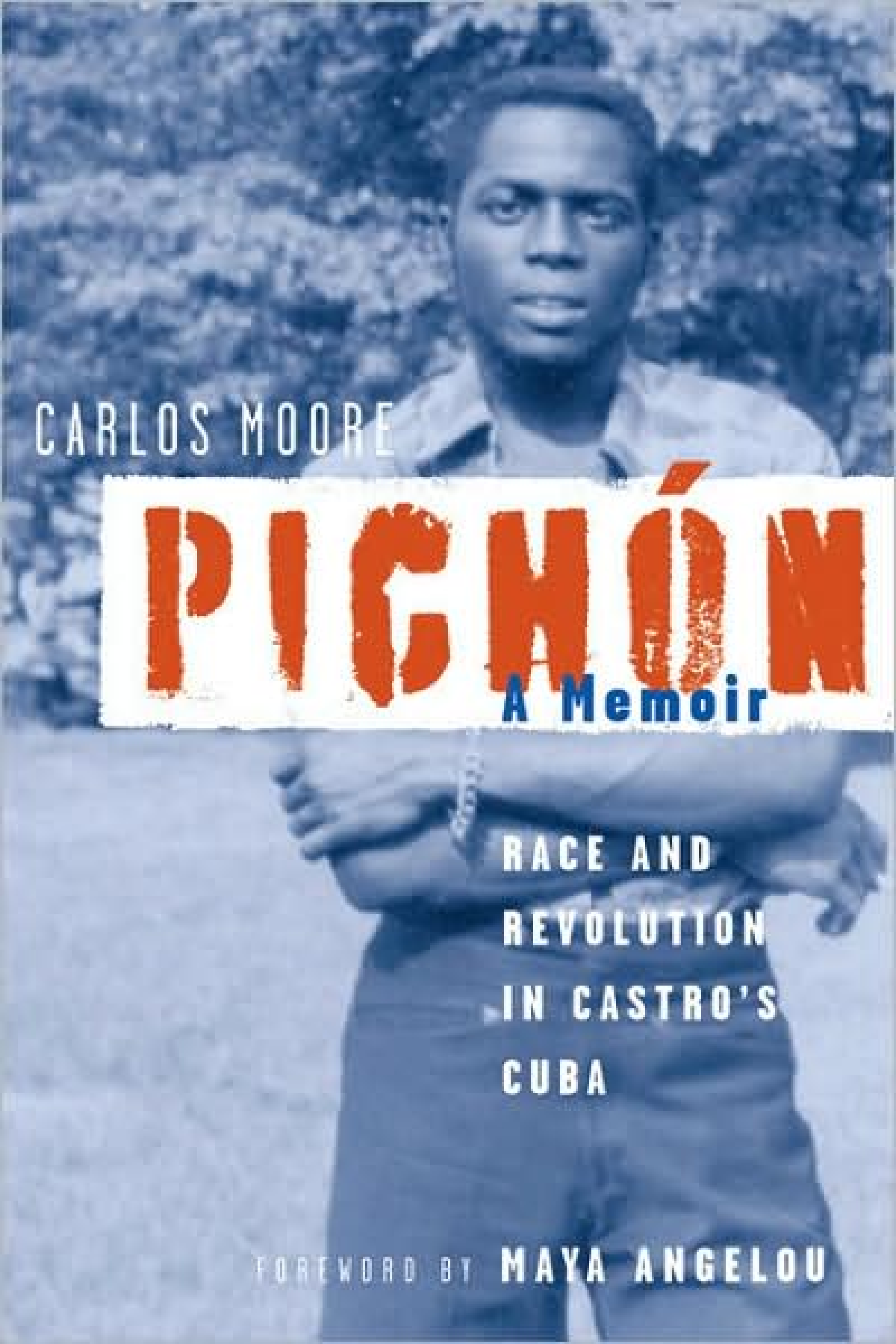
CARLOS MOORE
PICHÓN
A Memoir
RACE AND
REVOLUTION
IN CASTRO'S
CUBA
FOREWORD BY MAYA ANGELOU

CARLOS MOORE

PICHÓN

A Memoir

RACE AND REVOLUTION IN CASTRO'S CUBA

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My destiny is to travel a different road.

—Claude McKay

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to:

Evaristo Estenóz, Pedro Ivonnet, and the thousands of black Cubans who heeded their call in 1912 at the expense of their lives.

My family, Shawna, Ayeola, Kimathi, Adriana, Rosana, Kimathy.

My parents, Sibylin Winifred Rebecca Wedderburn, Gladys King, Victor Theodore Moore, Whitfield Dacosta Marshall.

My brothers and sisters of the Moore-Wedderburn-King branch: Richard, Esther, Victor Jr., Franklyn, Martha, Lloyd, Marie, Lawrence.

My brothers and sisters of the Marshall-Stewart branch: Regina, Ricardo, Arturo, Mercedes, Dorita, Adys, Leonel.

My spiritual family: Maya Angelou, Rex Nettleford, Marcia Lord, Iva Carruthers, Margaret Busby, Patrícia Valdés, Micheline Lombard, Francine Cornely, Alex Haley, Sylvia Boone, Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, Mery Diagne, Lelia Gonzalez, Abdias Nascimento, Walterio Carbonell, Marc Balin, Aimé Césaire, Alioune Diop, Malcolm X, Cheikh Anta Diop.

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FOREWORD

Maya Angelou

Carlos Moore the Cuban, Carlos Moore the rebel, Carlos Moore the brother, and Carlos Moore the world citizen, are the same person.

In *Pichón*, the word in his country that is more negative than the *N* word in the United States, and the name he was called by his fellow citizens, Carlos Moore reveals himself as a human being who is better than the world that rejected him, and stronger than the world that wanted to see him dead, any way possible.

Moore has written an astounding book about revolution, resistance, passion, and compassion. The plot could have been set in Ireland, in China, in Mississippi, or in Algeria. It is an irresistibly human tale.

The National Memorial African Bookstore, headquarters of Harlem's black nationalists during the 1960s, where Carlos Moore had his fateful encounter with Maya Angelou.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book has been in the making since 1982, when my friend Alex Haley convinced me I should write it. He oversaw its slow progress until his sudden death in 1992; thereafter, the manuscript stood in limbo for years. Two defining events committed me irrevocably to finishing it: a near-fatal accident in 1996 while living and working in Trinidad and Tobago and, the next year, the lifting of the official ban on my reentering Cuba by the Castro regime. But the manuscript came to fruition only because Shawna M. Davis, Ayeola Moore, Marcia Lord, Rex Nettleford, Iva Carruthers, Patricia Valdés, Micheline Lombard, and Francine Cornely recommitted me to it every time I cast it aside.

Over the years, many were involved in helping me arrive at the most effective, truthful way to present my story: Shawna M. Davis, Bobbi Capitaine Weisse, Rose-Ann Mitchell, Irène Assiba d'Almeida, Regula Noetzli, Malissa Sylvester, Marie Brown, Judette Coward, Gail Riley, Elisa Larkin Nascimento, Allyson Seapaul, Frank Clarke, Lee Van Demar, Malaika Adero, Uche Ugbwe, Cheryl Basso, Rawle Gibbons and Mrs. Gibbons, Tonya Williams, Christen Smith, and Anne Sobotta.

The tedious transcription work fell on the shoulders of Lillian Indarasingh, Daphne Carter, Cheryl Seebreth, Jill Arneaud-Gibbon, and Gillian Dundas.

My friend of always, Margaret Busby, was generous enough to accept editing the manuscript I handed her in 2006. When she handed it back to me, hardly two months later, it was in the form of a lively, beauti-

fully architectured story that moved even me when I reread it. I salute the master crafter of language that she is.

Literary agent Janell Walden Agyeman at Marie Brown Associates fell in love with the manuscript at first sight and took up the task of representation with the discipline and commitment of a soldier. I cannot imagine things working as well, as swiftly, and as competently without her in securing the correct publisher and a contract. Janell, know that I will always be grateful to you and to Marie.

A warm, insightful, and generous person, Susan Bradanini Betz, acquisitions editor at Lawrence Hill Books/Chicago Review Press, brought fresh vigor to this book project. Her enthusiastic reaction to the manuscript led to a contract with Lawrence Hill Books and to a smooth relation thereafter. I thank her for her enormous capacity for empathy; she is now a part of the *Pichón* family in my heart.

Lastly, I thank Lawrence Hill Books copyeditor Michelle Schoob for her patient, exacting contribution; under her skillful supervision the manuscript metamorphosed into a book that is as free of errors as it could be.

My return to Cuba in 1997, after thirty-four years of exile, put an end to the longest and most grueling chapter in my life. I could look back on those frosty years and realize that several times I had been just inches from disaster. I survived the experiences I am about to recount only because a host of decent people took up my defense, stood by me when it was politically unwise to do so, and deflected the big waves that threatened to overwhelm me. My grateful thoughts go out to them: Shawna M. Davis, Ayeola Moore, Marcia Lord, Maya Angelou, Rex Nettleford, Alex Haley, Sylvia Boone, Micheline Lombard, Patricia Valdés, Margaret Busby, Francine Cornely, Mbisin Soufflot, Mery Diagne, Ndèye Khary Dia, Bobbi Sykes, Jean-Pierre Ndiaye, Ellen Wright, Iva Carruthers, Lelia Gonzalez, Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, Aimé Césaire, Malcolm X, Cheikh Anta Diop, Abdias Nascimento, Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael), Miriam Makeba, Susan Taylor, Robert Jaulin, Charles Rangel, Robert and Mabel Williams, Alioune and Christiane

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Thanks to these generous and principled people, this story may reach you. In that sense, yes, they are the coauthors of *Pichón*.

INTRODUCTION: ESCAPE!

At fifteen, I had my first break in life: my Jamaican father took me out of my native Cuba. When the magical day came for us to leave, I could have died of happiness. That day in May 1958, at the Havana airport, my heart pumped wildly as I, my father, and two of my five siblings readied to board our flight to America. I had been nowhere near an airplane before, let alone inside one.

America represented everything that I, a poor black boy, could not even dream of having in my own country. For me, "America" rhymed with good government, good schools, well-paying jobs, affluence, unlimited opportunities. It symbolized not just power and money but a place where I would finally be treated decently. I yearned for the life that American films and glossy fashion magazines promised. All the things I identified as signs of success—a good job, a television, a car, a nice home, fine clothes—would be within my reach.

Symbolically, and actually, leaving Cuba was a flight. After a life of poverty, humiliation, and fear, I did not mind that I might never set foot in my native land again. The island was torn by a civil war between the supporters of the ruling dictator, Fulgencio Batista, and the followers of Fidel Castro. Bloody violence had visited our family when my brother Frank, a pro-Castro sympathizer, narrowly escaped death at the hands of the police. It was time to flee, a move my father had carefully prepared for.

To be honest, the reigning chaos and conflict that had split Cuba into two hostile camps were not my overriding concern. My starry eyes were set on the big door of opportunity that had suddenly opened

before me. I was leaving my country, my friends, and my childhood with minimal regrets.

Growing up in Central Lugareño, the only place I had known since birth, I felt as insignificant as a blade of grass in one of the towering cane fields that spread beyond sight over the horizon. Our sleepy little town owed its existence to a sugar mill that was merely a brown speck encircled by a huge green carpet of cane stretching into the mysterious countryside. For sure, I knew my share of laughter and enjoyment—going to the country to pick fruit and watch the black sugarcane cutters hacking away, or being given a horse ride by the white peasants. I loved going to the river, learning to fish, to swim; climbing trees; eating mangoes; hunting birds. Those were good experiences. But the bad ones far outweighed them. More often I felt no better than the pigs penned in our backyard.

As early as the age of six I was aware that whites did not approve of my dark skin color. By the time I was a teenager, I had had enough of the penury into which I was born and the contempt attached to my blackness.

I latched on to the idea that one day I would leave. I entertained fantasies of running away, hiding in a ship, and traveling afar. The only destination I knew of outside my island was America, the place to which Cuba exported its sugar from the port of Nuevitas, where big ships docked. People talked about America as if it were paradise.

We children observed from a distance the few people we knew as "American." The biggest shot in Central Lugareño was an American, Mr. Miller, who managed our sugar mill. He brought in other big, blond Americans, who drove jeeps and lorded over everyone. They were our superiors, whether we were black or white Cubans, and the closest thing to Superman we had seen—powerful, larger-than-life people, like the heroes in movies.

I had heard there were black Americans who were equally huge and wealthy, but I had seen none in my town. When our elder folk spoke of them, their eyes shone with pride. Those fabulous dark-skinned

Americans were mythical beings to me. All my favorite movie, TV, and sports stars were American: Nat King Cole, Harry Belafonte, Joe Louis.

America was indeed a fairy tale place to me. I knew nothing of its physical geography, only that it was very big, full of grand buildings, cars, supermarkets, and rich people. By comparison, Cuba, home of the wretched, was insignificant, fitting into the pocket of any American city. Anywhere in America was good enough for me. I just wanted out of Cuba! That was my frame of mind when I arrived in America. I could not have suspected that the America I loved with such intensity would be the same country whose international policies and domestic racial order I would eventually oppose with equal fervor.

But first let me start by telling the story of the conditions that led me to despise my own country to the point that I idealized America.

1

THE CUBA OF MY BIRTH

If I hated anything during my childhood, it was Central Lugareño, where I was born in 1942. With fewer than two thousand people, mostly whites, it was one of Cuba's most backward towns.

Lugareño could be walked from north to south, or east to west, in fewer than twenty minutes. Our only link to the outside world was a narrow dirt road that ran through the heart of town, then for some twenty kilometers to the main highway. There was one ramshackle bus, which left at 5:00 A.M. and returned at 7:00 P.M., to connect us to anywhere else.

Our town spread out in four separate residential areas that reflected the economic situations of their dwellers, the center being a sort of no-man's-land. The white elite lived in a neighborhood of tall, shady trees, asphalt streets, and elegant concrete homes. A sprinkling of light-skinned mulatto families, who desperately tried to pass for white but were constantly rebuffed, occupied a well-to-do sector adjacent to the elite neighborhood. I grew up in a working-class area, with dirt-floor, thatch-roofed houses but large backyards, inhabited by both whites and blacks. That meant I escaped entombment in the muddy, stagnant district designated simply as the *Barrio Negro*, the Negro Quarter, where the majority of the black population resided in hellish squalor, without electricity, running water, or indoor toilets. A separate area was reserved for celibate West Indian and Haitian migrant workers, comprising crowded wooden houses called *quarterías*, a modern-day version of slave barracoons.

The town proper was made up of a racially segregated park, a racially segregated movie house, and three social clubs that operated on strict

color lines. A private school catered to the children of the white elite. The children of poor whites and blacks, such as me, went to the public government-funded school. Not admitted to the former and not wanting their children in the latter, the mulattoes set up their own school. However, everyone shopped at a general store, two small retail shops, and a drugstore. Two free-for-all bars, owned by *gallegos*, Spaniards who had come to try their luck in Cuba, were the meeting point for workingmen.

Rural positioning determined class. Particularly despised by all were the *guajiros,* white cane cutters living deep in the countryside, whereas the American families who lived in the white sector and ran the sugar mill constituted an elite of the elite. Everything said or done in Lugareño obeyed an unspoken genial but inflexible order based on skin color, occupation, and national origin. To all appearances, everyone got along, but scratching the surface would uncover embedded clusters of bad blood.

