázaro’s English was better than his friends’ because his grandfather had given him a Berlitz Beginner’s English cassette many years ago.

“The man said he can get us strong rope, but not today,” Lázaro said.

“Okay, we wait. We have to be *paciente*.”

“*Sí, sí, tranquilo*. We have to look at the weather and moon again. I will talk to Wilfredo tomorrow. Maybe the time will not be good for one week or more.”

Wilfredo Pino was an older gentleman who had studied meteorology, worked at the weather center, and had access to radar and satellite intelligence. He was a close family friend

who'd known Lázaro since birth. Wilfredo knew that when people who were not fishermen inquired about tides and the phases of the moon, they had something very specific in mind, and he was willing to help. Wilfredo was able to pinpoint the evening when the tide would be pushing out to make rowing easier.

“If I wasn't over sixty and didn't have a weak back, I'd get on a raft himself,” he told the young men.

Pedro looked to the right, then the left, although nobody was around. “I am *muy nervioso*. But we cannot go if everything is not perfect.”

“I'm nervous, too. My sister, she asked me why I was being strange.”

“Shit, stay cool, okay? *Mujeres* know everything. They know how to read brains.”

“Rambo, Rambo, tay ke reasy. We are okay, we have a good plan.”

Pedro nodded, then asked, “You talk to Freddy?”

“*Sí*, he worried like always, but he will be okay. We will take care of the work, so he won't freak out.” Lázaro swirled his finger by his temples, and they both laughed.

That night had not been the perfect night, after all, but Pedro knew it would come soon, although the wait would only make him more anxious. They'd have to work on the raft some more, reschedule the driver who would transport them, and wait for when the tide at *Cojímar* would work in their favor.

The fishing village east of Havana was where they would be departing from and it was near a secluded and dilapidated barn where their raft had been put together and was being stored. Their vessel to freedom was comprised of old inner tubes below and wooden planks to create a floor and side panels to somewhat protect them from strong waves. Attached to the back was

circular contraction with a rudder that would push water, much like old steamboat's paddle wheel, but they'd have to turn it by hand.

Through the grapevine, the young men had heard that at least two groups, one that included Lázaro's distant cousin, had pulled off successful escapes from that particular fishing village. Also, through rumor, they'd heard of a raid by government henchmen on a truck transporting five people. The teller of the tale had not been able to pinpoint the location, but supposedly, it was clear by how they were driving slowly with no headlights on that they were trying to make a getaway in the dead of night. The three men and the male driver were beaten to a pulp, and the officers cut some wires under the truck's hood. The two women were eventually able to reach town the next morning to get help.

The perfect night arrived ten days later. Those ten days had been the absolute worst; Pedro was walking in a daze from fear of being found out and from excitement. On the day of their departure, Pedro had naturally been anxious all day, but also looking forward to the new life awaiting him in the United States.

Pedro shared a home with four people – his mother Teresa, his maternal grandmother, and a sickly aunt and her ten-year-old daughter. Pedro's sister, two years older, recently married and had moved out of the rundown, three-bedroom house.

After dinner, he'd kept quiet while he and his family sat around the living room, as romantic songs emitted from the portable radio. As she did each night before bed, Abuela kissed her two grandchildren on the forehead and gave them her blessing. This final blessing got Pedro a little teary-eyed, and he soon announced he was going to his room, too, as his mother and aunt prayed the rosary, their almost-nightly routine.

In his tiny room, a nine-by-six-foot alcove on the side of the living room, which had a curtain separating it instead of a door, Pedro waited impatiently. His friends would be coming for him in less than two hours. His heart beat quickly and sweat formed on his forehead.

Since his lamp was still on, his mother said good night again as she left the living room. “*Hasta mañana, mi hijo.*”

His heart stopped for a second. Oh, please, don’t let Mami peek in here and sense something is wrong, he thought. She rarely came in his room, and tonight was not the night for her to do so.

“*Hasta mañana, Mami,*” he finally said, though he was lying. *Until tomorrow, when your heart will be broken* was more accurate.

After a few minutes, he finally heard the creaky door of her bedroom open and close behind her, then sneaked out and went directly to the small side table in the living room where she kept her prayer cards and her treasured old rosary. He snatched the rosary and put it in his pocket, went to the kitchen to take a final look around, to the bathroom where he splashed cold water on his perspiring face, and then back to his room to continue the wait.

Pedro looked around his tiny space. His twin-sized mattress, which rested on an old wooden frame, was lumpy and too small for him. A milk crate served as a nightstand and a narrow chest of three drawers held his underwear, socks, and personal belongings, such as books his father had once treasured.

On the wall facing his bed, he’d nailed a metal shower rod where he hung his pants and shirts, and three *guayaberas*, four-pocketed linen shirts, that had belonged to his father. His mother thought he should have them, and they fit him nicely. His grandmother kept those cherished linen shirts ironed for him, despite there being no starch.

Pedro changed into one of his father's shirts and put his mother's rosary around his neck. His nerves subsided a bit, and he felt confident that the two items from his parents would protect him on his journey.

He wanted so badly to see his father, to sit in front of him and get confirmation that leaving was the best thing to do, but that was not possible.

His father, Luis Manuel, was currently serving thirty years, although many political prisoners had been released before completing their full sentences. Luis had found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time during a raid. He worked at a factory where some coworkers had been speaking up and plotting against the government. He had not been an instigator, so to speak, but he was against the government and didn't deny it when he was on trial.

He was sent to an island prison in 1966, two months before his son's birth and when his daughter was two. Throughout her pregnancy, Teresa was certain she'd have a boy and wanted to name him after the father, but Luis Manuel insisted they name him after an uncle who'd been murdered during the revolution, with Luis as his middle name.

As an infant, Pedro was taken to meet his father in prison. Teresa, accompanied by her brother, carried her small children in her arms on the ten-hour journey, which involved a long bus ride followed by several hours on a cargo ferry. In time, Luis Manuel was transferred to another facility three provinces away, equally difficult to get to with less frequent visitations allowed.

Pedro had seen his father seven times in his life for twenty minutes at a time, and the last time was two years ago. He didn't know what was more painful – not really knowing his father and having no happy memories to cherish, or feeling as if he already lost him. The last time they

visited, he couldn't believe that the handsome and strong man he'd seen in photos and during their early visits now looked like an ancient stranger.

Because of untreated diabetes, several dark bruises lined Luis Manuel's bony arms, and his cloudy and half-closed eyes, which were sensitive to light, sometimes haunted Pedro at night, prompting him to quickly grab a photo of when his father was young and vibrant. Pedro couldn't even begin to imagine his father's suffering, considering that being so sick in a rat-infested place with exposed electrical wires and leaks didn't seem much better than death.

Earlier in the day, Pedro had stopped by his sister's house, secretly told his brother-in-law of his plans, and made him promise not to tell anyone until his mother found the letter he planned to write. He was affectionate with his sister, which was usual for him. Since they were close in age, they always playing together as children and were often asked if they were twins.

In his letter, Pedro apologized for not telling them of his plans because that would have put them all in danger. He knew they'd only try to convince him to stay. He said that from Florida he'd be able to help them more. He told them not to worry, that everything would turn out fine and that he looked forward to the day they, including his father, would all be reunited in a free country. Lastly, he apologized to his mother for taking the rosary, but that he'd taken it for protection. He promised he would buy her a rose-scented one to replace it.

In a small kid-sized backpack, Pedro packed two underwear, a pair of socks, and a Miami Dolphin's long-sleeved cotton T-shirt, a gift from a visiting aunt. Originally, an impractical piece of clothing for two reasons. First, Cubans didn't care about American football; everybody knew *béisbol* was their thing. Second, a long-sleeved anything was useless in tropical weather. However, it served a purpose now, since the sleeves would protect him from the harsh sun at sea.

The backpack also held a re-sealable plastic bag, containing two pen-styled flashlights, a book of matches, and a small washcloth. Pedro needed something that would keep those items dry and this ingenious bag, which the same aunt had brought filled with vitamin bottles, was *perfecto*. She'd referred to it as a "Sip-lo."

Several months ago, Lázaro had requested the flashlights for them from his grandfather, saying they would come in handy during the power outages that occasionally occurred on the island. Marco was in charge of getting sunblock, and with the help of their meteorologist friend, they were able to acquire a reliable compass to guide them north during their trip.

Close to midnight, Pedro finally heard the tap on his window. He placed the letter on his bed and left the separating curtain ajar, so his mother would notice he wasn't home but eventually find the letter if she began to worry and called for him. He did not leave it in a more obvious place, like her chair or the kitchen table, because he didn't want them to panic first thing in the morning and set out looking for him. He hated doing that to them, but he needed to be long gone before they figured things out.

Once his family read the letter, they knew what they needed to do next: call a relative in Miami who would, in about twenty-four hours, begin calling the detention center in South Florida to see if he'd been found and processed and was ready to be claimed by relatives. Pedro would live with whichever aunt or uncle was willing to take him in.

The four young men, with their pants rolled up, pushed their raft into the water. Freddy, who'd been a bottle of nerves on the ride there, was mumbling a prayer of some sort, and the others kept signaling him to be quiet.

Their first goal was to reach international waters about thirteen miles out. The first twelve miles out are owned by Cuba and patrolled by officers. Two would row, then they'd switch. Then three would rest for one hour, while the other kept an eye on the compass, and pedaled. Then more rowing and pedaling, though not strenuously.

They had to preserve their strength for the mid-point, about fifty miles out, when they would be swept into the Gulf and had to fight like madmen against the current to reach somewhat tamer, though still rough, waters. The trek could take about three days if a great amount of luck was on their side and they got picked up, or longer if it wasn't. Either way, they would be at the mercy of the unpredictable sea.

Pedro and Freddy sat in the middle and synced up their rowing quickly, as the others reclined sideways, Marco in the front and Lázaro in their rear.

Marco shot up. "*Mira,*" he whispered as he pointed. He was the only one facing the shore.

The rowers turned to look, and Lázaro rose and turned, too. Flickers of light came from the road, but they faded within seconds. They hadn't even traveled the length of a block, it seemed, so they were able to see through the trees on the shore. They stopped rowing so there wouldn't be any noise, though they couldn't do much about their pounding hearts. They lowered their heads and stayed in that uncomfortable position for about a minute.

Pedro turned his head, lifted it quickly, and saw no sign of light or a moving vehicle. "*Vamos,*" he whispered, and he and Freddy rowed much faster to gain more distance.

It seemed as if they had been rowing for less than a minute when they heard it. Pedro didn't turn around; everyone knew the sound of a military jeep, and in the dead of night, it instilled even more fear. It seemed to be coming from the left, not the right where they had seen

the lights. He didn't know what to do. Row faster to get farther away or stop and remain motionless once again?

They didn't have a chance to make the decision. There was a shot fired in their direction, and it hit the water a few feet behind them. Pedro gently placed his oar in a way that it would hang diagonally from the raft but not bang against anything, and signaled Freddy to do the same. They got down in the fetal position; there was no way for all four of them to fit longwise. Again, there was silence, and to Pedro, this lull seemed to last much longer.