Criollos, native Cuban whites, were at the top of the racial pecking order alongside the Americans and the Spanish-born *gallegos,* who boasted pure white heritage. *Gallegos* detested blacks, who in turn called them *alpargata*, "slippers," referring to their poor condition on arrival in Cuba.

Turcos was the generic term for Eastern European Jews and Middle Eastern Arabs, who ranked shoulder to shoulder with the *gallegos* and criollos.

Cuban-born Chinese, or *chinos*, were generally looked down upon while enjoying an intermediary position, marrying either up or down in the racial classification.

Guajiros, generally perceived as poor white trash, were small-time peasants who lived in the bush. Illiterate and violent rustic folk, they had emigrated from Spain in the mid–nineteenth century to work primarily as hunters of runaway slaves or as *mayorale*s, whip-wielding overseers. Sixty-five years after the abolition of slavery in 1886, that tense relationship survived. On the least pretext, they would pull out machetes, ready to chop up a black, particularly a Haitian. The Rural Guards seldom arrested anyone for killing a Negro.

Last, in descending order, came native Cuban blacks, known as Negroes, headed by the fair-skinned mulattoes, then West Indians, with Haitians closing the pack. Whites grumbled, "Those foreign Negroes are taking jobs away from true Cubans!"

Since English-speaking blacks were lumped together under the derogatory term Yuma, short for Yumaican, it was years before I realized that many different nationalities were subsumed under the adjective Jamaican.

Designated pejoratively as *piti-piti*, Haitians lived an isolated and miserable existence ranking below *guajiros.* They inhabited secluded peasant huts deep in the countryside, coming to town only to buy food or rum. Accused of practicing a blood cult called voodoo, they were intensely despised by the whites. Even West Indians—known to practice their own form of voodoo, called obeah—kept their distance from the Haitians, who reputedly could kill with a curse or cripple with a look. The whites called it *mal de ojo*, the evil eye, and protected their babies against it with amulets in areas where Haitians predominated. Whites needed no provocation to murder Haitians.

Both my parents were Jamaicans who came to Cuba in their youth in search of a better life. Cuba's booming sugarcane industry and the jobs it was creating at the time acted as a powerful magnet on the other Caribbean islands. In the religion-drenched and economically depressed environment of rural Jamaica, work, religion, and education were touted as the keys to success. My parents tried to inculcate these values in me as the passport to betterment.

Our neighborhood was named Machete, reminding its dwellers of their narrow escape from harassing, socially demeaning work in the canefields. It was a multiethnic community of workers where everyone greeted one another with smiles and backslapping, *abrazos*. But underneath, color, facial features, hair texture, and country of origin were the criteria by which people were judged. There were some fifty West Indian families in Lugareño. My parents' friends were predominantly West Indians, whom I treated as relatives, referring to elders as uncle or auntie

and considering their children cousins. Ours was one of four black families in the neighborhood, including a Jamaican couple, Mr. Heath and his wife, Mrs. Winnie. The Bryans, up the street, were also Jamaican. Our immediate neighbors were whites, from whom we so craftily concealed our poverty that they believed we were better off than they were. We were enemies with the other black family, headed by Pedro Pimentel, since their eldest son tried to kill my brother Richard in some obscure argument.

Being West Indian immigrants, we were nearly at the bottom rung of Cuba's poorest 85 percent. My father, who was attached to the sugar mill, had been given a break by Mr. Miller, the factory director, sparing us the indignity of living in the worst part of town alongside the dirt-poor blacks.

I grew up in a dirt-floor two-room house, sleeping in a hammock made of discarded flour sacks. However, when I was eight things improved on account of my father's growing relationship with Mr. Miller, which brought access to supplies of zinc, wood, cement, tiles, and bricks that progressively turned our home into a larger, thatched-roof house with a cement floor. Years later, it would even boast a modern toilet.

Seen from the road, our house stood out. The little front garden, my father's work, was an orderly mass of bright flowers—crotons, roses, marigolds. Compared with the other dwellings, ours appeared big because my father kept adding boxlike extensions. He built a room just large enough to accommodate an iron bed for my mother and himself. He built another tiny bedroom where my sisters, Esther and Martha, shared a cot. Richard, Victor, Frank, and I slept in the living room until a room was added for us boys. My mother cooked on a charcoal furnace in a little kitchen that protruded into the yard. In the back was a shack containing a bench with two privy holes.

I will never forget that outhouse. My most frightening experience up to the age of six took place there, resulting from my inordinate terror of the hairy, black, poisonous spiders that pullulated in dark places.

Panic-stricken every time I had to use the outhouse, I developed the habit of climbing on top of the benchlike structure that served as the toilet in order to escape the horrible creatures. One day, fidgeting with fear, I slipped and fell down the hole into the excrement, rapidly sinking up to my neck while holding on to the outer ridge of the bench. Hearing my desperate screams, my parents rushed to my rescue and pulled me out of the mass of shit that was sucking me down.

That was my first brush with death.

The only exciting times in my life were Carnival, the circus that came to town for a fortnight each year; the hurricane season; and the *zafra,* a cyclical three-month period when the sugarcane was harvested. During the harvest, money came into pockets but flew out as quickly to pay for debts, the accoutrements of Carnival, and rum.

Lurking behind those three happy months of frenzied activity was what everyone feared most: *tiempo muerto*, the dead season, a nine-month stretch when everything came to a standstill and hunger twisted my guts. The lethal idleness, the dread that invaded eyes, instilled in me for life a terror at the very idea of being poor. Even men like my father, who had the security of a three-month job at the mill during the *zafra,* roamed the countryside seeking menial jobs that yielded ten or fifteen cents or just some staples to bring home. He sometimes walked seventeen hours a day to barter the crude zinc pots and pans he manufactured at home in exchange for the yams, cassava, sweet potatoes, and bananas that the sharecropping *guajiros* grew on tiny plots. He cleared grass from canefields, repaired roofs, dug wells—anything for food.

I cringed at the approach of the dead season, when my mother would brew green leaves from a bush called *kalalu*, which Cubans fed only to their pigs but we gathered under cover of dark. She had the older boys collect any bottles lying about to exchange for ten cents at the *gallego*-owned stores. That pittance was enough to buy a bag of coarse cornmeal, which she boiled and served as porridge. Otherwise, we went to

bed with a cup of hot water sweetened with molasses and woke in the morning to the same ration.

When the shrill whistle of the sugar mill blew three times, we were served notice that the *tiempo muerto* had ended, and the *zafra* had begun. Everyone sprang to life for just three months, but then back to the dead season.

I WAS SIX OR seven when I realized the predicament into which I had been born. I was cross-eyed, though I knew that could be corrected. I was poor, yet deep down I was convinced I would one day overcome that condition, too. But I was also a Negro, a reality nothing could alter. Having no control over the two circumstances that determined my life—race and nationality—I ended up expending much energy denying them, and resorted to any gimmick that could downplay my being black and of Jamaican descent.

School exacerbated everything that was wrong in my life. I hated it, and I particularly loathed Civic Day, which was every Friday. We were lined up before the flag and a marble bust of José Martí, Cuba's independence martyr, and ordered to declaim our pride in being Cuban. Like everyone, I would place my right hand on my chest, recite the pledge, and sing the national anthem. But I felt no patriotic stirrings. I abhorred Martí's poems—silly stuff like "My little shoes are hurting my toes, and my socks overheat my feet. But the little kiss that my mother gave me will forever remain engraved in my heart." Martí came to symbolize everything I hated about school: the white teachers, their white lies, and the disdain they inculcated in black kids against our own color. I wish no one the psychological bruises that being schooled by prejudiced teachers inflicts. I was made painfully aware that my parents were not Cuban.

My non-Spanish name, Charles Moore Wedderburn, was an obvious indicator of my West Indian heritage. At eight, I repudiated "Charles" and, despite being whipped by my parents for that affront against them, Cubanized it to "Carlos." At twelve I dropped one *o* from

Moore to turn it into the perfectly Cuban surname Moré. Self-baptized Carlos Moré, I spread rumors that I was related to Cuba's iconic singer Beny Moré.

My parents frowned at these antics and flatly rejected both new names. But when everyone else began using the diminutive Carlito, they mercifully relented and came up with a compromise. They agreed to call me Lito. That small battle won, I would for the rest of my life juggle with the triangular conundrum of being Charles, Carlos, and Lito, having to construe myself within the borders of two identities that were problematic in a country where black skin and African features were despised.

At a time when play was all that occupied my mind, I stumbled on the scorching message of hate attached to the term *pichón*. My initiation was thanks to Zoila, a seven-year-old white girl who lived next door and often played with my little sister Martha through the chicken wire fence separating our yards. My mother had decreed that Zoila was unwelcome in our yard, since my sister was barred from Zoila's home because of Martha's color. So they played house with each girl on her own side of the fence, pretending to bake, sweep, or wash clothes as adults did. I was drawn to their laughter, but my mother had warned me to "stay away from dem gyals."

Watching from afar, I noticed that every so often Martha slipped inside the house when my mother's back was turned, reappearing with flour and sugar in hand. One day when she went to pilfer from the kitchen, I inched toward the fence. Zoila was alone on the other side. When she saw me, she drew back in fear.

"*Negrito de mierda*, nigger shit! Go away!" she screamed.

The insult froze me in my tracks.

"Go away, *pichón*! Go away!" she bawled again.

I was used to being called *negrito bizco*, cross-eyed nigger. I knew the term *negrito de mierda*. But *pichón*? Intuitively sensing that word was more injurious than the others, I flew into a rage, grabbed the rusty wire mesh, and shook it with such force that Zoila's face crumpled as if con-

fronted by a gorilla. She seized the broom she had been playing with and shoved its handle through the fence, landing the tip in my left eye. I screamed.

"*Pichón*," she shrieked, "go away!"

My bulging eyeball throbbed with pain, and I yelled at the top of my lungs. Zoila, too, began to cry loudly. In a flash my mother was there, grabbing me and dashing back into our house, dousing my eye with water from our well. Such was my fright that even after the pain subsided I continued to sob.

"What in hell you was doin' by dat blasted fence, bwai?" Mother shouted.

Between sobs, I denied provoking Zoila's attack.

"Lito, why you no listen?" My mother's voice had mellowed, indicating that I had escaped a whipping. "If me have to tell you again to stay away from dat blasted fence, daag goin' eat you supper!" she threatened.

That night when my father returned from the countryside he was apprised of the incident. He summoned me onto our front porch and sat me on his lap in the rickety rocking chair. He spoke in a neutral tone designed to cushion the blow of the information he was about to release. Dispassionately, as if conversing about the flowers in our front garden, he shattered the certainties that until then had sheltered me.

"Son, you is a Jamaican. You fada and mada born in Jamaica."

It was as if a thunderbolt had struck me. How could I be a Jamaican? I was *born* in Cuba. I spoke Spanish, sang the national anthem, recited Martí's poems, pledged to the flag just like everybody else. How could I not be Cuban? When I brawled with the neighborhood kids, they shouted, "*jamaiquino*, *jamaiquino*"—Jamaican, Jamaican—but I never made much of that. This new information, however, wove an unacceptable tale of *foreignness* around me. What did Zoila's attack have to do with it? What was a *pichón*?

"*Pichón* is di pickney of a jancrow," my father responded, deepening the mystery. I knew what a jancrow was—a bald-headed, curved-beaked,

carrion-eating buzzard. Our countryside was full of those vicious, repulsive birds. They swooped over our homes, screeching devilishly, alighting on whichever corpse lay about the neighborhood, tearing furiously at maggot-filled carcasses. Was that the idea people had of my parents?

"In the old days, dem call we West Indians jancrows," he added, laconically, but I sensed that he was upset.

No doubt his mind turned to his experiences of 1929 when the Great Depression hit Cuba. As the economy crashed, hundreds of thousands of West Indians were summarily expelled. Many Haitians were massacred. Those who escaped deportation roamed the countryside, my father among them, clothes in tatters, boots caked in mud, going from hut to hut begging morsels of food from the already impoverished white peasants. To avoid the Rural Guards, many slept in cemeteries. They picked up leftovers around the slaughterhouses. From dawn they squatted like silent vultures, on the outskirts of every rural town, waiting near the abattoirs for the butchers to dispose of the bones and entrails of disemboweled beasts. They would rush at the steaming leftovers, stash big jute sacks with their bloody bounty, and take it home to be washed, rubbed with salt, and seasoned with hot pepper.

Because of their scavenging forays, the white peasants dubbed these blacks buzzards. It stuck, as did the term reserved for their children—*pichóns*. Foreign-born blacks, especially Haitians, were also often accused of stealing corpses from cemeteries for consumption, so the notion of cannibalism was also implicit in the term *pichón*. Offspring of black buzzards! Children of carrion eaters! Feeling my body tremble, my father drew me close to his chest as I fought back tears.

That day I came to accept what I had fought to deny: my parents were foreigners. I became conscious of how thick their accent was when they spoke Spanish. My resistance to learning their tongue grew, despite their resorting to the rawhide belt. I hated English to the extent that I pretended not to understand it, though I was taught it from the crib.

My parents' insistence on demonstrating that West Indians were upright, clean, God-fearing people emphasized my lack of self-worth. I

was constantly admonished to do such and such so that "the Cubans" realized we were decent people, to say this or that to show "them" that "we" were cultured though black. Under a perpetual obligation to prove myself deserving of respect, I came into my own through systematic mischief.

By the time I was eight, the townspeople labeled me a *negrito malo,* a bad little nigger, a soubriquet I relished. To be singled out as "Mr. Moore's bad little nigger" was great; my existence was finally being recognized.

In truth, I desperately wanted out of my black skin. I was aware of being the only one in my family whom whites referred to as "Mr. Moore's little blackie." I was not my father's "little blackie," I insisted, but his son.

They would chuckle. "Señor Moore is a mulatto. You are a *negrito*!"

Mulatto? My parents' evasive half answers only deepened the mystery. It was obvious that, unlike my siblings, I did not resemble our fair-skinned, wavy-haired father one bit, but then many of the families I saw around had children of varying shades of color and texture of hair. The only evidence I had of anything amiss came from seeing the photographs mounted on the wooden divider in our living room. There were Victor Jr. and Frank, hair slicked to their scalps. Esther and Martha were shown with their hair plaited into coils snaking down their backs. Richard stared out with hair austerely pulled back. Why was there no image of me?

I was the darkest, a *negrito retinto*, an ink-black nigger, as whites said. Rather than my father's "good" hair, I had *pasas*, dried raisins, as Negro hair was designated. I was born with *bémbas*, swollen lips, and my nose was *chata*, flat. To crown it all, I was cross-eyed.

The *gallegos* in town had an explanation. Ugly Negroes, they said, came into being because one day God put out his clay creation to dry on a chair under the broiling sun and forgot it there all day. At sunset, he returned, exhausted, and sat on the chair, unintentionally crushing the overbaked clay figurines that were to become the ancestors of black people. Hence the skin color and features sported by Negroes.

"Doh pay dem no mind," my father advised about the racial attacks that whites passed off as jokes. "Words kiant hurt you, son," he said. "Dem is not stones!"

But to me as a child, words did hurt. I felt mercilessly bludgeoned.

"Cuss dem dirty *panya* back, goddammit!" my mother commanded, fiery eyes flashing. Her voice hammered the word *panya*—a corruption of Spaniard but used for all whites—as if beating it with fists. Her anger was comforting. She provided the ammunition for me to retaliate.

Until I asked, my parents gave no explanation of why there was no picture of me in the house. Cornered, my mother explained that one must not take photos of a cross-eyed person lest their eyes never straighten. That seemed logical, so I began to pester them about correcting my eyes. I was eight when that wonder came about.

"Son, dem eyes goin' straighten," my father said triumphantly one day.

I nearly fainted when he explained that it was his best friend, Mr. Heath, who would be in charge of that task. The Heaths were Jamaicans whose home was in a yard at the lower end of our street. People appeared to avoid that house while secretly visiting at night, for Mr. Heath was said to be an obeah man. My parents denounced obeah as the devil's work, so their tight relationship with Mr. Heath was beyond my understanding.

I was petrified of him. Completely bald, with bloodshot, cherry-red eyes and thirty-two gold teeth that gleamed when he smiled, Mr. Heath was the blackest person I had ever seen. My parents often sent me to him on errands, but I never remained in his presence longer than necessary. Now I was going to him for a therapy known only to God and the devil. I shuddered at the thought of being delivered into his huge calloused hands. The man had been ill for some time, and on the first day I reported to him he was sitting in a chair in the yard, soaking up the sun's rays.

Paralyzed with dread, I called out from a safe distance, "Uncle Mr. Heath, me fada tell me fi come, sah!"

That noonday he pointed to a vivid blue sky and told me to report to him every Saturday when the sun was in that exact position. So every Saturday at noon sharp, I walked to his home for fifteen minutes of therapy.

Mr. Heath's therapy consisted of having me "travel" around the sun, starting from its center, out to the sides, then in circles.

"Look at di sun right in di middle, chief," he commanded.

I obeyed.

"Now, left, look at di edge of di sun. Now to di right. You see di edge, chief?"

I looked until I made out the edge. "Yes, Uncle Mr. Heath, sah, I see him."

The edges were fine, once my eyes got used to the sting of the heat. But to look straight into the center of the sun was a hell of a thing. Each time I failed, he had me start all over again.

When I got the hang of it, he instructed, "Go east . . . west . . . north . . . south . . . center . . ."

In time, I was able to look at what he called the sun's equator. Every noon, Mr. Heath explained about planets and stars. I could not wait for nightfall. I did the eye exercises on my own at night, using the moon as my reference.

One day, Mr. Heath observed me for a while from different angles. "Chief, we almost done," he said with a satisfied grin.

He rose from his chair with great difficulty and walked to the house, leaning on me. "Winnie," he called to his wife. "Bring di mirror here to show chief."

After three months, my eyes began to converge toward the center of their orbit so that my school playmates noticed I squinted less. Mr. Heath's reputation as an obeah man grew to even greater proportions.

Of my own volition, I visited him after school to hear his funny tales about Anancy, the spider who performed fantastic deeds, and about life in Jamaica. Eventually, Mr. Heath could no longer even sit outside to catch the sun and had to remain in bed. But whenever I dropped by his eyes lit up.

On one such occasion he had a strange riddle.

"When me dead, me no really go dead," he said, asking me if I understood.

I was puzzled. How could one be dead yet not dead? He smiled and unveiled the answer. All I had to do was look at the moon, the stars, and speak to him. I would hear his reply in my own mind.

Less than a month after that conversation, I heard a loud wailing from down the street and knew that someone had died.

"Mr. Heath gone," my father said right away.

A big crowd came to the yard for the wake, which was called a nine night. People laughed, ate, told jokes, drummed, and drank rum and sorrel. Food was plentiful. My mother baked buns for the occasion. Night after night, a trio of musicians played. I was allowed to stay up late with the other children, eating cakes and listening to the music and stories.

With Mr. Heath's passing came my first experience of seeing a dead person up close. As tradition demanded, my father took me into the room where the body lay to pay my last respects. Mr. Heath was outfitted in a white shirt, black suit, and tie. His face had an ashy cast, but otherwise he looked as if he were sleeping.

"Go say good-bye to Mr. Heath," my father instructed, with a gentle push.

Swallowing my fear, I approached the open coffin.

"Touch 'im, son," my father encouraged. "'Im is you friend."

I put my hand gingerly on the bald head. It was cold. I stroked it. My fear dissipated.

The trio was playing "Cuatro Milpas," a song about a country hut left empty and unattended because a woman had left her man. The sweet, mournful melody that wafted in from the backyard brought tears to my eyes.

Handsome and debonair, Emilio Portuondo—*El Negrón*, the big Negro, as blacks affectionately called him—was the man I most admired

in Lugareño. Tall, mustachioed, and ebony black, he was the uncontested labor boss. To those who disliked him, he was *chusma*, trash; a *buscalios*, troublemaker; and a *borrachón*, drunkard. But the blacks were proud of him. He was their leader, the man who took up matters directly with Mr. Miller, boss of the sugar factory. Moreover, Emilio was worshipped because he could talk pretty. He spoke at all important occasions: burials, birthdays, weddings, and national holidays. No party was a party if he did not speak. He brought tears to people's eyes or made them laugh.

My parents liked Emilio and he often dropped by to chat over coffee. He seemed to know more than anybody about the old days in Cuba.

During the dead season, our front porch, with its four low benches and old rocking chair, was where my father's male friends gathered at the end of the day to kill time. We children were banned from their conversations, but as soon as dusk fell I hid among the crotons surrounding our house, ears alert. The grown-ups spoke of their fears and tribulations, pessimism and hopes. The wooden porch was their makeshift confessional; all I had to do to steal their secrets was to listen.

Emilio was an inexhaustible wellspring of vivid narratives. It was from him that I first heard about the bloody events of 1912, six years before my father arrived in Cuba. I heard not a single word in school about the war against the Negroes. The origins of that hidden chapter of black Cuban history, Emilio explained, were in 1902 when Cuba became an independent republic. Blacks were subjected to new indignities, with the backing of the Americans, as a de facto Jim Crow system was grafted onto Cuba's homegrown racial structure. Blacks faced a new set of challenges as this new form of racial segregation became ingrained. All over the country blacks wandered about unemployed. In response, General Evaristo Estenóz and General Pedro Ivonnet, two black veterans, set up the Independent Party of Colored People.

"We live in a republic with all and for all, so the Negro has no cause to set himself apart from his white brother to advance his cause," President José Miguel "the Shark" Gómez had told a Congress that included no more than nine blacks, most of them his cronies. A government

decree banned the black party, and its leaders were jailed and persecuted. They, in turn, mounted a protest: on May 20, 1912, the date of Cuba's twelfth anniversary as an independent republic, six thousand poorly armed black Cuban men, many followed by their wives, took to the eastern hills in open revolt. The response from the Cuban army, assisted by freshly landed U.S. troops, was ghastly.

A reign of terror was unleashed against innocent men, women, and children, regardless of any association with the rebels. Lynchings took place all over the island. Within three months, six thousand black lives were claimed. Emilio recounted that blacks fled into the mountains to escape, provoking a labor shortage and the standstill of sugar mills. Contingents of sugarcane cutters had to be imported from neighboring islands. This was how and why my parents wound up working in Cuba.

Emilio's story haunted me. Estenoz and Ivonnet become my secret heroes for having fought to defend their *raza*. Though I was not yet quite sure what *raza* was, I felt its burgeoning stirrings deep within me.

2

MY HEROES, THE *JOROCÓNS*

As I grew up, my model of manhood was the *jorocón,* which means "street fighter with the biggest balls." *Jorocóns* were the baddest of the bad with fearsome reputations, but they were godlike to me. I dreamed of becoming one of them.

My parents would have skinned me had they known of my fascination with such characters or of the love errands I ran for them. They were my only source of income, and with the centavos they paid me I bought my way into a joyous world of comic books, which I traded with other kids. Tarzan, Mickey Mouse, Superman, and Bugs Bunny populated my dreamland.

The scheme I had was simple: exploit the *jorocóns'* lust for my sister Esther. Once a jukebox was installed in the bar near our neighborhood, men used songs to convey love messages to women for whom their hearts ached. Tindito, a large and muscular two-hundred-pounder with bloodshot eyes, was always attempting to woo my sister with love songs. Stevedores like him were feared by all, for these tough men were used to carrying 325-pound sugar bags on their backs to railroad wagons or ships. When drunk, they would deliberately provoke a brawl to prove their masculinity.

Tindito had always been nice to me. Leaning against the garish, oval-shaped music machine, he would press a five-centavo coin into my palm. While the mournful wail of trumpets blasted out of the jukebox, he urged me to run home with word to my sister that he was playing a ballad especially for her.

"Go, my *negrito*, and tell her this song is for her," he entreated hoarsely.

I gripped the coin in my fist and left the bar faster than a bullet. It would take me exactly two and a half minutes to race to my house and deliver his love message to my big sister Esther, just enough time before the record would play. The silky crooning of Alberto Beltran surged through the air, hovered over the houses of our neighborhood, and showered down as caressing entreaties:

"Cantando quiero decirte lo que me gusta de ti. . . ."

As usual, my sister received the message with a look of disdain while humming along to the bolero. It was the singer she loved, not the uncouth stevedore. But Tindito's infatuation with her was good business for me. I sprinted back to the bar to find him sitting alone at a little table, staring at six full bottles of beer lined up in front of him. Panting, I falsely reported that Esther had liked the song and wanted more. The stevedore beamed and his rough hand patted my head.

"You're a good *negrito*."

He fed the jukebox twenty-five centavos and punched the keys. The velvet, pleading tones of Vicentico Valdes sang desperate declarations of unending love.

"This is for her. Go quick!"

That morning I made a total of twenty-five centavos from five runs with as many falsely encouraging reports to Tindito.

Only the most awesome street fighters earned the title of *jorocón*. They referred to themselves as *gallos*, roosters, and were great womanizers. Outwardly disdainful of them, women secretly admired their machismo. The *jorocóns* lived on the other side of town in the run-down section called *Barrio Negro*, the Negro Quarter, definitely off-limits to me. A rough area with hardly any electricity or running water, it was notorious for heavy drinking, powerful drumming, and the rhythms of *guaguancó*. It was a place of boisterous laughter, prostitution, and regular fights, and the stronghold of African religions.

The bars were the *jorocóns*' headquarters on weekends, where music blared from the jukebox early morning to late night. These tough guys

would get drunk there and then provoke *broncas*, big fights. They loved a good brawl. No *joroción* ever backed down from a fight with those they called *makris*, "white trash." The whites, especially the tough *guajiros*, feared them. It took a dozen men to subdue an out-of-control *joroción*. Even the Rural Guards cautiously stayed in their barracks at such moments. Nobody, unless he was out of his mind, messed with a *joroción*.

"I doh want you talkin' with dem riffraff, you hear me, bwai?" my father would admonish, discerning my fascination for those rowdies.

But they were my heroes: Roncona, "the one whose balls snore"; Tindito, "the one with the sharp razor"; Ito, "the one whose prick has to be tied down." All were members of a much-feared secret African cult known as the *Abakwa* or *Ñáñigo* that thrived in this part of town. *Ñáñigos* addressed each other as *asére*, *bonkó*, or *monína*, meaning "brethren" in the *kaló* language they spoke, which my parents naturally forbade me to learn.

The neighborhood harbored other African secret organizations, such as the *Lukumí*, *Mayombe,* and *Arará*, which people claimed were blood cults based on witchcraft. My father warned me to avoid them, saying they caused bad spirits to enter people's bodies and turn them wild.

However, I was drawn to their music. The Negro Quarter, the one place my parents forbade me to go, resonated with the sound of the instrument I liked most—drums. No one could beat drums like the *jorocóns,* unquestionably the best musicians and dancers in town. They brought magic to Lugareño twice a year during Carnival and the Catholic feast of San Juán, when they organized dazzling masquerades known as *comparsas*. At night during their festivals, I would lie awake in my hammock until the early hours, listening to those distant rhythms from the forbidden side of town, the powerful staccato beat that slashed the air and wrenched my heart in ways I could not explain.

It was from the *jorocóns* that I heard amazing stuff about women and sex that none around me dared mention. They did not tell me such things directly, but neither did they shoo me away if they caught me

stealing in on their big-men conversations. When sent into town on errands, I would position myself outside the bar where they congregated to drink boisterously and recount wild tales of fights won and women seduced.

It blew my mind to hear them talk of having fucked white women. That was the ultimate conquest to me. I knew that if a white woman ever complained that a Negro had made a pass at her, it could bring down the Rural Guards. The countryside *guajiros* had been known to kill blacks who whistled at their womenfolk. White women were off-limits to black males, but not the other way around; everyone knew which white man was sleeping with which black woman. In fact, black families boasted about it, since the outcome would be coffee-and-milk offspring with "good" hair and a "nice" nose.

My interest in white women peaked dramatically when, in my teens, I saw the film *Island in the Sun*. Going to the cinema was a rare treat; our little movie house was the only place where whites and blacks gathered according to the saying *juntos pero no revueltos*: together but each in his place. Upstairs, the long hard benches of the *gallinero,* or chicken coop, were for blacks. Whites, even lowly *guajiros,* sat downstairs in comfortably cushioned chairs. The only people of color tolerated downstairs were mulattoes.

Starring Harry Belafonte and Joan Fontaine, *Island in the Sun* hit our town like a cyclone, igniting racial controversy. The furor was over the love affair between Belafonte's character, a Negro, and a white woman who has fallen for him. For a black man to kiss a white woman was a bombshell! Months ahead of its release, people were talking about the film. It had been banned in many places in the United States, and rumor was that it would be banned in Cuba, too. So everyone scrambled to lay hands on fifty cents to get into the movie house that night. My brother Frank took me to see it, and I sat mesmerized in the chicken coop, my mouth hanging open and my eyes bulging as I watched the action with an excitement that never subsided. I had never seen a black actor play a dignified role.

For weeks people argued and came close to blows. The scenes suggesting sexual intimacy between Fontaine and Belafonte handed Negroes a sweet piece of revenge but angered the whites. Fontaine was nothing but a *puta*, a whore, they said. Blacks retorted that since Negroes had bigger and better *pingas* than whites, it was natural that she succumbed to his charms. As the quarrel grew heated, the whites switched their reasoning. Belafonte, they said, was not a full Negro but a mulatto. Fontaine had been seduced by the white blood in him. Blacks roared with laughter; if ever a Negro did anything worthwhile, whites were sure to attribute it to drops of *sangre blanca*.

Harry Belafonte became my instant hero, the first black man outside Lugareño whom I wanted to emulate.

3

CHILD OF REASON: DADDY'S FAVORITE

I BAWLED AS LOUDLY as the hogs whose throats we slit every year during the Christmas sacrifice of *nochebuena* and jumped up and down trying to escape the barrage of lashes. But the rawhide belt that literally bore my name fell in rapid succession on my back, thighs, and legs, creating instant welts. My father held me with one arm and delivered the lashes with the other, his ashy face contorted and masklike. My mother stood nearby looking on with fierce eyes, awaiting her turn at the whip.