It was decision time once again. Wait for whomever had shot at them to wade into the water to get closer aim, either at them or the inner tubes, which, if deflated, would capsize them, or go? One thing was certain: These military men never traveled alone. That meant there were two guns that would be aimed at them momentarily.

"Vamos?" Marco whispered.

"Un minuto," responded Lázaro.

They remained in their positions for another eternal minute.

Lázaro held up three fingers, made sure the others saw them, and slowly brought each one down. At zero, Pedro and Freddy shot up, grabbed their oars, and rowed as fast as they could. Marco and Lázaro returned to their sideways positions.

Two shots.

Pedro ducked his head between his knees, pulled Freddy down with him, and saw Marco slide down. He hadn't felt the vibration of the shots hitting the water like last time, though the raft did shake because of their quick moves. He heard a gurgling sound behind him, and then it stopped.

Had their water keg been hit? No, no, flowing water was constant. He heard the sound again and felt a tug at his shirt. Lázaro!

Pedro spun from the waist up and, even in the dark, he knew. Lázaro had been shot and was trying to speak. Pedro turned around completely and leaned over his friend.

“Laza...” Pedro couldn’t get the word out.

“*Ay Dios mío,*” Freddy said as his hands trembled.

Marco sat up. “*Que?*”

“La...” Pedro tried again.

Marco didn’t need to hear another sound and nearly climbed over Freddy to get closer.

Lázaro reached out, found Pedro’s hand, and held it tightly. Then he managed to speak. “*Prométeme, que van a llegar a tierra libre.*” Lázaro made Pedro promise they’d reach the land of the free.

“*Sí, sí, te lo prometo,*” Pedro vowed.

Pedro had no time to apply any pressure to Lázaro’s chest, he couldn’t say goodbye, couldn’t thank him for having been such a good friend to him or for being the one who had put forth the most effort to plan their escape. Lázaro was gone within seconds.

Freddy and Marco grabbed the oars and began to row for their lives.

The morning sun was already blazing as Pedro opened his eyes and rose with a start. “Lázaro!” he called out.

“*Tranquilo, tranquilo. ¿No te acuerdas?*” Freddy told Pedro to calm down and asked if he remembered what had happened.

Of course, he remembered, but was hoping it had simply been a nightmare.

Pedro had placed his extra T-shirt over Lázaro's motionless face and had held the crucifix of the rosary tightly. He hadn't remembered the exact words to the prayers his grandmother had taught him as a small boy, so he and the others had simply asked God to bless their companion. However, Pedro could not recall how he ended up passed out on the other side of the raft at some point in the night.

Marco leaned his head back to indicate Lázaro's body was still there. Pedro saw they'd covered the body with a small tarp they'd brought to use as a flag to signal the Coast Guard. There was an odor, due to the hot sun, but not quite a stench. The wooden planks under Lázaro might be soaked with blood, and they all knew what animal that would attract.

It was time to follow through with the difficult oath the young men had made months ago. If it came to any of them not making it the whole way, they would bury him at sea and not risk sharks following the scent of blood and attacking the raft.

Pedro was relieved that, despite the distress, his friends had carried on, though now their plan was completely off balance. They were not sure how many miles they had rowed but were confident they could make it into international waters in the afternoon based on their initial calculations. According to the compass, they were still heading northeast toward Florida, which was the most vital factor.

"Marco, Freddy, *tengo esperanza que vamos a llegar bien.*" Pedro said he was hopeful they'd make it okay. Deep down, though, Pedro was anxious about the next obstacle. He sensed his friends felt the same, but nobody said so.

After losing Lázaro – the one who was the ultimate motivator and the strongest of them all – would they be able to fight the powerful currents of the Florida Straits and win?

What if they didn't make it at all? No, no, he couldn't think that. They would make it. They could not break their promise to Lázaro.

Pedro had been told a long time ago that when the Europeans arrived in America on giant ships, they were welcomed by the Statue of Liberty. She would not be expecting them, no, but he made a promise to go see her one day.

He didn't know whether they'd be rescued up by the U.S. Coast Guard halfway or whether they would have to make it to dry land on their own and desperately wished for the first scenario since the Gulf Stream did not provide a direct route in a northeastern direction to Florida. This powerful and possibly destructive stream was made of various currents and countercurrents, sending small boats and rafts near the Florida Keys – the desired destination – or toward the Gulf of Mexico that would most likely be fatal.

As he pedaled, Pedro heard the reverberation of conga drums in his head and visualized the majestic palm trees of his *Cubita linda*. He hoped there would be hundreds of the tall beauties to welcome them on the other side.

Adrift

Night fell. This meant it had been almost twenty-four hours on the water. There was no way they could tell how far they had travelled, and the disbelief over Lázaro's death weighed heavily in the small and often silent space between the three friends. They had to remain steadfast, calm, and alert, so they wouldn't crack under the pressures still awaiting them.

There were moments when everything was so still and dark that Pedro forgot they were on the ocean. He felt he was sleeping, then abruptly wake up to reality.

"The air feels humid," Pedro noted.

"I'm cold," Freddy said.

"*Coño*, I'm just hungry," Marco said.

They laughed and agreed that they all craved a homecooked meal. They ate some of the fruit they packed and drank water. They took turns relieving themselves into the water, then steered away as fast as they could. Their minds were consumed by how any action that might emit an odor—eating or peeing—would attract a shark. They hadn't dealt with other human waste just yet, as they were rationing their food, but that, too, would have to be done in the water.

After a couple of hours of darkness, they felt some raindrops and were relieved that it didn't turn to rain. Their luck did not last long, though. Sometime in the middle of the night, there was a torrential rain that lasted only ten minutes, the longest ten minutes, it seemed, as they huddled under their tarp but still felt chilled to the bone.

As daylight arrived, their spirits lifted with the warmth of the sun. They ate some more and were able to make gains because it was less hot than it had been the day before. As Freddy was at the

paddlewheel, and Pedro and Marco rowed in unison, they heard a clunk under the craft. It wasn't loud and didn't shake them, so they paid it no mind. Soon enough, there was confirmation of what the noise had been; a detached shark-bitten arm appeared next to them.

Before he could look way, Freddy gagged and could not hold in his vomit; thankfully, his face made it to over the edge in time to pollute the water and not the vessel. He still felt cold since the evening rain and feverish but did not want to complain. The other two gagged but did not react in any other way. They did notice that Freddy seemed pale and made him keep an extra shirt on, for fear of hypothermia.

As the day wore on, the sun was no longer soothing; it was fierce and the young men's lips were getting chapped, their eyes were dry and stinging from the salty sea air. They wanted to preserve the drinking water but were forced to rinse their eyes with some of it.

At dusk, Freddy, who had drifted off, awoke disoriented. "Where's Lazaro?" he asked. "He was just here. We were talking and laughing. His sister was here, too. She's so beautiful."

Pedro and Marco looked at one another, and, realizing Freddy was hallucinating, Pedro simply said, "No, he isn't here." Then he lied, and instead of reminding him that Lazaro was dead, he said, "Remember, he decided not to come?"

Marco added, "We saw them both the other night. But they aren't here now."

"Oh, yeah, that's right, I forgot," said Freddy shyly. Then he smiled and took a deep breath, as if he was simply lounging on a beach.

"Freddy, here, drink some water," Pedro suggested.

Pedro and Marco, now concerned for Freddy, ate fruit and peanuts, and drank a shot of rum each to gain strength and keep warm in the night, and tried their best to gain more distance. They kept their eyes on the compass, staring at it in the dim moonlight.

“Are we almost home? I’m hungry. Where are we going, anyway?” Freddy started to rise, as if he were simply stepping out of a car.

His friends grabbed him and set him back down. “No, no, no, we’re not there yet. Remember, we’re going on vacation to Miami? All the pretty *chicas* are waiting for us at the beach,” Pedro said.

“*Coño*, why didn’t we just take a plane?” Freddy asked.

Pedro and Marco couldn’t hold in their laughter. “You’re right. That would’ve been so much better,” said Marco.

“For now, just relax, okay, we’ll be there soon,” Pedro said.

“Okay, I’m tired. Will you wake me up when we get there?” Freddy asked.

“We will,” Pedro promised.

By morning, neither Pedro or Marco knew what day it was. Day three or day four? Pedro had vomited twice already as the sun was rising. He rinsed his face with sea water, except for his eyes, but the salt stung his already-chapped and bloody lips. Marco complained that his vision was blurry.

Pedro pulled out his rosary and, again not recalling any prayers properly, just repeated, “*Ay Dios mio, sálvanos*” and other variations of “Oh my God, save us.”

Marco soon did the same, and as the two mumbled in desperation, Freddy awoke. He was himself again; he knew exactly where they were and what was happening.

Instead of joining in the prayers, he simply started sobbing.

Blowhorns startled the three young men who were passed out. The sun was very bright, and the young men were unclear clear what afternoon they were waking up to. “United States Coast Guard, coming aboard!” was the last thing they remembered. They awoke in beds in a clinic at a detention center in South Florida; all three were connected to IVs and being treated for dehydration, severe sunburn, and bacterial infections.

About ten days later, Pedro and his two friends were released from the detention center and finally met their respective relatives, who exchanged phone numbers with one another. The three young men embraced as they said goodbye and went off with the strangers whom they would now call family.

Neither Here Nor There

Pedro went to live with his mother's sister, Marta, and her husband, Ramiro. Ramiro was the person who had been the warmest and most helpful to him, treating him like a son, though he had not known him before. He had driven to the processing center twice and inquired about Pedro before the three friends were finally released.

“We are okay with money, so if you need to rest, rest, and I will help you get work soon.”

Ramiro said on the fourth day when Pedro got out of bed at noon.

“I am sorry. I don't know what is wrong with me.”

“*Hijo*, you're a young man and think some rest will be enough after everything.”

“I haven't done anything strenuous and slept a lot in the clinic, I guess.” Pedro said.

“That is different. You were sick, recovering. Now you are in a new place and need to get used to things. It is okay, we understand.”

“*Gracias*, Tío.”

“I understand more than you think.”

“Oh?”

“Well, not about a raft escape, but about the fear from a horrible event. I was there when my father and my uncle were held at gunpoint at their cafeteria by Castro's army. They went door to door stripping people of businesses, as you must have heard about. That image, so many images, really, remained in my head for a long time.”

“Yes, of course. Everyone in the family, it seems, has experienced something bad.”

“Exactly, so we understand how it feels afterward. Just know that we like having you around, before you have to go to work and we won't have another person to talk to or watch

movies with, like we have been doing these last couple of days. I have two daughters, but it would be nice to have another man to do things with.”

“I like being here. It’s just....”

“This is not home.”

“Yeah,” Pedro said, then added, “I am sorry.” Pedro didn’t want to seem ungrateful.

“You don’t have anything to be sorry about. Of course, I hope with time you will think of this as home, until you make a new home for yourself somewhere else. Everything takes time.”