"Goddammit!" my father cursed. "Ah goin' teach you never to throw stones at no beggar again!"

But suddenly he stopped the beating and set me free. "It's all right, Beck," he said, thwarting my mother's round of chastisement.

I had begun to limp away when he summoned me back with a mighty roar. "Bwai, come back so!"

The worst was over, for he had already wrapped the belt around his fist. I approached with eyes downcast, wearing my most contrite face, the submissive behavior expected on such occasions.

"Bwai, hear dis good," he said, pointing his index finger daggerlike at my tear-drenched face. "If me catch you throwing stones again at beggars, me goin' rip di hide off you back! You hear me, bwai?"

My father's outburst was prompted by a neighbor's report that my pals and I had been taunting a beggar passing through the neighborhood. Pelting indigents with pebbles as they went from house to house was one of our pastimes, though without harmful intent. Rather, we

sought to provoke them into charging at us, which would make us scatter wildly, screaming with excitement.

These drifters were often barefoot, always ragged and dirty. But as they passed along the dusty road that linked town and countryside, my parents led them into our house and gave them whatever food could be spared. They kept a small jar full of one-cent copper coins to hand out.

"No man don't ever know what tomorrow will bring!" my father said.

That day's murderous whipping, one of the worst I ever received from him, put an end to my baiting of those unfortunates.

My father, Victor Theodore Moore, was a stocky, square-shouldered, fair-skinned man of medium height who walked with an air of authority and wore his wavy ash-colored hair neatly parted on one side. Born in Shrewsbury Village, Cambridge District, St. Elizabeth Parish, Jamaica, in 1901, he had settled in Cuba in 1918, aged eighteen, after his father migrated to Panama. By that time he'd already sired two children in Jamaica, with twin sisters who became pregnant at the same time, but in my eyes he was a strict Bible man.

He seldom smiled and, barring occasional outings to dance, had few enjoyments. It was hard to know what was on his mind; he was introspective and exasperatingly evasive. Two of his favorite sayings summarized his philosophy: "Flies kiant enter a shut mouth" and "Di fish done dead 'cause he open him mouth."

He resorted to enigmatic parables to answer questions, avoiding contentious issues. His whole personality seemed based on the belief that there was danger in anything unconventional or complex. The Bible, his reference to arbitrate contending views, was his life pedestal. His biblical fanaticism and my ingrained turbulence constantly collided.

My first traumatic experience with his views was when I was about eight. It had to do with a matter about which he never uttered a single word before or after: sex. One day he simply picked up a stick and called me to him. When I approached, he delivered a quick hit to my groin. I was shaken.

"I doh ever want to see dat again," he growled, and threw the stick away.

I had been walking around "indecently," according to him, even though the term "erection" had not yet entered my vocabulary. Soon after that incident, a thin, light-skinned Jamaican carpenter by the name of Mr. Alfred, a lay Seventh-Day Adventist preacher, became my compulsory religious instructor. He showed up every Saturday morning and distributed stinging lashes with his belt to help me absorb the Scriptures. I came to know the Bible from front to back, but my misgivings about the one upstairs heightened with the years, more so when I realized he was in the way of the most pleasurable sensation I was ever to discover.

Everyone in Lugareño sang my father's praises. A pacific man of polite manners, he was not the type to challenge authority or disobey any law. His was the diplomatic way, the middle ground. He was accepted by all and respectfully addressed as *señor*. Whites even claimed that "Señor Moore is a Negro only in appearance, for his soul is white!" He was exceedingly proud of the consideration he earned from everyone, despite being a *jamaiquino*. He rebuked my mother for railing against the "damned *panya,*" not wanting such ideas to contaminate me.

The esteem he was accorded was proof to him that Negroes and whites could get along, so he was against the "race talk" of people like Mr. Wilson, Mr. Anderson, and Mr. Bailey, who were members of the local chapter of a West Indian organization named the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). The UNIA was founded by the Jamaican race leader Marcus Garvey, who, I would later learn, had paid a triumphant visit to Cuba in 1921. He had come to Cuba to root his organization among the West Indian migrant workers, but my father was wary of the race-conscious, self-help "Back-to-Africa" philosophy of Garveyism.

But race kept resurfacing as a problem. He never referred to himself as black in my presence, but I took no solace in the whites' contention that he was mulatto, not Negro. His vague answers to my

inquiries created more apprehension than comfort. He insisted we were all humans. Mulatto meant "nothing." But when I took the matter to my mother, I learned that mulatto meant "good hair, a nice nose, and fair skin."

In one particular instance, my father's approach to the local race question bore tangible results. Since the abolition of slavery in 1886, Cuban blacks had organized fraternal mutual aid societies to extend literacy among ex-slaves and promote their rights. In time, these institutions regrouped and became social clubs, known as *Sociedades de Color,* Colored Societies, divided into light-skinned and dark-skinned branches. The logic behind the split was that light skin conferred privileges that made it easier to climb the social ladder. Added to this was the fact that the whites had their own exclusive club. Therefore, as a child I had known three social clubs in Central Lugareño: one for whites, another for brown-skinned people with straight or wavy hair, and a third for *prietos*, blacks with kinky hair. My mother, a *prieta*, was denied entrance to the mulatto club, to which my brown-skinned father, sister Martha, and brother Victor Jr. had access. Richard, Esther, and I were admitted to only the black club. Frank, dark skinned but with wavy hair like my father's, was considered an *Indio*, Indian, acceptable in either club. None of us, however, was allowed inside the gates of the white club. One day, my father created confusion by taking my mother to dance at the black club and the next day to the mulatto club. Because of the respect he enjoyed, no one dared evict him. The precedent triggered much discussion, and eventually both clubs fused under a new name, *Amantes del Progreso*, or the Lovers of Progress. After this victory, his reputation soared among the blacks.

My father's good standing is what brought him to the attention of Mr. Miller and confirmed his seasonal job at the factory. In turn, proximity to Mr. Miller further boosted my father's prestige in the community as a whole. Industrial relations were always a problem in Lugareño, where there was a staunch branch of the Confederation of Cuban Trade Unions. My father refused to join, but Emilio, the local union boss, was

his friend, which made it easier to reach compromises in times of conflict such as when the stevedores paralyzed the mill to demand better wages. My father summoned Emilio, extolled Mr. Miller's good intentions, and exhorted him not to put the men's families at risk. That approach always worked. My father's thinking was simple: having no job was worse than the worst pay. He considered labor unions incubators of conflict. Priding himself on being a man of peace, negotiation, and harmony, he trusted only those solutions his unaffiliated hands could broker. His reputation made him a natural peacemaker, much sought after to mediate disputes.

"A talk is better dan a fight," he would say, "and a bad solution is better dan none!"

Padrinos and *madrinas*—godfathers and godmothers—enjoyed enormous authority over their godchildren. In the event of a parent's death, they were expected to fill the void and safeguard the child's health and education. The Cuban custom originated during slavery, when having a white sponsor was envied by other slaves. Poor families were eager to secure influential white godparents for their children. One could have a black godparent, for sure, but the goal was for one's *padrino* or *madrina* to be white. I was one of the blessed.

Don Miguel Rosado, an unsmiling *gallego* with thick eyebrows and chalky skin, had accepted my father's request to be my *padrino.* He had apparently helped my father years before I was born though my father was reluctant to speak of that period. Don Rosado was in his sixties and walked slowly with the support of a cane, which doubled as a beating tool. He lived in faraway Camagüey, our province's capital, so he visited only three or four times a year. Those occasions were carefully choreographed.

Dressed in my best, I was ceremoniously taken into the living room where I kneeled to receive my *bendición*, blessings. Head bowed, I pronounced the ritual phrase, "I beseech the blessing of my *padrino*!" Don Rosado would raise his right hand above my head to make the sign of

the cross, then extend his fingers for me to kiss as a demonstration of submission while he declaimed sonorously, "You have my blessing, godchild!"

Next came a conduct report from my parents, and I received gifts or licks accordingly. Gifts consisted of clothing or shoes to wear to school.

My *padrino* lectured me on civic conduct, insisting on respect toward elders, women, and girls. I must not curse, lie, or steal. I must be a good Catholic, confess my sins, and obey God. During one session, when I was about eight years old, he confirmed what I already knew, only now it was explained with clarity and with the voice of high authority.

"Negroes must marry Negroes, and whites must marry whites," he said. "If God had meant it otherwise he would have made everyone the same color."

How could God think that way? There was something wrong, but since my parents were of little help in clarifying it, in my heart I moved an inch away from the only Being who stood above my father.

My first unintentional clash with God's laws on interracial commingling came at the age of twelve when Angela, a blue-eyed schoolmate, complained that I had "touched" her. We boys did pinch the girls to trigger their anger, but on this occasion she had lied.

Something quite different had taken place. During recess in the school yard I had briefly gone to the "girls' area" to fetch a stray ball, which I found in Angela's hands. Because it had fallen into "her" area she refused to return it, so we argued. She spat at me, and I spat back, snatched the ball away, and went about my business.

On my return to the classroom, I was ordered to the headmistress's office. There a war council of teachers had convened, before which Angela offered her tearful and distorted account of the incident. The teachers dismissed my explanation outright. I received six *reglazos*, strokes, with a long wooden ruler and was left to stand facing the wall until my father showed up an hour later. The look on his face made me

squirm. He did not need my version; the headmistress's accusations sufficed.

My father was disgusted by anything with sexual connotations, which this clearly had. Worse, the girl was white. Without a word, he dragged me from the school. I thought he was taking me home for a monster licking, but instead he walked me to the wooden building in the north of town that was headquarters of the Rural Guards.

"Here he is," he told them.

They stared at me steely eyed. One came over, took my hands, and slipped on handcuffs, then led me into a little room with a heavy iron door.

"Daddy, Daddy!" I screamed in panic.

After locking the cell, the guard walked away, unconcerned. My own father was having me confined to Guanajay, the jail for juvenile delinquents! Terrified, shaking from head to toe, I crumbled in a corner and wept.

Around midday, the guard opened the iron door, uncuffed me, and led me to where my father was waiting. He thanked the Rural Guards, took me by the hand, and walked me home. There he confined me to my sister's room until nightfall.

At bedtime he called me onto the porch. The movement of his rocking chair was the only sound as he smoked his evening cigar.

When he finally spoke, his voice was soft. "Spare di rod and spoil di child. You understan' what dat mean, son? Today me teach you a lesson. It's calaboose you goin' end up if you doh listen to me, Lito."

After sermonizing for a while, he made me promise to mend my ways.

Given my turbulent predisposition, the jail incident was a salutary warning. I grew up with a healthy fear of the calaboose.

I WAS MY FATHER'S problem child, his exact opposite. I had begun collecting beatings at the age of three, but keeping me in line was no easy matter.

He complained in desperation, "Anything me tell you not to do is what you do!"

My parents concurred that a short, thick, customized rawhide belt was the answer to my stubborn and rebellious character. But I was unquestionably my father's favorite of his male offspring and had an edge over the others in terms of quality time with him.

It was when I was sitting on his lap in the rocking chair while everyone else was asleep that I heard of the place from which I dissociated myself during the day, Jamaica. Those enchanted moments built in me deep feelings for the land to which my father would never return. The round of tales over, he would rock for a while, humming his favorite songs and hymns such as "Rock of Ages" and "Tennessee Waltz." If I fell asleep on his chest, he would cradle me in his arms, walk me to my hammock, and tuck me in.

Life with my mother was an altogether different story.

4

CHILD OF ANGER: MY MOTHER'S BLOT

Confined to the house one afternoon in punishment, I was in the backyard trying to catch lizards when an iron grip clamped on my neck. The heat of the dead season was suffocating, and the billows of dust that created an eerie atmosphere stuffed our nostrils.

"You damned likl thing," a voice growled. "You story done finish today!"

My mother had sneaked up behind me. I did not have to see her face to know the cold look that shone in her eyes. Terror overtook me. A sudden weakness seized my body and prevented me from uttering a cry. This time I was surely lost.

I was dragged like a puppet to the side of our house, where an oil barrel stood to collect rainwater. My scrawny legs kicked wildly but failed to free me. She lifted me bodily and heaved me straight into the barrel as I let out a long scream.

Landing headfirst in the dark water, I held my breath and struggled frantically for about a minute before opening my mouth to gasp. Water rushed down my throat and into my lungs. I gagged in the silence of the cylindrical steel. I was about to leave this world.

My scream saved my seven-year-old life, for it woke my father from his afternoon nap and alerted our white neighbors, who rushed into our yard. They found my parents wrestling. A wild look in her eyes, her hair in disarray, my mother screamed curses while trying to drown me until my father broke her grip.

That brush with tragedy became a family taboo, erased from memory. It took thirty-three years—until I was forty—to learn why I suffered so at her hand. I was the fruit of a clandestine, extramarital liaison that ruined my parents' life as a couple. I was an enduring blot reminding her that her rainbows would never come.

My mother, Winifred Rebecca Wedderburn, was a full-bodied woman with smooth black skin and full lips. Large suggestive eyes peered from a comely and proud oval face. I never saw her hair in its natural state, for she straightened it into a fashionable style with a hot comb. Born in Browns Town, in the Porus District of Manchester Parish, Jamaica, in 1911, she had arrived in Cuba in 1925, aged fourteen, to rejoin her widowed mother, who was among the Jamaicans who had sought work in the Spanish-speaking neighboring island, leaving my mother in the care of a cousin.

Three years after arriving, Rebecca was raped by her mother's common-law partner and, at eighteen, become a mother in her turn, giving birth in August 1929 to a son she named Richard. That year the Great Depression began, bringing with it destitution greater than anything she had experienced in Jamaica. People were already grumbling about how "Negroes from the islands" were taking the few available jobs away from Cubans. Through sheer luck my mother got work as a cook with a Spanish Cuban family. In 1932 she met my father, Victor, a handsome Jamaican ten years her senior who eventually became her first love, who took Richard as his own son. In their hand-to-mouth existence, she bore another five children: Esther, Victor Jr., Franklyn, Charles (me), and Martha.

The mother I knew had become a bitter and dissatisfied woman who felt cheated by life, although she wore her handmade dresses over her well-rounded body with a carefree attitude. Scarred by her own deprived childhood, she did everything to conceal the fact that we were poor. Being an expert seamstress made it easy for her to create that illusion. She was responsible for my father's reputation for having hidden cash, and she relished the neighbors' belief that we were better off than they

were, which stemmed from her insistence that none of us ever step out of her house looking like a pauper.

"We is not riffraff," she would mutter. "No, sir!"

She would patch our old shirts, boil them in a basin of blue dye, and have us wear them another year. She confected dresses for herself and shirts, gowns, and pants for the rest of us, sometimes from recycled and dyed flour sacks. If she saw my shirt hanging outside my trousers, she would grab me and shove it back into my pants.

"Me doh want you lookin' like a street daag," she would warn.

Once safely out of her sight, I would pull out my shirt again, the way I preferred it.

My mother's fetching looks drew the discreet gazes of men. She dressed to the hilt whenever she went out, particularly on weekends when she and my father danced at the social club. She would cause a sensation with her outfits, like pairing a white knee-length dress with a string of fake pearls wrapped jauntily around her neck, even putting on long white gloves that inched up her arms to just below her elbows.

She dealt with the daily household business: cooking, washing, cleaning, making sure we children attended school. The West Indian community liked her, for she was generally a genteel woman, given to picking bouquets of flowers from her garden for those she cared about or making shirts and skirts from recycled flour bags for their children. However, many folks in town disliked her belligerent side.

During the dead season, when my father went off to the countryside in search of work he could do in exchange for food, her labor kept the house going, which boosted her authority over the family. Besides doing laundry for the town's white elite, washing and ironing heaps of their clothes, she baked and sold Jamaican cakes while making sure I did my homework every day. She taught me what she knew about arithmetic, geography, and history, whipped the multiplication table into me to the point that I could recite it backward and forward. Unlike my father, my mother mastered Spanish well, so she taught me to read and write both Spanish and English, enforcing my learning with stinging lashes.

On religion, my parents did not see eye to eye; she was a former Protestant who had converted to Catholicism upon arriving in Cuba, and he was a Moravian Protestant. Cuba had no Moravian churches, so my father resolved to take his boys to worship with him at a small evangelical temple while my mother took the two girls with her to Mass. She later boycotted our Catholic church because it discriminated against blacks, who had to stand in the side aisles or at the back. Many Catholic churches banned blacks entirely, as they had done throughout the days of slavery.

"Dey can eat dem blasted church," she exploded one day. "Man doh need no church to worship di Lawd."

People knew where my mother stood on most topics; the town was rife with gossip about her confrontational ways. One story told of her going to the house of a married Jamaican woman, Mabel Cross, and challenging her to a fight. For years my father had been having an affair with Mabel, the wife of a coworker, and my mother had decided to "put out di fire in di furnace." Her readiness to fight anyone, woman or man, who offended our family honor made people tread with caution around her, preferring to deal with my father on contentious matters.

But her bellicose reputation protected us, especially me, from abuse that the town's bigoted whites would otherwise not have hesitated to inflict; they feared her. My mother taught me never to retreat if my dignity was at stake. I secretly admired her willingness to stand up to whoever called me names. In practice, I could not measure up to her requirements. Whenever I landed in a tight spot from which I disentangled myself by taking to my heels, I trembled at the prospect of going home, knowing I would face a whipping for having backed down. It was a no-win situation.

One day when I was eight or nine, a much bigger white boy wanted to pick a fight.

"You fuckin' *pichón*!" he taunted.

His size told me I could not win, so I ran. Having trouble catching me, he picked up a large stone and threw it just as I turned to see how much distance I had put between us. It hit me—*bam!*—right in the mid-

dle of my forehead, making a big cut that gushed blood. In tears, I ran straight home.

When my mother saw the blood, a horrified look came into her eyes, but her voice was gruff. "A-wha happen?"

"A *panya* bwai done lick me wid a stone," I sobbed.

"An' what you done do to him?" she asked, gritting her teeth.

I was crying so hard I could not answer.

"Wheh is dat *panya* bwai's eye?" Mother insisted.

Faced with my silence she went inside, returning with the strap.

"Me goin' teach you a lesson," she said, unleashing a barrage of lashes.

I was crying and bleeding, but she belted me again and again.

"Next time a *panya* make you bleed, bring him eye fi me in you hand," she growled. She threw the belt aside and grasped me in her arms. She wept as she washed away the blood. Then she took me to the doctor, who put eight stitches in my forehead.

"You goin' have a nice scar there for life," my mother said.

That evening she called me to her side. "Lito, I doh want you run from no *panya* again. If him too big fi you, come get you brathas. If him too big fi dem, then come get me. You hear?" Her eyes blazed as if on fire.

"Yes, Mada," I replied, trembling with terror.

Nonetheless, I could not live up to her insistence that whites be resisted, nor her command that I not run from them in fear, whatever their size. The naked truth is that I was cowardly and that my mother literally beat the fighting spirit into me. I cowered when facing an imminent fight. I would faint at the sight of blood. Knives terrified me.

"Bwai, you runnin' again? Come yah so," she once shouted at me after I entered the yard with a black fellow in hot pursuit. She grabbed my collar and with one quick twist pulled me up so that my face was opposite hers. "Me tell you fi di last time," she sneered. "If you come yah runnin' from dat bwai again, it's daag goin' eat you supper!" She shoved me away in disgust.

I was ashamed of myself, especially since there was always someone to report to her. And my three brothers were disgusted that I should exhibit such ball-less attributes.

"You the only one who is a *pendejo*," Richard told me, furious. "Don't you have no *cojones* between you legs?"

All that changed as a result of the appearance of a *jorocón* from out of town, a former professional light heavyweight boxer who arrived in a flurry of dust atop a big, shiny Harley-Davidson motorcycle. Nicknamed "Chulo" (the Pimp), he took Lugareño by storm.

Armando "Chulo" Brown was a copper-skinned, muscular fellow whose facial scars served to emphasize a rugged handsomeness. He was a *pichón* hailing from the port city of Nuevitas, where the big American ships docked to load sugar. The shape of his eyes told of Chinese blood. Nobody knew why he had landed in Lugareño. Soon no one cared, since everything changed when he introduced professional boxing to our town.

A famed womanizer, Chulo soon became the premier hero of Lugareño and captured the heart of one of the town's prettiest girls. He set up an open-air, dirt-floor boxing academy that he restricted to blacks.

"*Makris,*" he said, using the derogatory term by which whites were designated, "have enough advantages already!"

My brothers immediately enrolled. One day, Richard dragged me there, put my hands into a pair of oversized boxing gloves, and pushed me into the ring to face Chulo. The gigantic tower of muscle with a habitual grimace on his face began to circle me, jumping on tiptoe.

I was scared, trembling from head to toe, but Chulo was adamant.

"Get up your guard, *pendejo*, or I'll gut your eyes out!"

I saw stars as the first blow slammed into my face. Tears welled in my eyes, and my impulse was to run away. Reading my mind, Chulo launched a barrage of curses. If I ran, he warned, he would pursue me, haul me back into the ring, and beat me to a pulp.

"Listen, you punk, a *pichón* don't 'fraid no man!" he shouted.

My wobbly legs could hardly hold my body. Richard clapped when I raised my gloves to my face and awkwardly circled the mastodon of a man who was my adversary.

"That's it!" Chulo beamed.

Under his instruction, I learned combinations of hooks, jabs, and uppercuts. The brutality of the blows frightened me, but little by little I learned to dodge them. If caught, I got up from the ground, licked the blood oozing from my cracked lips, and continued brawling.

One day Chulo sat me on a bench beside him. "Men is born to fight," he said. "Only a *pendejo* run from a fight." I would not be allowed back into his yard if I disgraced the academy by backing down. "From now on, any son of a bitch call you *pichón*, just put him to sleep!" he instructed.

After a while I was good enough to spar with my elder brothers. I was knocked about, of course, but would bounce back fighting. Chulo baptized me Kid Palanca, or the Brawling Kid.

"That's it," Chulo exulted. "You now is ready to kick ass!"

Boxing built up my confidence. Soon came the opportunity to prove to others, and to myself, that I would run no more.

My mother forbade setting foot in either of the bars owned by the *gallegos* or receiving a single penny from them. Her orders had to do with a game those Spaniards favored that involved black children. It was called *sorteo*, drawing lots, and the *gallegos* had played it since the days of slavery. They would toss a coin to decide which of us would pick a fight with someone else; the *gallegos* loved to watch us fight one another. They paid up to fifteen cents for a good brawl, which was a lot of money for us kids.

Orlando Pimentel, a fierce black lad who lived down the street, was my childhood terror. The *gallegos* had nicknamed him Cheetah, after Tarzan's pet monkey. He walked about forever angry. Our families had feuded ever since his elder brother stabbed my brother Richard in the stomach. That automatically made us blood enemies.

Cheetah was the *gallegos'* favorite gladiator, undiscerning about the race of his adversaries and money hungry. We all ended up as his prey. He would lie in wait for me as I went to school or stalk me on my way back. He made a lot of money at my expense.

"Go after that *negrito.* Get him!" the *gallegos* would shout.

Whenever I went on errands to the heart of town, Cheetah hunted me down and chased me right into my yard. Because of him, I collected numerous beatings for having lost money or victuals in the course of flight.

"Come here, you *pichón* of shit!" he would shout, as I predictably sped away.

One unforgettable day, Orlando Pimentel and I fought. I pummeled him using the technique learned from Chulo, but he ran home and returned with a knife. He stabbed me, but I somehow managed to disarm him and went on to beat him to a pulp. I came home limping and holding my side, which was oozing blood.

My mother's alarm at the sight of the deep liplike hole in my right side alarmed me, for she was seldom flustered in any emergency.

"Cheetah done stab me, Mada," I explained hurriedly.

She escorted me into the house, sat me on a bench, and cleaned the wound with gauze and Mercurochrome, saying not a word. "A-wha you do to 'im?" she asked, softly.

This time I would not disappoint her. I described the fight blow by blow, ending with my crushing victory. Her face lit up.

"You done di right ting. A man mus' stand up, even if he musta dead," she muttered.

She finished bandaging my wounds and hugged me. "OK, *señor*, you good as new."

I began to limp away, but she called me back. This time speaking in Spanish, she said, "Lito, *ahora usted es un hombre de verdad!*" You are now truly a man!

She addressed me in Spanish when she was proud of something I had done. So her words that day remain among my best childhood memories.

Much of the ten years I spent under her authority, I tried to accommodate her mercurial changes. I was aware of being a problem for her in a way I could not explain. Although she insisted I fear no one, I feared her the most. Fear of her, fueled by the water-barrel incident when I was seven, had soared to the point of panic by the time I was ten. The mere idea of being alone with her terrified me, and my enduring memories of her are rooted in that fear.

During the dead season, when my father roamed about the countryside, my terror surged, knowing I belonged entirely to her. Her beatings, unlike my father's, were assaults that became increasingly violent. Realizing they were getting out of hand, my father asked the white neighbors to keep an eye on the situation while he was away. A time came when my elder sister and the neighbors were my only salvation.

It reached the point where my mother would hit me with anything handy, driven by an absolute frenzy. She would lash out wildly left and right, with full force, not caring where the blows landed and as if she would never stop. None of my siblings was set upon like that. So the idea that my mother hated me was planted in my mind. In dread of her, I spent as much time as possible out of sight. I dug a secret foxhole in the backyard to hide in when I heard her angry voice calling. But her answer to my stratagem was a sudden surreptitious attack from behind. She would creep up noiselessly and—*wham!*—swoop down without warning in a frightful explosion of violence.

Outside school, I took refuge under the two lofty coconut trees that guarded our backyard, daydreaming and playing the harmonica she had given me. Any lull in the day was ominous. If she did not hear the harmonica she would bawl, "Lito! Litoooo! Is where you at, bwai?" To forestall a belting, I would run to present myself wherever she was with a readily concocted story, knowing that to say I had been doing nothing would not satisfy her. She would slap my face for lying, since doing "nothing" was doing something, and whatever that thing was must have been bad in my case.

"Di devil finds work for idle hands," she declaimed.

As I grew older, I was better able to withstand her powerful lashes, which infuriated her. She elected my brother Victor Jr. to deliver the corrective force she desired, a new duty he embraced with terrible relish. Those rounds of thrashings and curses made me develop a strange fainting condition that only stopped after Mother left our home for good in 1952. No doubt I largely invited some punishment since I made a habit of infringing rules. But one indelible beating when I was nine erased her from my heart as mother.

That day I was in our tree-studded yard absorbed in playing marbles on the ground, my legs spread wide in a V shape. Suddenly, my mother materialized with Victor Jr., who was holding the rawhide strap. She seemed beside herself. Losing my nerve, I began screaming at the top of my lungs before they even reached me.

"This time daag goin' eat you supper," she cursed.

I was used to her threats, especially that one about dogs eating my supper, but a new level of terror beyond all the others visited me. The first blow landed on my back, making me spring into the air like an out-of-control acrobat. The second lash missed my face by an inch. When I lifted both hands to shield myself, the whip sliced my left arm. I went clattering down, bleeding from a deep gash. Screaming for help, I writhed on the ground. The strap caught my left arm again, opening an even deeper wound. I was lashed again and again, until my throat was voiceless. My body went limp, and suddenly everything was distant and quiet.

Having heard my screams, the white neighbors rushed into our yard, finding me sprawled on the ground, my eyeballs rolled back in their sockets. From what these neighbors recounted later, I had stopped breathing. It was feared I was dead.

"Rebecca, the *muchacho* is dead!" someone screamed.

Frantically, a neighbor pulled me up and tossed me in the air in an attempt to make me breathe, whereupon my mother let loose a shrill scream that made my body quiver. I heard voices that seemed to come from afar and felt myself being hurled upward.

When I came to, I was in the house, lying on a cot. Opening my eyes, I saw my mother's face above me, tears streaming down her cheeks. She dipped a white cloth into a basin of water and gently wiped the blood from around my injuries.

"Lito, son, wha' happen? You make me frighten," she sobbed.

I didn't know what had happened either, since I had just experienced the first of a series of seizures that thereafter overtook me. I was a mess. My skin was raw all over my body and bulky welts protruded from my back, chest, and legs. I had a wide gash on my left upper arm where the strap had sliced two deep cuts and several secondary ones.

For several days I slept lying on my right side to avoid reopening the wounds, which took weeks to heal. My mother dutifully tended to them, turning her head away as soon as she had rebandaged them. Two scars chiseled on my left upper arm and the traces of several smaller ones remain to remind me of that day when I thought, yet again, that my mother was about to kill me.

5

UNDER DEATH'S SHADOW: A FAMILY IN TATTERS

The traumatic landmarks of my childhood are linked in my memory. Politics were thrust into my blood at the age of eight by a national tragedy.

In August 1951 Cuba was rocked by an event that nearly sparked a revolution. At the center of it was Eddy Chibás, a popular politician and front-runner by far in the presidential elections less than a year away. Though I was not entirely sure what an election was, I knew something big was happening. Lugareño buzzed with excitement. The name Chibás was on everyone's lips. The meteoric rise of his mass-based *Ortodoxo* Party threatened the stranglehold of the corrupt Liberal and Authentic parties. The latter, regarded as a tool of the United States, had held the electorate for ransom since Cuba's independence in 1902.

"Chibás for president!"

"Things are going to change . . ."

"Eddy is our man!"

Chibás set himself up as the people's prosecutor on behalf of justice, and the *Ortodoxo* Party was united by his charismatic personality. Despite his origins in the wealthy white elite, he embodied the hopes and aspirations of all segments of the disgruntled Cuban population, from poor white peasants and victimized blacks to upper-class intellectuals. The *Ortodoxo* Party symbolized change. Its emblem, a broom, and its motto—"Pride Versus Money"—caught on like wildfire.

I absorbed every scrap of gossip that drifted my way. Much of it came through a mysterious square box that drastically changed our way of life—the radio.

We were the first family in our neighborhood to own a radio. That was back in 1951, when I was nine; I remember listening to the broadcast of the fight in which Jersey Joe Walcott knocked out Ezzard Charles, my mother's favorite. She bawled for days. From then on, our living room was filled with neighbors avid for news, music, and tear-jerking soap operas.