For that first week or so, Pedro continued to be withdrawn and exhausted. During the night, he would awake a few times and had trouble trying to block Lázaro’s death from his daily thoughts. He certainly didn’t want to forget his friend or dishonor his memory, but he didn’t want the images of those days on the raft to hold him back from living the new life he had yet to begin.

He didn’t have much of an appetite and only served himself small portions. But, with time, and whenever there was more than the daily meals with his aunt and uncle, Pedro had to refrain from gobbling down all the food on the plate in front of him. He knew there was plenty more in the pots, but, sometimes, he felt convinced there wouldn’t be more to replace it. He had to refrain from devouring it, as if it was going to disappear. Back in Cuba, everything was so scarce that a couple minutes of eating slowly, to make the food last, was all it took to finish a meal and still have room and a strong desire for a lot more food.

Pedro wasn’t sure why he had those moments when he would revert to not eating all he wanted because he feared there wouldn’t be fresh food to replace it later. He seemed to be existing in two places. Physically, he was in a world of abundance and beauty, and psychologically, he would sometimes be back in his previous life, one of scarcity, rundown

homes and streets, and beaten down spirits. That life was still too recent to ignore, Pedro knew, but realized that he needed to keep in mind what his uncle said about everything taking time.

Pedro became an active participant in the household; he assisted his aunt before and after dinner and worked in the yard with his uncle, when he was not working in the stockroom at the local pharmacy and taking ESL classes at the local high school two nights a week. He asked his uncle to speak to him in English sometimes, so the man obliged in his choppy way whenever he remembered.

He didn't ask the same of his aunt because she was always too concerned about cooking and cleaning and being in control of almost everything, and, at times, treating Pedro like a child since her own daughters were already out of the house.

"Don't worry about Marta," Ramiro recommended. "She is not the same after our *niñas* got married. She likes to be the boss, you know, she doesn't feel right if people don't need her."

One Saturday night, Pedro arrived home from going out with some of his coworkers and found his room decorated with a new bed comforter and pillows, and his pants and shirts ironed and hanging in a closet that had been emptied out of old things they'd been keeping there.

Did his aunt think he was going to be staying there indefinitely? Pedro had made it clear he didn't want to be a burden and wanted to be independent as soon as he could. Mainly, he didn't want to remain in the place he held in the family, as the novelty, like a helpless zoo animal people watched and probably pitied. Sure, a family he had not met until recently, who really didn't know him, but still, family.

His several cousins, most in his own age group and a little older, had been nice enough when he arrived. He was able to communicate easily in their native language – Spanglish. From family gatherings, it became clear they lived worlds apart from his own experiences and goals.

He just wanted to survive and help his family back home, but he got the impression they wanted to make a lot of money and talk about it often, own a nice house, a BMW or Mercedes Benz, send their young kids to private schools, and spend weekends on boats, or on Isla Morada, Marco Island, Sanibel, or wherever; he didn't really know where these places were or what people did there. Still, he couldn't blame them. In fact, he downright envied them.

Pedro had even met an attractive young woman at a cousin's law-school graduation party, which his aunt insisted, more like forced, him to attend. The woman from North Carolina immediately began talking to him, actually seemed interested in him, and he was able to keep up with her English. He eventually mentioned he had recently begun working at the pharmacy.

“Wow, did you study to be a pharmacist in Cuba and already get a job so fast? That's impressive.”

“No, I work at the pharmacy, in the back, and I organize the shelves.”

“Oh,” she said. She went silent and looked around for a distraction.

Pedro wasn't embarrassed of his job; he had nice coworkers and a fair boss, so it was too bad she was embarrassed for him. “It is okay, you can go. Go talk to one of those guys. He drives a *really nice* car.”

“Sorry,” she said as she walked away.

As the blonde reached the French doors that led to the pool area, he called to her, “And I make minimum wage, if you want to know.” He wanted to add that he had read more history and science books than most people he knew, but that did not add up to a fancy car.

Pedro wasn't in her league and probably would never attract a career-oriented woman's interest, and he had to accept that. After all, his cousins and their friends had attended college, medical, business, or law school, while he had attended two years at the *universidad* in Havana to study minerals, an area of study forced on students by the government, which, while interesting, was impractical; they'd worked hard at their chosen careers, while he was digging up pebbles as his stomach growled from hunger. In the end, his *primos* had earned these rewards, while he had *absolutamente nada* to show for his past efforts.

Not once, though, had they invited him to take part in social outings with them, not that he had much of an interest in being on a boat. On the one hand, he was relieved because he didn't know how he would react to being on water again, considering Lazaro's death or the other obstacles he and his friends had faced during those long days and dreadful nights on the raft.

He hadn't spoken to them about the experience, and it seemed they were reluctant to ask. Only his aunt and uncle knew the three young men had been treated at a clinic for severe sunburns and dehydration before being released.

Still, he hadn't been given the opportunity to decline an invitation or propose an alternative, like a barbeque in their backyards or to eat his new favorite food, pizza from the Pizza Hut.

Welcome to America

Miami, FL, November 1991

“Next *jueves*, we are having a big party,” Ramiro announced on a Sunday morning in late November. “Come with us to the *supermercado* to buy all the food.”

A party on a Thursday seemed odd to Pedro. Plus, he had work, of that he was certain. He had only been at the job three weeks and couldn't ask for a day off, and for a party no less.

“No, no, no work, it is a holiday, it is *Sangivin'*. You will get out early or have da whole day off. The *Americanos* eat turkey with something called *estuffin'* but not together. We put many things in da dry bird. We eat chicken and *puerco* too, because turkey is boring and not everybody like it. Maybe twenty-five people are coming.”

“Why we are having a party?” Pedro asked, still not understanding why so many people were coming over on a Thursday, and it wasn't *Navidad* yet.

“To give thanks to God for *libertad*, *Sanks givin'*,” Ramiro said slowly. “Maybe something about *Cristóbal Colon* and the Indians and the Pilgrims who came to America. Something like that. Your *tia* has little dolls with hats and feathers, and a happy turkey, but anyway, we have a big party. And it is your first *Americano* holiday, so we want to make this party special for you.”

It sounded nice to give thanks to God for liberty, but Pedro knew his history and was pretty sure Christopher Columbus had not been the one to attain liberty for the United States. Still, he agreed to go food shopping with them and participate in this American party.

They drove into a giant lot packed with cars and people honking when someone cut in front of them. Eventually, they found a spot in a back row, casually walked, grabbed a cart along

the way, and continued to the front of the giant building with the green letters that read *Publix*. Two glass doors opened like magic, and Pedro's dark eyes froze in surprise.

His aunt and uncle realized this was the first time Pedro had gone shopping at a large busy store. They'd only taken him to the much smaller Cuban market and to Sears to buy him clothes his first day at home, plus, the store had been half empty.

"*Está bien*," his uncle said, and hurried through the automatic doors to prove it was fine.

Reassured, Pedro followed and gave a nervous laugh, then walked ahead to act casual.

"Here is the list, I'm going to go get the *pavo*," Marta said as she hurried to the turkey section.

Pedro watched her as she left, and then his eyes took in everything in front of him. He had never seen so much food in his life, so many colors, fruit, vegetables, thin hoses watering those vegetables, a giant basket loaded with orange and yellow produce, and a poster of a turkey with a speech bubble that said, *Gobble, gobble! Everything is on sale!*

To the right there was a wall made of cases of beer, with bags and bags of potato chips on the floor and posters of American footballs attached to the boxes of beer. Some bright lights, like at a sports stadium, peeked from behind the beer wall. Pedro froze, again, and didn't know how to pretend he was okay. He felt his blood drain from his face, and his black hair might have been standing on end.

"*Que pasa?*"

"I can't be here, it's too much. I've never seen so much food in one place." He put his hand on his stomach, almost gagged, and turned around.

"*Vamos*," his uncle said as he led him out the doors.

They continued on the walkway toward a small sandwich and coffee place, where they could sit at a table inside. Pedro apologized, saying he didn't know what happened to him, and that he didn't want them to think he wasn't appreciative of all they did, getting delicious food, having a party.

"*Ay, olvidate.*" Ramiro gestured in a "forget-about-it" way. He noticed an old woman wanting to eavesdrop on them, so he switched to English. "If you don't want party, we don't have party. I call everybody and make excuses. They can cook their own stupid turkey. Marta likes to have parties, I just want the day off. It's okay, we want you to feel happy. Party, no party, it's okay. I just bring *Mama* over, and, and ..."

"What?"

"Marta was going to tell you today... but okay, I tell you. She wanted to invite your *abuelo* - Rubén. We have not seen him, ooh, for years, the last time somebody died. He comes to at those events, surprises everybody, then disappears. He drinks like crazy, so we don't know what he is up to or if the phone number we have is the correct one. Anyway, he is old and Marta's father and your grandfather... she wants to know if you want to see him...to meet him."

"O, *mi abuelo*...." Pedro's maternal grandfather was hardly mentioned back home, since he'd left the family so many years ago, and nothing had been said about him since Pedro's arrival. "He is still alive?"

"*Coño,*" his uncle cursed. "That *sanava beesh* will live to be a one hundred!" They both laughed.

"If she wants to him to come, then okay. I want to meet him."

Pedro had never known his father's parents. His paternal grandfather had already died when his parents married, and the grandmother, who'd seen Pedro as an infant, lived in another

province and died when Pedro was a teenager. He'd only had his *abuela* back home, so yes, he wanted to meet the man who'd fathered his mother and aunts and uncles.

Ramiro left Pedro at the café and returned to grocery-shopping with his wife, and on the way home they agreed to tone down the gathering to only their daughters and their husbands, Ramiro's mother, and Rubén, along with whatever person the old womanizer brought with him – a “nurse” perhaps.

On Thanksgiving, his *abuelo* was the last to arrive, and, as expected, with a female in tow. This time, a Dominican woman in her forties who cooked and cleaned for him.

“*Rubén*, this is your grandson, *Pedro, el hijo de Teresa*,” Ramiro's outstretched arm indicated as he pointed to Pedro. The two men stood in front of the couch where Pedro and his cousins' husbands sat watching football, and Pedro felt his heart reach his throat.

The dark and lean man, despite a couple of arthritic fingers, commanded attention. His hazel eyes firmly held Pedro's gaze. His dark, wavy hair had gray streaks, was held back by aviator sunglasses, and extended beyond his shirt collar. He wore a starched white *guayabera* with light colored khakis, and brown loafers without socks. The man, who was almost eighty, looked as if he was going to cruise on a yacht with some super models.

Pedro stood, almost stumbled, found his way to his grandfather, and extended his hand. “*Mucho gusto...*” It's a pleasure, was all that came out. Should he call the man *abeulo* or Rubén?

The man hesitated in taking his hand at first, then shook it as a stranger would, no pat on the shoulder, or half-hug. “I am Rubén Calvo, *tu abuelo*.”

Pedro responded in like. “I am Pedro Olivares, your grandson.”

An awkward silence, despite the TV, extended for several seconds. One of Ramiro's sons-in-law stood up and asked Ruben if he wanted something to drink. "Whiskey, *doble*," the old man said and quickly followed the young man to the bar at the corner of the room.

Ramiro gave Pedro a pat on the shoulder, and said, "It's okay, he is strange."

That was obvious, but why did Pedro still feel rejected? After all, he was well aware the man seemed to have strained relationships with all seven, or who knows how many, of his grown children. Why did Pedro think the man would treat him in a friendly manner?

He quickly grabbed his bottle of *cerveza* from the coffee table and sneaked out through the French doors that led to the back patio. He would linger there until dinner was ready, which Ramiro had promised would be soon, since Rubén was unpredictable and known to make unannounced appearances and swift departures.

Rubén's Dominican companion parked herself in front of the TV with a plate of food as the family sat around the large dining room table.

"Oye, Pedro," Rubén said. "You speak English? You work already? You got girlfriend?"

After the old guy got his answers, he asked the other two young men about their jobs and seemed quite impressed that one was a CPA and the other was an architect. "Pedro, these two Americanos are good *ejemplos* for you."

Pedro wasn't sure he could set his sights so high just yet. He described his current plans to save money, take some business courses, and work with his uncle in construction management.

"*Bueno*, okay, but better that you have a job where you don't get your hands too dirty."

Pedro was surprised by the sarcasm, while Ramiro mockingly examined his fingers, which weren't dirty at all, and shook his head.

Marta interjected that her nephew and husband got along well, and that if Pedro wanted to work with his uncle, well, that was his decision. Ramiro took a sip of beer and signaled his wife not to engage the old man further on the topic.

“Okay, okay, tay ke reasy, everybody. Wasa matta wis you? Just talking to *mi nieto*.” He emphasized *my grandson* like if Pedro was his possession.

Marta and Ramiro's daughter took turns deflecting the attention to their jobs and such, but it wasn't working, because soon enough the old man addressed Pedro again.

“*Y tu madre?* Why doesn't she come?”

Everybody knew the answer to that question. Pedro's mother was not going to leave her husband behind as he got sicker and sicker in jail. Everyone at the table was surprised the sensitive subject was brought up.

“I don't know if you know, but my father ...”

“*Sí, sí*, I know everything.”

“Well, my mother intends to stay...”

“What a fool, and what an idiot your father was. Try to win against the *hijo de puta* Castro? Ha! *Idiotas!*”

Chairs screeched as Pedro, Ramiro, and Marta stood up, while the old man remained calm and collected. “*Papá, por favor,*” Marta begged.

“I can't believe this,” one daughter muttered, and her husband Jimmy responded with, “You weren't kidding when you said he was an ass, and my Spanish isn't that good.”

Marta could not hold in the tears and rushed to the kitchen, and her daughters followed. She murmured, "Same as always, same as always."

"I will not allow you to insult my parents. My father was *valiente*."

The old man shrugged his shoulders, as if saying, "I was only expressing my opinion."

"You were the coward and abandoned everyone... and.... it seems like you have problems with everyone. I don't know you, but you aren't giving me a good first impression. I think you are..."

Ramiro's old mother had not said a word during the meal, leaving the arguing to the others, but she was easily able to finish Pedro's thought and looked the old man straight in the eyes. "*Usted es un gran comemierda!*" She called Rubén a giant asshole.

Pedro, his uncle, and the sons-in-laws offered a collective look of respect to the old woman. She was the only one with the balls to set the man straight.

Pedro straightened and said, "*Gracias, Nidia.*" Then he turned at his grandfather and said, "*Adios, Rubén.*"

Pedro's grandfather called out to the woman who had accompanied him and stood up slowly. "Orisel, it's time to go. *La fiesta se acaba!*"

Pedro's "Welcome to America" party was over.

Category-5 Effects

Miami, FL August 23 – 24, 1992

When Pedro got home on Saturday evening, his answering machine was blinking. There were three messages, which had all come in during the time it had taken him to wash and dry his clothes at the laundromat.

The first message was from his cousin Marisela begging him to come to her parents' house for the hurricane, so she and her husband wouldn't have to deal with her mother's hysterics alone.

The second was from Tío Ramiro telling him to come over for the hurricane tomorrow and to arrive early to help him take protective measures.

Pedro already knew who the third one would be from – Tía Marta, in a frenzy, about this Andrew that Pedro had not heard enough details about. "Come *mañana*, you can't be alone. *La familia* needs to be together, blah, blah, blah."

He returned the call to his aunt first to assure her that he would be there early to help his uncle. "Go to *el seben-leben* and get those *gato-ray*," she requested. "You know, what the sporty people drink? There is no more bottled water at *el supermercado*. We need a lot of water. Go now and get as many as you can. And some *yunky* things, like cookies and potato chips, in case I can't cook."

"Sí, tia, I will go in a little while," said Pedro.

"I am going to cook a big meal tomorrow, so we can eat a lot before we have no electricity."

Were they supposed to be like the bears and eat like crazy and then hibernate during a hurricane when it was brutally hot?

“You want shrimp enchilada or pork chops?” Before Pedro could answer, his aunt said, “I will make both.” Pedro stopped listening when she started talking about everyone taking showers and then filling the tubs with water and some other emergency action. See you *mañana*. Bring all your valuables with you.”

Terrible storms often passed through the Caribbean islands, where people didn’t have plywood or extra food to properly prepare; yet they survived somehow, so Pedro wasn’t all too concerned, since obviously his relatives’ houses here were not dilapidated like so many in Cuba, Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

Pedro could place his valuables in one plastic grocery bag and pack all his clothes in one suitcase with room to spare, so he went ahead and packed quite a bit. He rushed to 7-Eleven, where a TV blared with panic over how Hurricane Andrew was going to be like nothing they’d seen in decades.

Pedro bought snacks and Gatorade, as his aunt requested, though he was sure his aunt and uncle’s refrigerator and cabinets had enough food for a few people to last a long while, though it would mostly spoil if the electricity went out.

The first part of Sunday was hectic as he helped his uncle secure metal backyard furniture to the fences with electrical wire.

“Tío, won’t they blow away and break a window?” Pedro asked.

“Try to pull this,” his uncle dared. The metal rocker wouldn’t budge. “This thing will stay tied till *Jesucristo* comes back.”

They carried a few large potted plants inside and tied the doors of the aluminum shed closer, as there was a tiny gap where the handle had gone loose. Ramiro had already fastened items, like the lawnmower and boxes of tools and other supplies, to each other inside the shed.

“Make things heavier by putting them together, then they don’t blow away,” Ramiro explained.

They parked the cars between the house and the fences and helped the old lady next door secure a few items in her yard before her son picked her. Then Ramiro asked Pedro to help him build a contraption to keep the front entrance – two French doors – secure against the wind. Three pieces of wood bracketed together formed a right angle that would be placed against the door and under the knobs.

The problem was that one bracket had to be drilled into the floor, and Marta would freak out of she thought the Spanish tiles would be damaged. He carefully explained it would be between tiles and nothing would crack, and that he’d fill the hole immediately after. She reluctantly acquiesced, though she did comment he looked like a *loco* with his hair standing on end and doing these crazy things.

“When this house is the only one that doesn’t blow away, you will know you have married the smartest man. Call me crazy now, but you will see.”

Lastly, they wanted to catch the stray cat Marta had been feeding for more than a year, so they could put her inside; the skinny black cat with yellow-green eyes was aloof and only made an appearance when she was hungry, but when she saw Pedro she’d always come.

“You look for her and call her. That *gata* loves you. She only uses us for food.” Before long, Mimi was eating tuna bites out of Pedro’s hand and followed him straight into the laundry room that faced the side of the house.

One of Marta and Ramiro's daughters – Marisela – and her husband Jimmy came over; they'd simply locked their small townhouse, which they were presently renting, and brought their jewelry and photo albums with them. Ramiro's mother had arrived that morning with her yappy dog, who nobody liked. "If this hurricane doesn't kill us, that stupid dog will," Pedro and his cousin joked as they checked that all the flashlights worked.

The other daughter and her husband insisted on staying in the home they had recently purchased; her in-laws, who lived on Miami Beach had been ordered to evacuate, were going to be there, too. Naturally, Marta was upset that both daughters could not be there with them, but she calmed down eventually.

They feasted and cleaned up the kitchen and filled up the tubs with water.

"Let's join Bryan Norcross, our chief meteorologist, for the latest update on Hurricane Andrew...." announced the newscaster.

Marisela insisted they keep NBC news on, because this guy was the best. The light-haired man, about forty-years-old, spoke with authority and wore a button-down shirt; he had removed his tie hours before and appeared to be sweating from the stress. He reminded viewers to keep their battery-operated radios tuned to their station in case the power went out, promising he'd be there the whole night.

The TV would remain on until the power went off.

As Marta and Ramiro's mother, with the yappy dog on her lap, sat on the two rocking chairs in the family room, everyone else looked out the windows. The wind was so strong, it was actually visible. Not exactly like a tornado funnel, but it was certainly as forceful, appearing to land and

rebound upward. Thunder shook the house, and the lightning that followed was purple and lit up the night sky. It was like fireworks with only one color.

The three palms in front of the house swayed violently; the branches went from looking like umbrellas to going straight up as if they were being electrocuted, as the trunks bent to the insistent wind's will.

The neighbors across the street had only bought some food and simply planned to lock their doors, according to what the woman told Marta earlier in the day. The back doors of their van hadn't locked properly in years and was exposed to the wind instead of facing the house; soon enough one door flew open and blew furiously.

"*Coño*, don't fly this way. You see, we can protect your house, but you cannot do anything about the *idiotas* who don't do anything. Then their stuff causes damage to other peoples' houses," said Ramiro.

Within moments, colorful kid toys that were in the van shot out like missiles through the open door, and then the other door blew open. They all watched waiting to see if the doors would detach and they did. They soared several yards up and went with the wind, followed by two plastic children's chairs and a small flower pot by the front door that lodged itself into the side hedges of the front yard.

"I think we're going to have a problem with the shed," Pedro noted.

"*Sí*, I think so, too. Some air will get through that *mierda* door." They rushed to look out into the backyard. The shed's thin roof was moving, as if taking deep breaths in and out, before one panel came off and blew away. "Don't worry, the lawnmower and the other things aren't going anywhere," said Ramiro. And he was right; not one more thing flew out of that shed.

The backyard shared a fence with a strip of land where a long row of electricity poles stood; they swayed, and sparks went off at the top. The house lights had been flickering for a while, before completely going out, while the phone lines still worked. As they looked out into the backyard, house by house across the way went dark as theirs had.

They all sat in the family room with only one flashlight on as the wind roared louder and louder, and the thunder made the house shake.

“*Coño*,” Ramiro cursed. “I don’t think my genius invention is strong enough.” He rushed to the front entrance and could feel a little wind through the French doors. “Pedro. Jimmy, let’s push the table to hold the wood in place. The wind is too strong. I can feel it through the gap.”