The radio introduced me to a new music from a faraway place that came on the shortwave band only late at night. It entered my soul, sometimes moving me to tears. I had heard nothing like it.

That was my introduction to jazz. In the darkness, the radio was my private music box. I would wait until everyone was asleep, then sneak from my hammock, switch the radio on low, and turn the dial until I found that special music.

The late-night music programs were in English. Because my parents had made us learn their native tongue, I could pick up on things being said. These clandestine moments were the only times I did not feel ashamed of the foreign language that branded me a *pichón*. When my elder sister Esther woke me for school, I was always tired. Invariably late, I flunked class after class, but I kept my new passion to myself.

The radio also brought the message of Eddy Chibás. By seven forty-five in the evening, neighbors were piling into our house. The place fell quiet toward eight o'clock, when everyone huddled around the box.

At 8:00 P.M. precisely, *The Voice of the People* began, Chibás's weekly half hour program that over the last decade had become Cuba's most-listened-to broadcast. My family and our neighbors gathered religiously on our veranda waiting in silence to hear the distinctive tones of the man everyone said would be Cuba's next president: "People of Cuba, fellow citizens . . . I am here once again to denounce the evils eating away at

the moral fiber of our motherland. . . . My voice is that of the humble, who hunger for good government and thirst for justice and fair play."

Not given to showing feelings, my father listened straightfaced but engrossed. He claimed, "Dem politics people is no damn good," yet he took notice of Chibás, whose photograph was in every newspaper, generally with one arm raised as he talked. My mother was as enthralled by this balding, chubby man who wore thick spectacles over small eyes as she was by any film star; she cut out his picture and stuck it on her bedroom wall. Every Sunday, as neighbors wept at his speeches, tears streamed down her cheeks, too. Chibás so fascinated me that I would imitate him in front of the mirror: "People of Cuba, I call upon you to sweep away corruption and fulfill this nation's destiny by ushering in justice!"

Then came the event that led to the sudden end of Chibás's extraordinary life and brought Cuba to a standstill. It began as a rather banal incident. During one broadcast, he accused the minister of education of transferring millions of dollars from the schoolchildren's breakfast program to the minister's personal foreign accounts. The minister shot back, "Prove it, or you're a damned liar!" So Chibás, a scrupulously trustworthy politician, found himself embroiled in a snowballing scandal that threatened his credibility.

The grumbling population knew that Cuba had been ruled by thieves for seven years, since the mulatto president Batista was beaten at the polls in 1944. Everyone knew about the misdeeds of the government of President Carlos Prío Socarrás, who, like his predecessor, Ramón Grau San Martín, was shamelessly looting the national treasury. So most of the nation was rooting for Cuba's darling politician to produce evidence the following Sunday.

Luckily, there was somewhere I could get a full rendition of what was happening: our black social club, *Amantes del Progreso,* where men got together to drink and discuss politics and all manner of grown-up issues. It was at the club that we children got help with our homework. It provided an alternative educational system; we eavesdropped on amazing things about the history of Cuban blacks that regular school did not

teach. Arguments raged at *Amantes del Progreso* all week while the newspapers reported daily on the escalating controversy between Chibás and the minister of education.

People were impatient for Sunday. Come Sunday, Eddy Chibás would surely provide the proof. When the big moment came, our tiny living room was packed.

At last, Chibás began to address his mass radio audience. He denounced government corruption and appealed for a new Cuba with jobs, dignity, equality, and fair play for all.

Toward the end of his half hour talk, he said, "Last week I promised to prove Minister Aureliano Sánchez Arango's corruption. . . ."

Then Chibás told a story about the scientist Galileo Galilei who, long ago, claimed that the earth moved around the sun. Since everyone at the time believed the earth to be the center of the universe, he was ostracized by the Catholic Church. "I cannot prove it, yet it moves around the sun," Galileo repeated as he was being condemned. Chibás said that like Galileo he could not show proof, yet he stood steadfastly behind his charges of theft against the minister.

Everyone was surprised and perplexed.

Abruptly, Chibás's voice went off the air, and Sunday's regular music program began. His studio time had run out, but, unknowingly, he continued to read his stirring speech, aiming to shock Cubans into revolt against the government. So when he ended with the shout, "People of Cuba, wake up! This is my last knock at the door!" none of his listeners heard that final cry.

Before anyone could stop him, Chibás pulled out a pistol, turned it on himself, and pumped several bullets into his chest. Listeners only realized, in horror, what had happened when the music was interrupted with news that pierced the nation's heart.

"Eddy Chibás has just shot himself in the studio!" the presenter announced.

Our home was in mourning. A black cloth hung around the picture of Chibás in our living room. The radio was turned low. At our lit-

tle cemetery people placed flowers. I knew about death, but suicide was something I had not encountered before.

Many tales surrounded Chibás's funeral in Havana. It was said that veiled women dressed in black stormed the grave begging to be buried with him, screaming, "Eddy! Eddy! Take me with you!" Cases were reported of people overcome by grief taking their own lives. Havana's police abandoned any attempt to contain the crowds and were engulfed by a throng estimated at almost half a million.

The air was electric; a single spark could start a conflagration engulfing the island. In people's minds was the specter of the bloody scenes following the overthrow of dictator Gerardo Machado in 1933, when mobs took to the streets, burning, looting, and exacting retribution. To this day, many maintain that Chibás intended to push Cubans into the arms of revolution with his suicide. Cuba did come very close to a military coup that day: a top-ranking armed forces officer, Major Ravel, approached Millo Ochoa, the interim *Ortodoxo* Party leader, offering to overthrow the government. All that had to be done was to march the thousands of mourners to the presidential palace and demand President Prío Socarrás's resignation; the military would do the rest. Ochoa rejected the idea outright, but within eight months Prío Socarrás's regime was indeed ousted by military coup from a very different quarter.

Chibás's suicide remained forever in my mind, not solely because of its dramatic nationwide repercussions—the outburst of violence that would follow plunged Cuba into bloodshed and civil war—but because it coincided with my father's falling ill and nearly dying. Those two events were intertwined with the most shattering experience of my childhood: the breakup of my family.

Chibás had been dead a month when my father began to cough and took to bed with what was thought to be pneumonia. It turned out to be tuberculosis.

Everything changed in our house. There was no laughter, no loud music on weekends, no gathering on the porch at nightfall, no tales of

duppies, those Jamaican ghosts that came to life at the stroke of midnight. A blanket of secrecy fell over our home. Neighbors stopped coming to visit. People would inquire over the fence about my father's health, then go their way.

My mother had moved into Esther and Martha's room and was the one to bring him food. She took special care to wash all his utensils in boiling water after first soaking them in bleach. A masked male nurse came every day to give him shots. We were not permitted to get close to him and had strict orders not to touch anything he used. Only the elder children, Richard and Esther, were allowed to see him.

The door to my father's room remained shut for weeks. My mother would rush to him several times a night when we heard his fits of coughing. I learned just how ill he was from the neighborhood kids.

"*Tu papá está tuberculoso*," one of my pals said. I repeated it to my mother.

"Who tell you dat?" she said gruffly. "It's just a bad caugh."

That was the name given to my father's illness: the "bad caugh." But I knew he had an incurable disease. The panic that entered my life was quite different from the one I had experienced because of my mother's beatings.

Every so often the doctor came, his face grave by the time he left. Before long we ran out of money, and he stopped coming. The pharmacist shut down our credit just as my father's cough worsened, requiring penicillin injections for which there was no cash.

My parents' friends rushed to our aid, and everyone brought something to quiet our hungry bellies. My mother no longer sewed or baked for extra cash since customers no longer came, for fear of contagion.

My parents were in debt to their friends, to the shops, to the pharmacy, to the doctor, even to the sugar mill, which advanced wages to be repaid at the next crop. We had no money at all. We would collect empty bottles and sell them for twenty-five cents per sack. We ate once a day, invariably cornmeal or a wild grass called *kalalu*. If there was neither, my mother boiled water, added sugar, and served it to us as "soup."

She was perpetually irritable, giving me yet more reason to keep out of her way.

I was particularly apprehensive when our West Indian friends started coming by to sit with her for long periods: Mrs. Winnie, Mr. Heath's widow; Mr. Alfred, the lay preacher who gave me Bible lessons; Mr. Anderson, leader of the West Indian lodge; the Bryans from up the street. They all had done the same thing a few weeks before Mr. Heath had died.

One day my mother called us all together. Our father's health had worsened, she said. Unless he had stronger, more expensive medicine, his condition would deteriorate. So she was leaving for Havana to find work for a time to send back money for his treatment.

Cuba's capital conjured up images gleaned from our teachers: bright lights, museums, hotels, parks, enticing stores, wide avenues, flashy American cars, scores of nightclubs, and people dressed in fine clothes living well in splendid houses.

But as soon as my mother left for Havana, leaving my eighteen-year-old sister, Esther, in charge, rumors started flying. People said my mother had abandoned her husband and children, that she was a *mujer mala*, bad woman, who had gone to Havana to bed other men for money. I got into nasty fights with the neighborhood boys who called her a *puta*, whore. I took to carrying a sharpened table knife. Nobody was going to get away with calling my mother a whore!

Much else was happening at the time that diverted my attention. Cuba was experiencing an explosion in song and dance that placed the island firmly on the map. Afro-Cuban mambo was conquering the world. The airwaves were awash with the music of singers such as Celia Crúz, Beny Moré, Vicentico Valdés, Daniel Santos, Alberto Beltrán, and Rolando Laserie.

The radio also reported on a major war in progress in Korea. That was the first time I heard talk of communism. Our school teachers spoke of the help Cuba was giving the Americans to conquer the Chinese and Koreans. All young men in Central Lugareño were required to register for induction into the army at Rural Guard headquarters.

My mother became nearly hysterical at the prospect of my brother Richard having to go to Korea, so as soon as she got to Havana she arranged for him to follow. She found work as a maid for white families, and money orders began arriving in the post. The pharmacy reopened our credit, and the doctor resumed monitoring my father's condition.

Twice Mother came home to check on his progress and then returned to her work in the capital. On her first return visit, she went looking for an old woman we knew as Tecla who lived alone in a hut in the countryside about five kilometers from town. Tecla was reputed to practice *brujeria*, witchcraft. Everyone was afraid of her except my mother. Tecla became a regular visitor to our home, taking charge of my father's care, as my mother had instructed, preparing him special teas. Smoke poured from his room, which Tecla fumigated several times a day. The smell of burned leaves clung to everything, mixed with the scent of Tecla's brewed teas. My father was coughing less.

One day, the door to his room opened wide, and I saw him for the first time in months, standing. He was all bones; his face was chalk white. But with Tecla's help he took a few slow paces into the living room, then back to his room. He was still very weak, but he was on his feet. He smiled at me.

"It's OK, Lito," he said.

Tears rolled down my cheeks. The old witch had performed a miracle.

My father improved rapidly. As his cough subsided, he took short walks around the house and began tending the garden again. He was almost his old self when my mother returned in February 1952. But no sooner was she back than they got into a fight. It was a big scandal that brought neighbors flocking and had the town buzzing with gossip for years. In the heat of their argument, my mother picked up a pair of long, sharp scissors and attempted to kill my father. The shame was unbearable.

Even before my father's disease I had noticed the dangerous shadows that lurked around our home, refusing to dissipate. My mother, who

took to sleeping in my sisters' room during his illness, never returned to the bedroom they had shared. Though none of us knew at the time what had happened, my parents' breakup was the culmination of a lingering feud.

My father had accused my mother of an affair with another man, Sergio Correa, bandleader of the circus *Santos y Artigas* that visited Lugareño. The previous year, for the two weeks the circus was in town, she took us children repeatedly. It was soon after the circus left that my father first came down with a fever and cough. In Havana, my mother ran into Mr. Correa again. Learning of her family problems, he helped her find a room. On returning home, she wrote him a letter of thanks. The postmaster, my father's friend, informed him that she was writing to a man in Havana, which was in line with gossip that had circulated for months. Intercepting her letter to Sergio Correa and reading the worst into it, my father used Correa's reply as proof of my mother's infidelity.

In Cuba, being a cuckold was the worst blow a man could sustain to his dignity; the reverse was expected and was a matter of pride. My father had had an affair with Mabel for years, but to the townspeople that merely proved he was an *hombre*, a man. Therefore, the whole town was on his side. My mother decided to call it quits.

The day after their big fight, my mother packed her belongings and called us together. She told us she was leaving and would not return. My brothers and sisters tearfully begged her not to go. She wept bitterly as she hugged us one by one. Then she quickly grabbed two suitcases and ran out to a waiting taxi.

"I'm shaking the dust of this house off my shoes," she said as she got in the car.

For years I had wanted her to disappear from my life. I had dreamed of running away from home, imagined hiding on top of the sacks of sugar that went by train to the port to be loaded onto ships for America. I also dreamed of death, which I understood to be a peaceful state where no one could bother me anymore.

Now, three months after my ninth birthday, my mother was gone, along with her merciless beatings. I felt emptiness, a heavy melancholy that brought down tears. In addition, the terror that my father might fall sick again and die overpowered me. Somehow, my mother's presence had provided a silent guarantee that we would overcome any adversity.

I did not cry the day she left, or the following week. In the mornings, I would automatically look around, expecting to see her. As it dawned on me she had gone forever, I slipped into a mourning that sank its roots ever deeper.

A strange New Year's Eve ritual that my father organized emphasized the weight of my mother's absence. He ordered that her seat at the table remain empty, her plate, fork, glass, and spoon on display. A portion of food was placed on the plate and left untouched throughout our end-of-year supper.

Within weeks, Mother's name vanished from our lips as if the earth had swallowed her. Esther, who had taken care of us during those months when our mother worked in Havana, moved into her place of authority and inherited the job of dispensing my regular beatings. I bore her lashes without crying, having developed such a resistance to them that she herself would break into tears.

"Lito, for God's sake, why you force me to beat you?" Esther cried one day.

She would grab me, hug me tightly, and sob while caressing my face. In that sense, her beatings ended up much like my father's. No amount of lashing could tame me. The more I was punished, the more daring and uncontrollable I became.

6

BIG MULATTO RETURNS: THE RACIAL DIVIDE

On March 10, 1952, two weeks after my mother's departure, the country awoke to martial music and the shocking news that General Fulgencio Batista had grabbed power again.

"I have carried out this coup because of my love for the people," he said. "But shoulder to shoulder we must work for the spiritual harmony of the great Cuban family."

Batista was aware of having forced himself, for the second time, upon a country whose whites destested him. The olive-skinned general, descended from mulatto freedmen, had been a sugarcane cutter as a child. At eighteen, he left the cane fields, roamed for a while, then mysteriously slipped into the all-white Cuban army. During the chaos unleashed by an ongoing revolution in 1933, when Cubans rose up to overthrow the dictator Gerardo Machado, he had staged a coup d'état at the age of thirty-two and imposed himself on the nation. However, because of his perceived race he was forced to wield power behind the scenes, allowing others to bear the title *presidente*.