The three men quickly pulled out the chairs and dragged the heavy dining room table into place against the triangular contraption securing the doors, then they lifted four chairs and set them on top of the table to weigh it down some more.

A loud crash was heard from the kitchen, and Pedro rushed toward it with a flashlight.

The blade of a shovel was halfway in the window, and though the window wasn’t completely shattered, there were large cuts in the glass. Pedro and Jimmy covered them with duct tape to prevent the glass from breaking more, but the pane seemed loose, so they taped it along its edges.

Car alarms blared, and the *abuela*’s dog barked.

“*Papi*, I think there’s a leak! I just felt drops, here by the couch,” said Marisela.

They lifted their flashlights and saw two bubbles the size of quarters.

“We can’t put a tarp or blanket, it won’t hold, or it’ll bring down a piece of the ceiling, but it needs to be a lot of water for that to happen. We have to let it drip,” Ramiro explained.

“Let’s move these two big plants under it. The soil will soak up the water.”

“I think we will be safest in the bathrooms, the tile, doesn’t lead outside, small window...” said Jimmy.

“*Vamos, familia! Tres y tres.*” Ramiro led Marta and his mother, yappy dog in her arms, to one bathroom and Pedro, Marisela, and Jimmy headed to the other, only separated by the master bedroom.

Several loud screeches stopped Pedro in his tracks. It sounded like a baby in agonizing pain. “*La gata!*” Pedro realized that Mimi the cat was crying. “I need to go get her.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Marisela.

He’d have to pass through the kitchen, which now felt like a wind tunnel.

“Mimi, Mimi!” Pedro called.

With one hand, he opened the laundry room’s door and aimed the flashlight in the direction of the meows with the other. The cat was on top of the shelf that held laundry detergents and cleaning supplies. Pedro descended the two steps and immediately stepped into a small stream of water coming in from the door that led outside.

He grabbed a bunch of cleaning rags and placed them at the threshold. He reached up for the cat, shaking and wet. He placed the flashlight on the washing machine to grab her with both hands. He placed her securely under his arm and took back the flashlight.

Pedro joined his cousins in the hall bathroom. The cat remained on his lap for a few minutes as Pedro sat on the tile floor against the door, then she settled on the bath mat between the three of them. It was weirdly quiet in the bathroom, because the only window was small and shaded by tree branches, Pedro assumed.

For a little while, the three young people tried making jokes to pass the time, then decided to turn off the flashlight to preserve its battery. Eventually, the wind could be heard again, then it stopped.

In that silence, Pedro began hearing voices – his friends’ voices, Lazaro’s voice, the sound of the shots that killed his friend, the shouts of the Coast Guard. He was reminded of the blackness of the sea at night, where a sound could be just about anything: a shark, another raft, a drowned body floating by. With his elbows on his knees, he placed his hands over his ears to turn off the noises. This only made his head spin, as if he was actually on a rough sea.

“Pedro, *que pasa?*” Marisela asked.

He didn’t respond.

She moved closer and tapped one of his arms.

“Are you feeling sick?” she asked.

“Sick, no,” Pedro finally said. “I don’t know. I’m hearing things... the waves on the ocean... and my friends... and seeing the bad things I saw... I feel like I am on the...”

“Oh shit, the raft.” Jimmy finished his sentence.

Marisela patted Pedro’s shoulder as he began to shake. “Of course, this would bring back memories. I’m sorry, *primo*. But you survived, and we are going to be fine now,” Marisela said.

The cat squeezed itself between them and rubbed her head against Pedro’s leg.

“We’re safe here. Listen, no wind, maybe it’s over,” Jimmy added.

“I know, I know,” Pedro finally responded.

“You know what the best thing is?” Marisela tried to lighten the mood.

“*Que?*” Pedro asked.

“We are here with the cat and not the obnoxious dog!”

The three of them laughed. Pedro caressed the cat, and she flipped over so he could scratch her belly.

“I think Mimi should go live with you,” Marisela suggested. “She doesn’t like the rest of us, and it’s clear you’re good for each other.”

“*Sí*, that would be nice...for both of us.” Pedro agreed.

Marisela turned on the portable radio, and Bryan Norcross’ steady voice was still there, keeping everyone calm through the darkness.

Lost in Paradise

Pedro fell back on the bed, still in his fruit-stained polo work shirt, and tried to stop the voices and images in his head. This was the first time they had appeared during waking hours. The other times they occurred in the form of a nightmare while he slept or tried to anyway.

The first time he woke up in fear was when his dead friend Lazaro called to him in a dream, “*Ayúdame, Ayúdame!* This water is taking me down. Help me!” The voice was then accompanied by the image of Lazaro in dark, rough water below Pedro, who was leaning over the edge of a large luxurious yacht.

Why was Lazaro in the water? He had not died by drowning; he’d been shot twice a short while after they had begun their escape on the raft. They had buried him at sea, so maybe that’s why he was calling out to him from the water now. And why was Pedro aboard a yacht?

Certainly, the four young men who’d set out together were not under the impression that arriving in America would suddenly place them in the lap of luxury. Miami was paradise, sure, with beautiful and stylish women, expensive cars, and great beach weather all year long, but it wasn’t a paradise for someone who was struggling to survive in a new world.

Another time, the voice, and then the accompanying image, had been of his father, pale with purple blotches on his face and hands, begging him to return and asking why he had abandoned them.

Pedro had left specifically to better assist his mother, grandmother, and aunt. Yes, there had been times when he felt like a failure, mistakenly, he realized. It was unrealistic to think that he would could instantly help his family with money and American goods.

Of course, his mother had been heartbroken by his departure, but she understood. She would have followed her siblings to Miami so many years ago, but her husband had still been of

military age and not allowed to leave, and then he was imprisoned. And after Pedro was born, Teresa had been even more reluctant to leave, although she must've known it was impossible for father and son to nurture a normal relationship between prison visits. Too many reasons had kept her behind, but she wanted her son to have a better life and a prosperous future in a free country, at least that is what she had told Pedro.

Now, Pedro, at twenty-six, wasn't sure if that prosperous future was a possibility for him. At this point, almost two years later, he had yet to make enough money to help them in earnest, but that was the purpose behind working two jobs – as a stockperson at the local Walgreen's pharmacy, Monday through Saturday, and as a shake-maker at *La Casa de los Jugos*, the house of juices, until one in the morning on Friday and Saturday nights.

From his current apartment, or rather a room with a tiny kitchen area and bathroom, he could actually walk to both places, something people in Miami never did. Before that, his uncle had been carting him almost everywhere and was now going to give Pedro the last two hundred dollars for the used car he'd been saving up for. Ramiro had gotten him a *very used* car soon after he arrived and got his license, but it turned out to be, how do the Americans say? A lemon.

Now, at almost two in the morning, he could not blame anybody else for his situation; he simply felt lonely among his own relatives. He was exhausted, smelly, and lost. And chunky and out of shape. He now weighed thirty pounds more than when he arrived.

Pedro had not seen and, sadly, did not want to see his grandfather again. In the darkness, he decided that he would not force relationships that just weren't there, with cousins or his own grandfather. He liked his coworkers and his classmates in his ESL class, so he decided he would nurture those friendships.

Pedro got up from the bed and slid out of off his stinky work clothes. He went to the bathroom and stood for a while under the hot shower. He promised himself that first thing in the morning, he would go back to what he and his friends did while preparing for their escape – he would do push-ups again. A lot of them.

Too Good to Be True

1994

Although Pedro, Marco, and Freddie had formed a brotherly bond, it became harder and harder to get together in Miami, as they were no longer able to just walk to each other's homes. Freddie had moved down from his cousins' house in Tampa to Miami and was living with a girlfriend, but, still, the three young men had ended up in three different parts of the city and were trying to juggle more than one job. Pedro was also attending night school.

Freddie put forth the most effort to keep in touch, organizing get-togethers, and so on. Sure, they were all busy, but how hard was it to make time on a Saturday or Sunday once in a while?

Apparently, it was hard for Marco, who recently told them he only worked Monday through Friday and that he no longer had to have a second job like the others. Last time Pedro and Freddie spoke on the phone, they both mentioned that Marco had been kind of vague about the work he was doing at his office job.

He said he was making *buen dinero*; the others didn't know what amounted to good money since they had been holding down two jobs for a while and not living the good life like most other Miamians, nor did they know what Marco meant by "filling out forms for different companies."

They also were kind of annoyed that Marco never invited them to the parties his boss would throw at his mansion in the ritzy Coco Plum neighborhood. Marco had mentioned that *el jefe* would host these gatherings once a month and that employees would bring family and friends, and that other weekends he'd take people out on his yacht to Key Largo or Isla Morada.

They did wonder if Marco was simply showing off, but they doubted he'd blow them off if he didn't actually have so many social activities.

Pedro was surprised to hear from Marco late on a Friday night.

"I want to talk to you about working with me. Part-time. You don't have to come to the office all the time, only for training and picking up papers; you can fill out forms at your house."

"No time for another job," said Pedro. Working with papers instead of being on his feet all day was inviting, but it might also be boring.

"If you do this, you don't need those two jobs. Keep the one you like more."

"Can you tell me more? I might be interested."

"Hard to explain, but it's easy. I would just have to show you in person, train you."

"Sounds okay. I can meet you Friday after 4. That's the only day I get out early."

"Okay, brother, Friday is fine. I can give you the address of the office now and you call me on Thursday night to tell me you are coming for sure."

Pedro had to explore his options and make more money but knew he could say no if he didn't like the job. He called Freddy immediately to see if Marco had contacted him.

"Sí, like two hours ago. I said I was fine with what I had right now. Ceci's job as a dental hygienist pays good, and we made a big decision... I hadn't told you yet, but... I'm going to study to be a nurse." Freddy laughed. "I know that's a woman job, but not anymore. Men are nurses, too. I am going to start classes soon."

"*Coño*, that's good. You and Ceci will have a good life together; you'll always have work. Ceci cleaning teeth and you cleaning sick people's *culos*."

"Okay, okay, make jokes. Nurses do a lot more than clean butts, but, yeah, I guess I'll be doing gross things. But I have a good feeling about this. I think it'll mean something."

Pedro wanted to do something that would be meaningful, but he didn't know exactly what; he'd been too busy to think about making such an extreme change in his life. He was very happy that Freddy and his girlfriend had figured things out. Maybe this job with Marco would bring about a positive change. He certainly wouldn't lose anything by trying.

The following Friday, Pedro slowed down the car as he looked for the address. This was the first time he was driving in Hialeah by himself. Miami people detested going to Hialeah, not only because of the traffic, which, of course, was a Miami thing, too, but also because addresses didn't make much sense and you'd spend way too much time being lost before finally arriving at your destination.

After driving past and then being on the wrong side of the street, he finally parked in the back lot of a two-story white building in a strip mall, and then walked around to the front entrance. The building's sign read: *5-Star Medi-Services*.

Two doors down, an old man was selling watermelons, mangos, and avocados. He would love to dig into a sweet juicy mango, but it was impossible to do so without staining your shirt unless you were leaning over the sink. Maybe he'd buy one on his way out.

Pedro pulled on one of the darkened front doors, but it was locked, then he noticed the intercom and pressed the call button.

He told the receptionist he was there to see Marco Portuondo.

Within seconds, Pedro found himself in the lobby with a glass reception desk and leather chairs and a coffee table with magazines for visitors. He was asked to sit and wait. Pedro instantly felt relaxed as he sat on the cushioned soft leather.

The receptionist made a phone call, and in a few moments, Marco came out of the elevator located behind the set of leather seats.

“Glad you could make it,” Marco said. He wore dark blue tailored pants, a silk light blue shirt with the first button undone, and brown soft leather loafers.

“*Coño*, looking good!” exclaimed Pedro.

Marco laughed. “Business has been *buenisimo*. And I treated myself to a new wardrobe to celebrate. *Vamos*, let’s go up to the office.”

They took the elevator up and Pedro was impressed by this set-up as well. Four dark wooden desks and leather chairs. A kitchen with a refrigerator, sink, and a coffeemaker.

“Sit here and let me explain how this works.”

“Okay, let me write the steps down.” Pedro wanted to do a thorough job.

Marco slid a few files stacked in front of him toward Pedro and a list of patients on another printout. He pushed his chair from the other side of the desk to where Pedro was sitting.

“First, you look up the name here, and then find the patient’s number in this column of the form here, what they were treated for, what equipment they needed – wheelchair, bathtub chairs, cane – here are the codes.” He gave Pedro a moment to take notes and then continued. “Then print all the names, account number, and codes in this reimbursement form. Then, take this rubber stamp and stamp this bottom line with the facility signature.”

“That’s it?” Pedro was puzzled.

“That’s it,” said Marco. “For the pile with the red dots. This one with the blue dots involves the same steps.” He separated the bottom half from the pile. “But a different stamp at the bottom. I wrote down what color goes with what stamp on this front sheet.”

Pedro repeated the steps to Marco to make sure he understood the process.

“Okay, do one,” Marco said. Pedro was able to complete the first one in less than two minutes. “*Perfecto*. When can you finish by? Can you bring the files back on Wednesday or

Thursday? It should only take a couple of hours, two hours, maybe. If you want to do the work here, that's fine. Whatever works for you."

"Okay, Wednesday is good."

"*Perfecto*, and I can pay you in cash. Two hundred dollars per batch. If there are more papers, I think I can pay you a little more."

Pedro didn't want to show his surprise at the pay, so he just said, "Yeah, okay. I'll do a good job. I thought it was going to be more complicated."

Marco chuckled. "No, it's not that complicated. But you do have to be careful and be detail oriented. Cover up the other columns so you don't mix up numbers. And go over each entry twice. If we make a mistake on one number, it will start this whole chain of questions and more paperwork and a headache from the health department. We just want to make everything easy for everybody. *Comprende?*"

"*Sí, jefe.*"

They both laughed.

"I'm not the boss, but I'll take the compliment."

As Pedro walked away with his folders in a shiny briefcase, he couldn't help but marvel at Marco's good fortune. He had found a way to make good money in America, not have to get dirty or suffer from back issues from a strenuous job, and dress professionally while working in a stylish office.

Freddy was going to be a nurse, Marco was not the boss yet but he on his way, and Pedro, well, he didn't know where he was headed, though getting paid good money for easy work was certainly a step in the right direction.

How far had they all come? It wasn't that long ago that they were scrawny and hungry from the food rations in Cuba, waiting in line for hours for a paltry supply of potatoes, beans, and eggs. They didn't give out mangos in those lines back home, so Pedro purchased three of them as soon as he walked out of Marco's office building.

The following week, Pedro delivered the batch of folders to the office and was assigned another set. These involved the same process but two different facility signature stamps. As promised, Marco paid him cash, and said this next batch would earn him an extra fifty dollars because there were some more files.

"By the way, my *jefe* said to invite you to a party he's having on Sunday afternoon. We will just to hang out by the pool. Around one o'clock. Can you come? I can pick you up."

"Yeah, I could come."

"Dress nice. Nobody actually goes into the pool, so you don't have to bring a swimsuit." Marco said.

Pedro had certainly been in pools since arriving in Miami, but always remained in the shallow end. He knew how to swim, sure, but since the raft days, he didn't care for deeper waters at all, and didn't want to be in a pool with a bunch of strangers.

Pedro was excited to finally meet this rich boss of Marco's and see his mansion and eat and drink with the rich people that would be there. He thanked his friend for the work and for the invitation. He left in disbelief at how easy this job was, as he held the briefcase with one hand and kept the other in his pocket gripping all the twenty-dollar bills.

When Sunday arrived, Pedro wore some new knock-off Ray-Ban sunglasses he'd purchased with some of the cash he'd earned that week, a white polo shirt and tan linen pants,

and his nicest flip-flops, the most common shoe wear in Miami, no matter the season. When he got into Marco's car, he noticed his friend's sunglasses and how they probably weren't knock-offs and wondered how much Marco was getting paid if Pedro was getting paid two hundred dollars for only two hours of work. It didn't appear like there was any drug-dealing going on in that office, but obviously there was a lot of money to be made in healthcare services.

When they arrived at the mansion in Coco Plum, Pedro felt as if he was part of a Hollywood movie, with young men parking the cars for the guests, waiters with trays of champagne at the front door, and large pieces of art in the living room and all the way to the back, where a giant pool with a colorful ceramic tile wall bordered it on one end and three grills and three bars were set up on the grass lawn. Small white tables with four chairs a piece, most already full of guests, were scattered about.

All this extravagance made Pedro wonder if, no, it seemed very likely that Andres Martinez-Tuñon – Marco's *jefe* – was involved in something much more serious than medical equipment rentals.

Pedro ate appetizers of all kinds and had shrimp kebobs, something he'd never heard of, and grilled sausages. He had two mojitos and bubbly water. Marco stayed with him only for a few minutes then went to mingle with other people. Pedro didn't mind; he found a lounge chair and relaxed as waiters brought around all these delicious items to him.

On the way home from the party, Pedro asked Marco if he could work at the office the next week, and Marco said it would be great to have him around.

Pedro dressed nicely for the afternoon at Marco's office, though it was nothing in comparison to the stylish and expensive-looking wardrobe Marco had been donning lately, or even those who were apparently casually dressed at Sunday's pool party. He felt somewhat

important getting dressed up and carrying a briefcase, even if he was simply filling out paperwork like a robot.

“You can work at this desk. Here are some pens and a ruler to focus on each column at a time,” Marco instructed. “You can probably be done in less than two hours, right?”

“*Si, no problema.* I’m getting faster at it.

“*Excelente.* I’ll take you out to dinner after.”

As Pedro did his work, Marco made phone calls, and for the most part, they were quick, until the last one. He became aggressive with the person on the other end of the line. It seemed to Pedro that the person was asking too many questions and Marco was evading them, or something along those lines. Pedro didn’t ask any questions afterward, even though Marco slammed the receiver and walked away in a huff before returning and pretending he was reading some files.

Pedro was down to only three forms when Marco’s phone intercom buzzed.

“*Si, Hilda, are you going home?*” Marco asked the receptionist.

“No, *la policia esta aqui,*” she announced with a trembling voice.

Pedro’s heart skipped a beat when he heard the word *police*, and Marco shot up.

“Go, go, run!” he said as he pulled Pedro out of his chair “Go down the back stairs now! This way. Get out of here. Drive away.”

Pedro did as he was told. He heard the elevator coming up as he looked back at his friend, who appeared to be frozen in the middle of the room.

As the door that led to an interior staircase slowly closed behind him, Pedro heard the words, “Marco Portuondo, you are under arrest.”

A Brother in Trouble

Pedro and Freddy each pulled out light metal chairs and sat to face Marco, who appeared a few years and looked pale in the orange prison wear.

After a few moments of silence, Pedro finally said, “Por qué? Why did you do it and why didn’t you tell them about me?”

“You didn’t know anything. Even though I didn’t lie to you, because I really didn’t know what was going on, I shouldn’t have got you into something I wasn’t totally sure about. It seemed weird after a while, but we weren’t taking money from the patients, and the way Andres explained it, it didn’t seem bad and we had so many doctor clients, insurance companies... I don’t know, it was too many names...it was confusing.”

“But if you didn’t know, I could’ve said I didn’t know either and that would’ve helped your case, I think.”

“Yes, maybe it could have helped, but who knows? It is clear Andres wanted other people’s names to appear on the paperwork to make it all look like real companies,” Freddy said.

“Well, it was still obvious he was the one behind all this. My sentence is nothing compared to his 15 years, even though his lawyer was much better than my free one. *Coño!*” Marco cursed. “I am an *idiota*,” he added as he pounded the table.

“What’s going on over there?” called out the guard.

“Sorry!” said Freddy and Pedro at the same time.

Pedro didn’t think Marco had been an idiot; he had been fooled by a con. He certainly hadn’t been the first person who was enticed by dollar bills and shortcuts.

Marco was like many young men, who simply wanted to get ahead. But he was blinded by his boss’s amassed wealth – the house, the boat, the trips, all the extravagance. Although if

they'd learned anything from *Scarface* – attaining all those fabulous things too quickly, got you in trouble, even got you killed. Tony Montana's words, *I didn't come to the United States to break my fucking back*, were wrong. Hard honest work and lots of patience brought better results; that was all clear now.

“Eighteen months isn't that long,” was the only thing Pedro could think of saying. “We suffered longer in Cuba. They'll feed you here. You can take classes, I think. Get diploma.”

Marco nodded.

“Don't get into any trouble. Do not talk to anybody that looks like trouble. Maybe you will get out sooner. That happens sometimes,” said Freddy.

“Maybe we can get you another lawyer?” Pedro had no idea if anything he and Freddy were saying was actually possible; he just wanted to be optimistic.

“We can't afford a lawyer, anyway. I'm not an *Americano*; no judge is going to give a crap about me – *a balsero*.”

“What does it matter that you came on a raft? You have your green card, so you're legal, you could get another chance with another lawyer,” Freddy said.

Deep down, the three friends knew it probably was false hope that another lawyer could be much help. Insurance fraud of this magnitude meant many years in jail, so, in essence, Marco was very lucky to get less than two years for being an accessory.

“I appreciate you two thinking you could fix this, but I don't think anybody can. I got myself into this...” Marco said in a defeated voice.

“Well, you know we'll come as often as we can. An hour drive is nothing,” Pedro said.

“Yeah, don't worry. You can count on us. You'll see, the time will pass quickly,” Freddy assured his friend.

“That would be good. It would mean so much,” Marco said.

“Brothers to the end,” Pedro reminded him.