Eager to end the spiraling chaos, the United States had backed Batista's coup, but representatives of Cuba's establishment approached the U.S. ambassador Sumner Wells, seeking to dislodge the new strongman on racial grounds. "In their private talks with me," Wells recalled, "the ABC revolutionaries [a secret anti-Batista group] pointed to the fact that Sergeant Batista is a Negro." Refusing to take the bait, the ambassador

curtly replied, "Gentlemen, I am more interested in the ideas in his head than in the color of his skin."

Wooing the poor with populist social reforms, Batista was elected Cuba's first colored president in 1940. He immediately appointed blacks to high offices for the first time in Cuba's history and pushed to expand the racial integration of the armed forces. This brought charges that he intended to "negrify" the country, even though he spared no effort to pass for white.

Batista's rule as a populist, benevolent dictator ended in 1944, when his political party was voted out of office. Sent packing into exile in the United States, he nonetheless kept an eye on Cuban politics. His discreet return to Cuba at the time when Eddy Chibás was the darling of the electorate was not regarded as a threat. Within months of Chibás's suicide, he again seized power.

The day of his return, many people were in the street, gesticulating and talking animatedly, having just heard the news. I was dragging my feet on my way to school, cutting through town to get there.

The bar was heaving with people. Surprisingly, the Rural Guards were drinking with the *jorocóns*, all slapping one another on the back and hugging. Against the background of boisterous shouts, the jukebox blared out Celia Cruz's "Mata Siguaraya."

"*Que viva El General!*" Long live the general!

"*Palante El Indio!*" Forward, Indian!

"*Arriba El Mulatón!*" Thumbs up for the Big Mulatto!

I rushed home from school to find my family and neighbors huddled around the radio, a mixture of contained joy and fear in their faces. My father shook his head in wonderment, cautiously refraining from any opinion that might later be attributed to him.

For weeks, the talk at our social club was of the miraculous way the Big Mulatto seized power again. Batista's admirers spoke of "divine intervention"; it was rumored that, as an adherent of the Afro-Cuban religion Santería, he had been installed by the gods of Africa. He was said to be the son of Shango, the god of war, lightning, virility, and fire.

No sooner was he in the presidential chair than Batista became the laughingstock of the whites, who told corrosive *chistes* (jokes) portraying him as a dumb and incompetent Negro. It was alleged that he could not speak Castilian Spanish properly and often slipped into *kaló*, the idiom of the black underclass. It was said he had no table manners and ate fried plantains with his fingers then wiped his hands on the tablecloth. It was rumored he straightened his "bad hair" with American-imported products. He was derided for secretly adhering to the Afro-Cuban cults, a widely known fact that he never admitted.

Cuba's blue bloods hated the mulatto intruder ardently. Within fifteen months of his second reign as Cuba's strongman came the first of a series of attempts to topple him. In July 1953, the upper-class lawyer Fidel Castro, a onetime Chibás follower, led an aborted putsch that was pitilessly put down by the recently integrated army. Blacks remained loyal to Batista.

In 1952 blacks constituted about 40 percent of the population and greeted the general's return to power with undisguised satisfaction. They defended him against racial mockery, which they took personally.

"People would never talk like that about a white man," Emilio bitterly remarked to my father. "If he's a bastard, very well—but he's *our* bastard!"

The old folks remembered that during his first administration Batista overturned the long-standing prohibition of Afro-Cuban religions and festivities. Blacks revered him as the first Cuban leader to take up the cause of the poor, while the Communists considered him to be an ally of the working class.

The question of race became more and more heated. Whites continued to insist that a colored man was inappropriate as the head of state. Batista's appointment of three black cabinet ministers caused waves. When Justice Minister Dr. Ángel Céspedes assumed his post, white staff resigned rather than serve under a Negro. Batista's choice of a mulatto, General Tabernilla, to head the army pleased the black population but sparked more race-based criticism.

When Haitian president General Paul Magloire, a staunch Batista ally, came to Cuba on an official visit, a posh Havana hotel refused him and his black retinue lodging because of his color. In another high-profile incident, the black American entertainer Nat King Cole was not served at the very nightclub where he was performing.

The winds of change blowing from America further fanned black grumbling. The U.S. civil rights movement, obliquely reported by the Cuban press, fired imaginations and fueled demands for a government attack on segregated facilities. Batista was unwilling to risk further unpopularity by banning the press or gagging the radio and TV, so we were relatively well informed about the world around us. Although subject to political censorship, newspapers continued to circulate unhindered. Black protest began to seep into the press.

The Confederation of Cuban Workers, the main labor union, which was an outlet for black grievances, pressured the government to pass a "compensatory law" requiring all work centers to employ blacks and whites on a 50–50 basis. The black social clubs prodded the administration to commit to immediate desegregation, targeting the department stores popularly known as Ten Cents stores, which refused to employ Negroes. Leery of losing black support but fearing a backlash from the white elite that he assiduously courted, Batista's regime was caught in the crossfire.

The government ordered Ten Cents to hire blacks and moved to further expand the integration of public administration, the armed forces and police, the diplomatic corps, and institutions such as banks. For the first time, high-ranking colored officials were appointed to a lily-white navy that within two years would stage a bloody attempt to unseat Batista. Blacks were not satisfied, but Batista was unwilling to go further. Black leaders sought to impress on him the impatience of the black populace. The secretary-general of the powerful Confederation of Cuban Workers told him, "General, the blacks sympathize with you. But they are unsure whether you sympathize with them."

There was gossip that the president discouraged his darker-skinned relatives from visiting him at the presidential palace. But the incident

that sowed real distrust among blacks came after Batista was rebuffed by the all-white Havana Yacht Club, which refused him membership on the basis of race. The Havana Biltmore, Vedado Tennis Club, and Casino Español likewise closed ranks against him. In solidarity with the humiliated president, the national leadership of the black social clubs unanimously voted to make a collective gesture, since they felt the insult was aimed at the black population as well.

"Our clubs have decided to confer on you lifelong membership," they are said to have told Batista.

"Thank you," he replied. "When the time comes I will respond to that offer."

He never did respond, and blacks felt aggrieved. The president, blacks felt, was snubbing them by denying his own racial heritage. Other disappointments reinforced that impression and led to black aloofness toward the man they once considered a savior.

The Big Mulatto also managed to alienate the Communists who had been his erstwhile allies during his first reign, when they had saluted him as the "herald of the working class, defender of the poor, the true democrat." But after his successful coup, they found him a changed man. Feeling betrayed when Batista denied them any ministerial posts, the Communists pointed to the "illegitimacy" of Batista's rule and called for his removal.

The first miracle to occur in my life, changing its course altogether, came in 1955. Exactly three years after my mother left, ending my parents' twenty-year marriage, Gladys King, a Costa-Rican of Jamaican descent living in America, came into our family.

She had met our aunt Vera, who lived in New York and had casually shown Gladys my father's photo. Gladys liked the look of him, and soon they were writing to each other. Then she began calling him at the only public telephone in Lugareño, at the post office. Like my father, she was a God-fearing Protestant who lived by the Bible and cared little about anything outside religion. They became engaged by correspon-

dence. Suddenly, everyone in the house was excited about the possibility that she could take us to America where she worked as a maid for a Jewish family, earning a weekly salary of forty dollars.

The prospect of going to the United States was like a fairy tale.

One day, after two years of correspondence, our now-radiant father announced that Gladys was paying us a visit for Christmas. We were dazzled when she showed up in the shape of an exquisitely dressed, chocolate-colored lady who spoke English like the Americans and a slightly different Spanish from ours. She arrived with several suitcases full of gifts. I received three nice shirts, a pair of brand-new shoes, and two pairs of blue jeans—the first I had ever worn in my life. I caused a stir strutting about town showing off my American clothes.

The most important thing that came with Gladys was a colorful, glossy magazine called *Ebony* that landed in our home and neighborhood like a bomb. There was not a single white face in it—only healthy-looking, well-dressed, authoritative, handsome blacks! *Ebony* was full of stories about doctors, engineers, baseball players, boxers, teachers, architects, university students, and military men—the black *americanos* of whom I had heard so much. Since my parents had whipped a proficiency in English into me, I could read the stories. Emilio and the others had not lied. There was indeed a place where Negroes were rich and famous and powerful. America, from whence came the heart-wrenchingly beautiful music I had discovered through our radio, was definitely the place to be. A dreamlike world opened up that would never leave me.

Within two weeks, my father and Gladys married, and he announced he would be leaving for America in search of work. His plan was to work for a year then bring Victor Jr. there. Frank, Martha, and I would follow. Richard and Esther had decided to stay in Cuba.

However, once my father went to the United States insecurity and fear engulfed us again for he remained jobless for months. Our situation plummeted; we fell back on eating cornmeal and *kalalu* leaves and drinking sweetened boiled water. He eventually landed a job at a Brooklyn button factory, but the plan for my siblings and me to join him had

to wait, for his weekly remittances of fifty dollars swiftly disappeared into the hands of others, to pay off huge debts. We hit rock bottom, and this time Esther made the decision to disperse the family.

Frank and Esther remained in Lugareño. Victor Jr., who was first on the list to depart to the United States, went to Havana to stay with our mother. Richard, our eldest brother, had long since preceded him. Martha was sent to the port city of Nuevitas to live with our uncle Ernest and his family. I was taken to Camagüey and billeted on a set of cousins whose existence was unknown to me until then.

Camagüey was my first encounter with a big city, and I loved it. There were big streets, big parks, bars and shops, and a huge commercial section displaying the sort of goods I had seen only in magazines. People seemed to do pretty much as they liked, not worrying what others said or thought. The impersonality of it all appealed to me. It was definitely my kind of environment.

In 1956 my father paid a return visit from the United States to Cuba to work the sugar harvest, hoping to receive the pension that had been promised him. He regrouped the family in Lugareño and showered us with wonderful tales of life in America. He was saving hard so that my siblings and I could join him there.

After my taste of big-city life, I hated Lugareño even more than before. The situation between blacks and whites had worsened, with a polarization between pro- and anti-Batista sentiments. The blacks generally favored the regime; the whites were split. Though most upper crust whites hated Batista, the widespread graft and corruption fostered by his regime earned him support from a sizeable chunk of the bourgeoisie. Moreover, the mulatto dictator continued to enjoy considerable support among the poorer segments of the white population.

But things were not going well for the Big Mulatto, who had put down a revolt by the elite navy. The mutiny was quelled with much blood spilling and savagery, the rebels having been strafed and bombed by aircraft, shredded by artillery. The violence kept spiraling after terrorist groups gunned down high-ranking army and police officials in Havana.

When the regime silenced the press, the opposition resorted to antigovernment songs and lethal jokes. One ditty particularly irked the blacks:

Cascabel, Cascabel,
ya llego Fidel,
pa' tumbar al negro mono
que está en el poder!

Jingle bell, Jingle bell,
Here has come Fidel.
To overthrow the nigger monkey
Who's giving us hell.

Whites whistled this tune provocatively in 1957. It was well known that the president ascribed his swarthy complexion to Indian ancestry, not African. According to rumor, he had gone out of his way to "marry white." Yet many blacks felt they must defend him.

The proliferation of informers, *chivatos*, made it risky to engage in such antigovernment taunts. Batista turned into his own worst enemy, alienating even the blacks with his increasingly repressive actions. There was criminal excess among the police, ruthlessness among the lawless paramilitary groups he set up to deal with the opposition, and an overall assault on civil rights.

One of the first things I noticed on returning to Lugareño was that anti-Batista jokes had escalated. Whites were openly saying that they would not be governed by a *negro mono*. President Batista, a "nigger monkey"? I was forbidden to repeat such jokes at home, but I knew them through my pal Chequelo, whose grandparents had come from Spain and who lived with his mother on the edge of the white part of town.

Lanky, green-eyed Chequelo had been close to me since kindergarten even though his mother objected to our friendship, barring me from

their home. My mother retaliated by barring him from ours, but now that she was gone he visited me at will. We fought sometimes—when he called me a *pichón de jamaiquino* and I called him a filthy *gallego*—but we always made up. The townsfolk dubbed us "Hunger and Necessity," so inseparable were we. It was impossible for him to have a secret I did not know, and vice versa. Whenever there was a new joke, I was sure to hear it from him.

"Hey, listen to this one, *chico*—it's the best!" he would say. "That mulatto is so stupid!" The general, he related, was about to leave on a trip and bought fourteen newspapers from the Negro manning the newspaper stand near the presidential palace. The man was overjoyed and grateful for the display of generosity.

"I see that you care for us," the man told the general.

"Race ain't got nothin' to do with it," Batista growled, annoyed at the inference of kinship with blacks. "It's just that ah is goin' for a two-week vacation and wants to keep up on the news!"

We doubled up with laughter. Chequelo went from joke to joke and I listened as if watching a comic movie. However, little by little I began to become aware of the racial slant in most of my buddy's jokes about Batista.

"Let me tell you the latest," Chequelo said one day. "What's the difference between Batista and a monkey?"

I shrugged, unenthusiastically, aware of the widespread association that whites made between Negroes and monkeys.

"The difference is that monkeys eat bananas and throw the skin away, while Batista throws away the banana and eats the skin."

Chequelo roared; this time I did not. I no longer found those jokes funny.

"Hey, Chequelo, I don't want to hear those things anymore," I said.

"What's wrong, *chico*?"

I told him I was a Negro, too.

"Oh, jokes are jokes—nothing to do with your *raza*," he retorted.

"I don't want to hear any more—" I said, but he cut me off.

"Since that shit-head nigger got into power, you people seem to have grown wings," he said angrily. "But Negroes always shit on the carpet, either on entering or exiting."

I had heard that Cuban dictum ever since I was a child but had not expected it from Chequelo. Anger surged within me. He was older, bigger, brawnier than me, but that day I was ready to tear into his white face. For a split second neither of us knew what the other would do. Race had lodged itself between my childhood friend and me for the first time.

He looked at me, amazed, shrugged his shoulders, turned around, and left. I stood there, my fists still clenched but relieved, for I knew he could have beaten me to a pulp.

7

SEASON OF GUNS: THE MERCILESS CIVIL WAR

Heavy machine-gun fire exploded around the presidential palace on the morning of March 13, 1957, three days after the fifth anniversary of Batista's coup. A suicide commando headed by student leader José Antonio Echevarría had stormed the president's office in broad daylight. Miraculously, the Big Mulatto escaped this assassination attempt.

"If they throw flowers, I shall throw flowers. But since they shoot bullets, I shall shoot bullets, too," a defiant Batista told the nation. Those commandos not slain at the palace were tracked down and slaughtered one by one in the following days. Cuba was in an infernal cycle of terror and counterterror. In the cities, clandestine rebel cells set off bombs and assassinated officials. In the countryside, activists loyal to Fidel Castro sabotaged economic and military targets. The entire country was destabilized.

My father returned from the United States in 1957, as he had done the previous two years. By then, he had managed to get Victor Jr. to America. Now three salaries were at work to pluck Frank, Martha, and me out of Cuba. The clock was ticking in my favor. However, Esther decided to remain in Cuba to finish her training as a teacher.

The look darkening my father's face meant he saw danger on the horizon for his family. He followed the deteriorating political situation with great anxiety, conferring almost daily with Emilio.