A Promise Kept

September 1996

Pedro lined up by the metal barricades where the ferry *Statue Cruises* was docked along with the other tourists that came to see the Statue of Liberty. He was thankful his cousin Jimmy lent him his North Face jacket with the red logo. The wind was blowing hard up New York Harbor on the late September morning, and most of the visitors were freezing in their light jackets.

A woman in back of him shivered, “Ooh, I should have brought something heavier like you.” Pedro smiled in sympathy. He couldn’t wait to get on the ferry and see the sights, and clutched camera his uncle let him borrow.

Pedro pushed his way to the top floor of the ferry along with the many international tourists. He saw a Chinese family point excitedly to the Lady Liberty as they got closer. The day was overcast but the sun came out periodically and shined on her. That’s when Pedro snapped several photos of her silhouette as the ferry floated toward her.

As he got closer, he marveled at her green patina sheen. He looked at the details of the robe, a tablet she held in her left hand and the “flaming torch.” It was everything he had read on the pamphlets he’d collected at the airport and at the visitor center at Times Square and saw in images in movies, but even more wondrous in person than he ever imagined.

Pedro had bought the ticket that included visiting the crown. While he stood in line, he met a Venezuelan couple with whom he spoke Spanish who reminded him that it was 377 steps from the main lobby to the crown platform, and that they were planning to take the elevator to the top of the pedestal and walk the 162 steps from there to the crown. He decided to do the same, to save time and energy, since he still intended to visit and ride the elevator to the top the Empire State Building later.

Gracias a Dios, he wasn't claustrophobic...whatever. But still he was nervous. It had been a couple of years since those terrible panic attacks he'd suffer after imagining visions from the days on the raft. The doctor he'd spoken to, well not a doctor at the time, but his cousin Marissa's friend, said it was called PTSD. He hoped that going up all the way would not cause him problems.

It was dark on the way up the double spiral, narrow cast iron staircase that wound around and around. He had to stop a few times to catch his breath, but he was excited to keep going. He saw the group of ten he was allowed up with also were taking their time, stopping to take photos of themselves on the very narrow stairs. When he got to the top he felt like he was inside of a metal umbrella.

The outside, well, he was blown away by the view. There was a series of tiny windows, and it was like looking through a port hole of a ship. He could see the T-shaped dock where the ferry had parked itself. He could also see the tip of the island of Manhattan and some of Brooklyn; he was told that was what they were looking at.

Down at the pedestal, he took more pictures and here were a few park rangers in grey uniforms sitting in metal chairs off to the side watching everyone to make sure they stayed safe and didn't do anything foolish.

Pedro felt very patriotic. He was not an American and not a citizen just yet, but he felt so blessed to be there, to be in this country, to have been able to save up enough money to take this trip and to be able to see this incredible monument.

He had kept his promise, the one he made while on the raft, to visit and climb all the way to the top of the greatest symbol of freedom.

El Balsero Meets the Songbird

Pedro checked the scrap of paper with Gloria's address on it: *46-06 39th Street*. Gloria Quintana was his mother's first cousin. He would call her *Tia* Gloria out of respect, since she was almost 70, even though she wasn't his aunt.

He pulled his windbreaker closer to his neck. He should have put another layer on. Useless to open up his suitcase now. A cool breeze, that he imagined to a New Yorker would be light as a feather, felt cold to him.

He admitted it was often too hot in Miami, but they couldn't even handle temperatures under sixty without rushing to a restaurant for hot chocolate and *churros*, the fried-dough treat powdered with sugar. Still, he admired the rust leaves of the tall maple tree that stood outside the gate on a crisp late September day.

He walked up to the silver intercom system and pressed the button for apartment *C34*. He waited a few seconds for his aunt's voice to come over the intercom. After verifying it was him, she buzzed him in.

He pulled the heavy black gate and stepped into the courtyard in the middle of six connected five-story buildings. The buildings soared in Manhattan, while in Queens, they were short and solid prewar apartments, row houses, and 99-cent stores. He would have to check those out later to see if they were as well-stocked as the ones in Miami.

He examined the stone pillars until he found the C-building, entered the vestibule, and hit another labeled button. The interior door unlocked with a buzzing sound. Wow, such security, but no elevator, and these buildings weren't fancy at all. After climbing the three flights up, he was surprised he was winded, though his suitcase wasn't heavy. It dawned on him that New

Yorkers did this daily, with bags of groceries, wearing heavy coats, and maybe even carrying a baby. He got to the third floor and heard a flood of music from behind the door. It sounded like rumba. His Aunt greeted him at the door with a firm hug and a kiss on the cheek. She smelled faintly of *Agua de Violetas*.

Gloria's once long raven hair was now dyed a dark brown with highlights in a lighter shade; it was short, below the ears, but with a lot of volume and layers, and parted on one side. She was lean and somewhat tall, dressed in black exercise pants with a black V-neck T-shirt that was form-fitting. On her wrists, she wore silver bracelets of different styles.

She walked toward the living room window where there was a console with a record player built in. Pedro had only seen those in some old TV shows he'd watched with his uncle Ramiro when he had first come to the US.

She lowered the volume to a minimum.

"No, no, I love it!" said Pedro.

"*Ay, que bueno.*" Gloria raised the volume.

She was pleased that Pedro appreciated classic Cuban music. She didn't know or care what young people listened to these days, but it was *mierda* as far as she was concerned. This music made her move her hips and the vibration went up and down her whole body.

Pedro put down his suitcase and approached a large bookcase filled with vinyl records, CDs, and knickknacks, the hardwood floor creaking under his tall stature. On the narrow wall between the window and the shelf, there were photos, a few black-and-whites and others in color, of Gloria as a young woman on stage. She was beautiful then, and even now, she was striking.

She turned and saw him admiring the photos.

“1947, Hotel Nacional,” she said as she pointed to the oldest photo. “I was eighteen.”

“I know that hotel, by el Malecón, walked by it many times,” Pedro said.

“Ah, what a joy to start my singing career there. It was an exciting place.”

“Wow, this dress is so shiny!” Pedro said in reference to the next photo.

“Yes, like diamonds. That was at the famous Tropicana. Since before I left the farm, that was the place where I wanted to end up, and it happened.”

The record reached its end, and Gloria lifted the needle. With no music, he also became silent and didn't identify any other photos; the colored ones were taken in New York, Pedro could tell. Gloria stepped over to the couch and told Pedro to sit.

“It is weird how one place could be both a blessing and a curse. Even though all I wished for became a reality there, it ended in a nightmare. Losing my baby changed the course of my life. And those events changed the course of our country.”

Pedro had heard the legendary stories about how Gloria sang at a famous hotel and nightclubs in Havana, and how she was at the Tropicana when a bomb went off during the beginning of the uprisings in Cuba. He'd heard about how her husband died within ten years of their arrival in the United States, and how her mother also died only a few years after Gloria left Cuba. These details sounded as if they were about a character in a book with a full, but somewhat tragic life, but now, Pedro was sitting next to the person who had lived that life.

“*Si, Tia*, Mamá told me the stories. She also told me she saw you perform, and that you were wonderful.”

“*Ay*, Teresa. I wish she would've have come when I did. You and Robi, maybe you would've been friends as well as cousins. He is only a year or so older than you...”

“I will meet him one day. I do wish Mamá was here now. I sometimes feel bad that I’m here, and she isn’t. Especially during my first few years here, I felt...”

“Guilty?” Gloria guessed.

“I guess, but I know she is relieved that I’m here.”

“She is, I’m sure. Still, it is hard to be far away from those you love. I can only imagine how weird it must feel for you in Miami; you are so close, only 90 miles, but still so far away.”

“Sí, and then all the Spanish radio stations talk day in and day out about Cuba, same old story, nothing new. It’s too much; doesn’t offer any hope.”

“That makes sense. I think Cubans up here are more detached because of the extra distance. They’ve become more Americanized because of the larger, more varied melting pot that exists up here.”

“I understand that feeling very well, so close but extremely far apart because of the imposed barriers, but it makes me feel better to know that she is still alive.”

“Of course. I did feel confused when I lost my mother when I was already here. When you are not in the same place and can’t be in contact as often as you’d like, it sometimes doesn’t feel real. Communications were so difficult...”

“Yes, you wouldn’t find things out for months or years.”

“And you still have to live your life not knowing how your family is doing in another place, your home that feels like another planet.”

“I feel exactly like that. And with time passing by here, it’s hard to remember some memories from over there. Time passes quickly, but also slowly when things are difficult.”

“Yes, time is an odd thing. My Beto and I were together for many years, but when you love someone it never seems like enough time. But I have Robi, a constant reminder of my Beto.

He and I had our problems after Beto died. Drugs, skipping school, almost dropping out. It took a lot for him, for both of us, to put our lives back together. He finally achieved a lot more than I ever imagined possible.”

“Roberto lives here in *Nueva York*?”

“Robi is in Connecticut now, so not far. He works as an accountant. I have two grandchildren. A seven-year-old boy who resembles his *abuelo*, and a five-year-old girl who looks like my beautiful daughter-in-law. I see them when their busy schedule allows. Sometimes they come here, or sometimes I take the train there on a Saturday and come back on Sunday evening.”

Gloria pointed to four framed pictures on a side table. “A lot more on the refrigerator.” Then, it seemed like something in her lit up. “You must be hungry. Come, come.”

She led Pedro to a narrow kitchen and served him *pollo guisado*, a chicken stew with potatoes, carrots, and lots of thinly-sliced peppers. Pedro hadn’t eaten something so delicious in a long while. It warmed him up physically and settled his spirit somehow.

He’d just met Gloria and already felt perfectly comfortable with her. She was full of life and wise and made him feel at home right away.

The Real Pedro

Pedro and Gloria sat on a bench in Windmuller Park, where many kids ran around, a group of teen boys played basketball, and a few old people with their dogs sat on other benches.

“*Bueno*, Pedro, you know about me. Tell me about you.”

He told her about jobs he had back in Miami, that he liked Janet Jackson and Whitney Houston, and that he loved the band Red Hot Chili Peppers and an 80s group called Depeche Mode.

“Those women are so talented and pretty. The groups, I don’t know them. *De* what?”

Pedro laughed. “I don’t think they are your style.”

“Those are things *you like*. Tell me what *you* are like. Tell me about *Pedro*.”

Pedro remained silent; he really didn’t have much else to say about himself.

“*Que pasa*, not used to talking about yourself?”

“No. I guess I work so much I don’t have time to...” Pedro didn’t actually know what it was he didn’t have time for.

“To find yourself? Like the *Americanos* say.”

“*Si, exactamente*.”

“Do you think you are the same Pedro you were before you came? Before the raft.”

Pedro couldn’t believe this woman was asking about the super sensitive subject.

Gloria realized she’d hit a nerve. “Nobody asked you about it, right?”

“I told some details, but I guess I didn’t want to talk about it,” Pedro said with a shrug of his shoulders. “I suppose people didn’t *really* want to talk about it either. It would make them uncomfortable, maybe.”

“Yes, that seems to be it, because they wouldn’t know what to say.”

“Yes, it seems to go both ways. But Tia Marta must’ve told you the basic information.”

“Yes, she did.” Then she smiled. “Oh, Latinos, so hysterical and smothering, but talk about feelings, they just can’t do it.”

“That’s it exactly. I don’t want to talk about feelings, but I am different because of that experience. No one could ever understand unless...”

“You are right about both things. You can’t possibly be the same.”

“I would get stomach cramps once in a while when I would think about those days out there in the sea.”

“Trauma.”

“*Si*, that’s what I was suffering from. Almost got ulcers.”

“Again, Latinos don’t talk about real feelings and don’t believe in mental doctors like the *Americanos*.... We are what they say ‘touchy-feely’ but not in touch with our feelings.

Pedro hadn’t heard of that saying, so Gloria clarified. “We hug and smother others with love, but then we don’t think about how we really feel inside.”

“*Ah, yo comprendo*,” said Pedro.

The kids playing basketball were getting louder; it appeared they had attracted an audience, and Pedro was half-looking at them while listening to his aunt.

“We will even make ourselves physically sick and then it’s too late. But you know what? I went to a *terapista* at a community center when my son was a teenager. I was worried I wasn’t a good mother because I was swallowing up my anger and bitterness, and I was worried he’d turn out the same way.”

“*Y que pasó?*”

“It helped, it really did.”

“So, you are not crazy?” Pedro teased.

Gloria laughed. “Only a little crazy. Life is more entertaining that way. I realized it is much better to talk about things with a total stranger than a critical or oblivious relative.”

The kids playing basketball started hooting when one of them made a three-point shot.

Pedro was impressed. “*Coño*, that boy is a Michael Jordan.”

“I think these boys want to grow up to be famous sports stars; they practice here day after day till it gets dark sometimes. What did you want to be when you were a boy?”

Pedro didn’t have to think at all before answering this question.

“I wanted to be a baseball player.”

“Were you good?”

Pedro smiled from ear to ear. “*Fantastico!* I was good at pitching, hitting, and, *coño*, I could run!”

Gloria squealed with joy.

“*Que, Tía?*”

“*Nada*, Pedro, you will find out tomorrow.”

They walked back to Gloria’s apartment, and Pedro got ready to meet his cousin Jorge who lived on the Upper East Side for drinks and dinner. He was going to stay over there and go to the Metropolitan Museum of Art the next day, but per Gloria’s directives, he needed to be back in Queens by five for whatever surprise she had in store.

Pedro returned the next afternoon and couldn’t believe his eyes. A New York Yankees baseball cap and T-shirt were waiting for him on the couch.

“I love *el béisbol* too! *Mi amigo* Donal and I go to at least five games a season, so as soon as you told me the dates you were coming, he got us tickets.”

“*Ay, dios mio, Tia*, this is the best gift I have ever gotten. The Yankees...” Pedro said with stars in his eyes. “I can’t believe it.”

“The stadium is in *El Bronx*, where I used to live many years ago, and it takes a long time to get there so let’s get ready. Donal lives only a few blocks away so he will be here in fifteen minutes. If you’re hungry, eat from the leftovers in the fridge before we leave. Only *mierda* food at the stadium.”

Although standing while holding on to a handrail during rush hour on the 7-train jam-packed with commuters and then transferring to the 4-train at the whirlwind that was Grand Central Terminal was jarring for Pedro, he didn’t know how to contain the excitement that made him feel like a boy again, like the first and only time his mother and grandmother took him to the beautiful Varadero beach.

Donal told Pedro about the first time he and his coworker had gone to Yankee Stadium, and how he had been the recipient of a wild punch during a drunken brawl that involved several men around him – the nasty combination of Yankees fans vs. Mets fans. He was an Irish widower of five years, who spoke a good amount of Spanish and had been a bar manager for decades. He had recently retired from working full time, but still tended bar a few nights a week. He appeared to be a little younger than Gloria, maybe mid-sixties, with graying light brown hair and blue eyes, that, Pedro noticed, were often glued on Gloria. He was generous, buying them overpriced snacks and drinks when they arrived at the stadium.

Pedro wondered why Gloria and Donal hadn’t gotten together. They had dinner together once a week, according to Gloria, and he took her to the movies and even Broadway shows a

couple times a year. Gloria was independent and probably didn't need a man to take care of her, but everyone needed companionship, Pedro felt, and it seemed Donal would be perfect for Gloria. He liked the man immediately.

During the fourth inning when Gloria left to go to the restroom, Donal leaned in to Pedro and asked, "I have asked Gloria to marry me twice, do you think she'll take me seriously a third time?"

"I don't know, but I hope so," Pedro said.

"She likes me, she maybe loves me, but she's scared or something."

"Yes, maybe she's scared. But I agree with you. I think she might love you. She had only wonderful things to say about you before you arrived so..."

"Oh," the man's eyes lit up. "So maybe I have a chance."

"I hope so. My other *tía* is always praying the rosary, so I'll ask her to pray one for you. It would make the family happy to know that Gloria is with *un hombre bueno* like you."

"*Gracias*, Pedro. I hope we can be family soon."

Beer and pretzel in hand, Pedro was in heaven as he marveled at the players in pin-stripes. He was quite impressed with the shortstop Derek Jeter, who the Yankees had acquired the previous season. It was a very close game against their rivals from Boston and the pitcher John Wetteland had done a good job so far, but Mariano Rivera, a Panamanian, was brought in to close. His ability to shut everything down and not allow any hits amazed Pedro. He couldn't believe he was witnessing this magic in person. He had no doubt that, next month, the Yankees would be in the World Series and win.

Oh, how he missed playing baseball – the smoothness of the ball, even though the balls he used in Cuba were worn down; the cracking noise of the bat; and the freedom he felt as he rounded the bases after smacking the ball over the rickety fence; yes, it was the feeling of being free that thrilled Pedro.

And now, years later, he was free, but didn't always feel that way.

That night at the stadium was unforgettable; for a couple of hours, Pedro was taken back to his most cherished memories growing up when he was playing his beloved *béisbol* and feeling completely free.

Commencements

April 1999

Since returning from his visit to New York City, Pedro had been thinking a great deal about Gloria, not so much about what she said to him, but how she had lived her life. She had taken on jobs she probably didn't enjoy – housekeeping, waitressing, and who knows what else – but continued singing even as she was faced with tragedy and her fame had diminished.

Pedro had only fantasized about playing baseball professionally when he was a boy, not an unusual aspiration for boys, he figured, but forces beyond his control didn't allow for it to come to light. He did, however, begin to reflect on what he could do to create a different version of that idea, one that would fit his current needs and circumstances. He sought advice from his neighbor's daughter, a principal at a local high school, to figure things out and create a plan.

He had taken several community college courses, was close to completing his associate's degree, and his English had improved greatly since his arrival. Tío Ramiro had insisted on paying for him to attend consistently, and he insisted on paying him back little by little, though he knew his uncle would give him that forget-about-it gesture and call the loan paid before it was time. There was no doubt in Pedro's mind that he would be nowhere had it not been for his uncle, a man who took him as his own son from the first day. That debt of gratitude was one Pedro was willing to keep on paying for a long time.

Pedro's next step was to transfer to Florida International University to obtain an education degree with a focus on physical education and become a P.E. teacher and coach. He would push kids to achieve their aspirations, even run with them and, maybe feel the joy he experienced as a boy playing with his friends on the streets and back lots of Havana. He knew it

would be a while, a couple of years, but it was attainable, much more attainable than becoming a professional baseball player.

Pedro waited for his section to be called. Although the air conditioning seemed to be on full blast in the arena, he sweated under his robe. He knew many of his classmates, especially the men, weren't wearing much underneath, shorts and flip-flops or some other beach attire, but Pedro had decided that for the most important moment of his life thus far, he was going to don a new dress shirt, tie, dress pants, and polished shoes.

He looked around and couldn't find where his family members were seated; twelve relatives, including his girlfriend Claudia and her brother, were there somewhere. The ones who weren't there – his mother, and his father and his *abuela* in the heavens – would be proud. Pedro had risked his life for freedom once, but now he'd really gained his freedom through hard work and dedication, pursuing a career helping young people and he was proud of himself.

He had been was a lost young man in a strange land – a paradise that was sometimes harsh, disappointing, and teased a person with one elusive dream after another, but with the help of others, he'd found this place was full of opportunities for a good life. Pedro wasn't sure about what people referred to as the American Dream, or whether he would achieve it or not, but he was happy that he had been able to achieve his small goals, one at a time.

At his graduation party that afternoon, Pedro was beaming. His relatives had taken the day off, and Tia Marta and Ramiro insisted on having a party to celebrate the grand occasion.

“Tia Gloria, *que sorpresa!*” said Pedro as he heard a commotion by the front door and realized she'd arrived.

“I didn’t want to miss your very important day! College, what an achievement!” she said as she rushed toward him. “I could not make it to the ceremony, I’m sorry. Waiting for luggage, getting the rental car, and fighting this traffic, *Ay Dios*, as bad as *Nueva York*.”

“You’re here for the party. That’s what matters.”

“I wouldn’t miss it. Marta told me two months ago, and I’ve been excited to see you and everyone again.”

“Well, drink, eat, enjoy yourself. But before all that, I want you to meet someone.” Pedro called out to his girlfriend who was distributing mimosas. “Claudia, *ven aquí*, this is Tia Gloria.”

“Hola, Gloria, I’ve heard so much about you,” the woman said.

“I have not heard anything about you, Claudia, but I look forward to. We have a couple of hours,” Gloria said with a hearty laugh.

The women exchanged a kiss and an embrace.

“Pedro, here, one of your gifts.” Gloria handed Pedro a box wrapped in blue-and-white striped paper, which he opened right away. “We had such a good time that evening at the game, I thought it would be nice to give you an autographed Yankees baseball. You might recognize some names.”

“*Ay*, this is... the best gift.”

“You said that about the last gift I gave you,” Gloria reminded Pedro, and he laughed. “Well, like I said, that is only one of your gifts. The other is coming...” Gloria looked around and smiled. “*Sí, sí*, the other is right here.”

Donal, the Irishman, appeared by her side. “Congratulations, Pedro!” he said as he gave him a heartfelt hug.

“*Gracias*. What a surprise to see you here.”

Gloria and Donal simultaneously displayed their wedding bands. “This was your other surprise,” Gloria said. “Donal said you all were praying for us?”

“Rosaries and my Irish luck! She finally said yes!” Donal announced.

“Champagne!” Tio Ramiro called out.

Marta grabbed Gloria’s arm and said, “*Ay, prima*, it was hard to keep this *secreto*.”

Gloria had wanted to keep the news as a surprise for Pedro for almost a year.

“I love surprises. Giving them, especially,” said Gloria.

After guests received their glasses of bubbly, or held up their glasses of mimosa, Ramiro said, “To my intelligent and wonderful *sobrino* Pedro, who I am very proud of, and to our lovely and talented *prima* Gloria!”

“*Salud!*” everyone cheered.