"These goddamned whites just want to get a colored man out of the presidential office!" Emilio fumed. If Batista was overthrown, many

blacks would be massacred, he said, echoing a widespread rumor made current by Batista supporters. They said that Batista's opponents were racists and therefore would not hesitate to kill blacks, as had been done in 1912.

By early 1958, several armed rebel strongholds were lodged in the mountainous areas. Rumors had spread about the racist intentions of the rebels, who countered that they had a black man in their midst, one Juan Almeida Bosque. Batista, they said, was stirring up racial feelings among Cubans who otherwise were color-blind.

I was still in the dark about the root causes of the civil war. People talked about communism, which my father claimed was something "un-Christian." But I had lost much respect for the Bible teachings inculcated into me with lashes. If God was so good, why did he allow blacks to be slaves? No one could answer that question.

Fear and suspicion visited our town. Esther told me not to repeat anything said at home, warning me to be careful with my friend Chequelo. My father was the last person I could ask about the growing struggle. He had long shielded himself behind the argument that these were "Cuban affairs" with which we should not be involved.

I had found a way to defuse the tense situation by turning it into fun. Every day, I trekked to school with a newfound excitement. The widespread rumors about the wave of terrorist bombings, kidnappings, cane-field burnings, and insurrectional agitation that were the talk of the day fed my imagination.

Once the ripples of the widening conflict reached our town everything in Lugareño changed rapidly, with people divided for or against Batista. The division entered our own home. Victor Jr., now in the United States, had always been a firm Batista supporter, to the point of having been on the verge of joining his army. Esther and Frank were increasingly opposed to the government, despite my father's pleas for neutrality.

The conflict became very personal when one of our family friends was found hanging from a lamppost. He was the uncle of Gertrudis

Quintanilla, Esther's best friend, whom Esther considered her sister. There were rumors that he was overheard saying he opposed the government; a *chivato* had denounced him. No one was in any doubt that the murder was the work of the Rural Guard now posted in our town. The new guards, two of whom were black, were not to be fooled with; you saw that in their faces.

For Chequelo and me, seeing people afraid and all the hush-hush were sources of excitement. We loved it. One day I had an idea.

"Let's do something spectacular and people will think it's the rebels."

"Yeah, but like what?" he asked.

We always competed to see who could think up the most daringly outrageous deeds. Each time, we went a little further. Since bombs were exploding in cinemas and in public places all over the island, how about if one went off right here?

"Let's bomb the school; they'll think the rebels did it," I said.

Chequelo's face lit up with glee. "Great, but where'll we get a bomb?"

With many game hunters in our town, including Chequelo's uncle, we had access to bullets. My idea was to collect powder from the bullets, put a long wick to the gunpowder, then light it. We had little difficulty getting the bullets—Chequelo stole them from his uncle. But removing the lead, even with pliers, was another story. So we decided we would tie several bullets together with wire, light a fire, and throw the bundle of bullets into it. That would set off a machine-gun-like conflagration.

We decided to try out our stunt on my next-door neighbor, Señor Chin, who was suspected of being an informer. He was Chinese, married to a mulatto woman who passed as white. Their several pretty daughters all claimed to be white. Since Chin was a staunch Batista supporter, everyone said he was a *chivato*.

One night, around eleven, Chequelo and I crept into his backyard, lit a fire, dropped a bundle of a half-dozen bullets into it, and ran straight to our homes. I had barely gotten in when I heard the loud bangs.

Shortly after, Mr. Chin ran out of his house and into the street, shouting, "I've been shot at! They want to kill me!"

The next day, people all over town said the rebels had attacked Mr. Chin's house. Knowing his pro-Batista sympathies, everyone figured that unknown revolutionary terrorists had attacked him. Only Chequelo and I knew the truth. We were enthralled, but it had suddenly become dangerous.

The Rural Guards patrolled the streets at all hours, so Chequelo and I cooled our heels for a while. They watched Mr. Chin's house, but my older sister Esther was convinced they were also watching our family's movements, even hiding behind the sugarcane trains parked opposite our house.

My brother Frank was by nature reserved. Since he hardly spoke to anyone, the Rural Guards assumed he was antigovernment, which happened to be true. He and my sister Esther were the two in our home who were suspects. At only fourteen, I was above suspicion. It was common knowledge that my father never involved himself with politics, which he saw as the devil's pastime designed to compound people's misery.

One day, we heard that the cane fields had been set afire. Now the danger was everywhere. Batista's terror campaign could not check the wave of sabotage, bombings, and assassinations. The situation in Lugareño so deteriorated that my family was shockingly affected. One day I was in school when I heard shouting.

"*Lo estan matando!*" They're killing him!

I ran out and saw Frank on his knees, bloodied. He was being beaten with long sabers by two Rural Guards, one of them black, who were shouting, "*Corre, negro cabron! Corre!*" Run, goddamned nigger! Run!

They wanted him to run so they could shoot him in the back. The townspeople yelled at him not to run. A scream lodged in my throat. *Don't run, Frank!* I cried inwardly. I was shaking from head to toe. Frank was my favorite brother. He always tried to save me from beatings by taking the blame for things I had done. I loved him.

Frank received many blows that day. He collapsed to the ground several times but kept getting up and walking, slowly, a few steps ahead of the frenzied guards. He uttered not a word under the assault. Eventually they tired of beating him and let him go. When people felt it was safe, they rushed to his aid.

My father bit his lips when people recounted what had occurred. After everyone had gone, leaving only us, he slumped over and wept. Esther, too, began crying. Soon we were all sobbing. Our brother had nearly been killed.

"Goddamn Cuba!" My father groaned. "Ah goin' take all o' you outta dis place."

That was one of the few times I heard my father curse.

Irrefutable confirmation that his invective was not a passing flicker of anger came the next day when he put our house up for sale along with our household effects. Meanwhile Gladys processed our papers, claiming us as her stepchildren. I remember posing for my passport photo—the first time I had ever been photographed. From then on everything went dizzyingly quickly. Leave Central Lugareño? My heart leaped.

A big farewell party was organized for us at our social club, where people showered my father with praise for being an exemplar, raising such a decent family, and instilling pride in colored folk.

Happiness and sorrow fused when the moment for us to depart arrived. We made the rounds, saying good-bye to those we had known all our lives. Friends, neighbors, family, we all cried. I hated Lugareño, but I was sad. What would become of all the people I had grown up with? The Morejóns; the nice white lady, Catuca, to whom we had sold our house; Emilio Portuondo, the man who had expanded my universe . . . and my buddy Chequelo?

The next thing I knew, we were on a bus bound for Havana, leaving forever a kind of life I wished for no one.

In Havana we stayed in a cheap hotel where our nights were filled with the strident sound of sirens as police cars raced about. Several times

I was awakened by deafening explosions. Cuba was on fire. Terrorist bombs blasted away at movie houses, restaurants, and public parks. Trains were derailed and cane fields set ablaze all over the country. Nowhere was safe.

My mother had been in Havana for six years. My father took us to say good-bye to her. He did not enter the decrepit five-story building where she lived on the third floor in a cluttered cubiclelike room. I resented being made to see her, and I hovered near the door as she hugged Martha to her breast. She was weeping.

"Come here, Lito," she called.

I did not move.

"Lito, me say come here, son!" She walked toward me, holding out her arms, tears coursing down her cheeks. I did not move.

A flash of anger swept across her face. "Goddammit, come here!"

She slapped my face. I did not care. Let her slap me. This was the last time she would have the chance. She hugged me tightly, sobbing. I did not hug her back.

The next day, aged fifteen, I was leaving Cuba for the United States. The thought of escaping poverty, escaping racism, and landing in paradise triggered a dance of joy in my soul. Every cell in my body celebrated.

8

COMING TO AMERICA

I GAZED THROUGH THE small, oval aircraft window, my heart careening. Thousands of tiny squares of light from the skyscrapers of New York City glowed like orange lanterns. Havana's ten-story buildings had once fed my childhood fantasies, but they were suddenly dwarfed into insignificance. To my amazement, the buildings stretched into the early morning sky, straining to touch the heavens.

What surged before my eyes was pure science fiction, the natural place for an accomplished daydreamer like me. The thud of the airplane's wheels on the tarmac jolted me to the realization that this was no fantasy. What I had prayed for each day, for as long as I had enough sense to know of America, had become reality.

People walked hurriedly in all directions of the huge airport, arriving or departing. Though dressed in our Sunday best, we must have looked like the peasants we were: our wide, oversized pants, loose check shirts, and heavy snub-nosed leather shoes gave us away. By contrast, self-possessed Americans in smart well-fitting clothes and elegant pointed shoes swaggered about with authority. You could see they were in command. I gazed in awe at that busy, stylish throng. We stood out, with "country" branded all over us, yet we were ignored. People went about their business unmindful of anyone else. In Cuba, even busy people paused to crack jokes or engage in inconsequential conversation.

I immediately registered the blacks. There were two types: those dressed to kill who hurried through the gates, and others in blue uniforms and caps, pushing trolleys of suitcases. I would have changed places with either type. They were broader and taller than the average black

Cuban, and appeared tougher too. The black workers might look at me furtively, crack the hint of a smile or wink, but they refrained from smiling openly.

My image of black Americans conformed to my overblown view of America: they were the richest, handsomest, most powerful blacks on the planet! In Cuba I rarely saw a black professional, whereas in America there were black doctors, teachers, managers galore, people who owned beautiful homes, cars, attended universities, and became anything they wished: lawyers, generals, engineers, architects, pilots. Becoming a pilot was to me the highest attainment; the first black I saw dressed as a pilot was an American.

At Idlewild, the airport in New York where we had landed and where our stepmother, Gladys, was waiting, my nostrils picked up the peculiar smell that I knew from the little clinic in my town and identified with hospitals, although I had never been inside one. The airport was so clean that it smelled like antiseptic.

A wave of heat greeted us when we stepped outside with our six bulging cardboard suitcases full of clothes I would not wear once I realized how differently Americans dressed. We set out in two taxis, racing along interminable highways that went in all directions, crossing, turning, and twisting. My head swiveled from side to side as I tried to take in the amazing scenery of suburban mansions, office buildings, and suspension bridges. The city unfurling before my hungry eyes was full of wide, hectic thoroughfares and tree-lined avenues tightly packed with long shiny cars. In my youth all I had known were dusty dirt roads that mostly led nowhere.

After an hour's drive, the superhighways abruptly gave way to manicured, orderly streets with lush trees and occasional parks that looked like gigantic bouquets of flowers. Bespectacled, dark-suited men with round black caps perched on top of their curly locks walked down the clean but empty streets. Where was everyone? Half an hour later, the driver turned off a broad avenue to navigate less-well-kept streets. I noticed heaps of garbage stacked in empty lots. Here and there I spot-

ted an abandoned building with gaping holes instead of windows or doors.

The complexion of the people changed abruptly from one neighborhood to the next. White faces gave way to black ones in an infinite variety of shades. I was being absorbed into an exclusively black world, and I liked it. Bedford-Stuyvesant, the heart of Brooklyn's largest black community, was indeed a new world. The buildings were sturdy brownstone edifices, lined up in a seamless row stretching for long blocks. I had not seen that type of house before. To my eyes, this was a good neighborhood; in time, I would understand that these so-called ghettos had once been exclusively white enclaves.

When our taxi pulled up at 163 Lefferts Place, I stood incredulous before the solid brick and stone building that would be my home for the next three years. No one could have persuaded me that I was in a slum. Despite its occasional run-down structures, Bedford-Stuyvesant was incomparably superior to anything I had known in Cuba. As far as I was concerned, it was a dream community in a country that was itself a dream world.

My parents rented a fourth-floor, three-bedroom apartment for eighty dollars a month. It was the dream of dreams: individual rooms, running water and two flushing toilets, a small living room with a television, a kitchen with a refrigerator, a gas stove, a toaster, water heater, linoleum floors. This was heavenly compared with the thatch-roofed, dirt-floor, charcoal-kitchen, outdoor-toilet home I had known for most of my fifteen years.

My brother Frank and I each had a bed in the room we shared. We shared a toilet with my sister Martha, who had a room to herself. Having slept for more than half of my life in hammocks that my mother contrived from flour bags, what more could I ask?

I also discovered television. Back home, it was a luxury enjoyed by two or three white families in town. Now my parents had an old black-and-white set, which was beyond anything I expected. I was transfixed. My stepmother controlled when we could switch it on, knowing I would

have remained before it all day long. A popular program was *Amos and Andy*, which every black would come home to see. I also watched the singer Nat King Cole, who, unbelievably, had his own program. A black man with his own TV hour!

Though I had always loved the idea of America, nothing prepared me for the reality. My senses were overwhelmed. I was plunged into the heart of a humongous city that dwarfed anything I had imagined. Everything was on an altogether grander scale, defying comparison with the country I had just left.

Food was one huge change. In Cuba our diet had been very limited and spiced with strong hot pepper. Breakfast used to be ground roast corn mixed with goat's milk, and rough salt-and-water bread. In the good times, which rarely lasted long, we ate white rice, fried plantain, black beans, avocado, and fried minced meat known as *picadillo*, Cuba's national dish. Now we ate "American food": sweet potatoes, red beans, pork chops, fried chicken, and collard greens. I did not know that it was Southern black food, soul food. My stepmother, being from Costa Rica, fixed a tasty mixture of both North and South American dishes. I also discovered bagels with cream cheese, pancakes with maple syrup, and hot dogs. I gorged myself on ice-cream sandwiches, and devoured slices of toast plastered with layer upon layer of peanut butter as if they were my last meal.

The night of my arrival, I sank into a comfortable bed covered by a new cotton sheet. This was living! Only twenty-four hours earlier I had been on a hard, wooden cot, cowering in fear of the turmoil wrought by civil war.

I did not feel the blind commitment to my homeland expected of someone brought up in the ultra-nationalistic Cuban school system. I was not sure I was even Cuban. I no longer cared. Henceforth, I would do everything to be an *American*. I was through with my wretched native island and anxious to put my painful childhood memories behind me.

9

FIRST STEPS IN THE LAND OF THE FREE

In my first days in America I was in a hurry to get out and explore my new neighborhood, so I went for walks around the block. Bedford-Stuyvesant teemed with record shops, bars, and liquor stores. I was struck by the number of people in the streets drinking beer and the fact that music was everywhere, blaring from the loudspeakers of record shops. It was wonderful. Seeing the faces of all these glamorous, glossy-haired black singers on the covers of 45s and LPs was a big thing for me. The popular names were Sam Cooke, the Platters, James Brown, Jackie Wilson, and Brook Benton. The men fashioned their artificially straightened hair into marcel waves. To have a marcel became my goal.

I practically walked on air that first week. Everything I had heard seemed true: America was a veritable land of opportunity. No one could have made me think otherwise.

In Bedford-Stuyvesant, you met no white people apart from the occasional policeman on a street corner. When you went to the shops you saw Jewish proprietors, but they didn't live in the neighborhood. They would leave home early in the morning and return at closing time to their own neighborhoods.

Our neighborhood was a self-contained world of black music, black restaurants and bars, black shops, black clubs, and black churches—all sorts of churches: Pentecostal, Baptist, shouting churches where people played tambourines and danced. The life I encountered in our neighborhood, which people called the ghetto, was quite new.

Every morning, very early, I saw women who looked after white people's babies and scrubbed white people's floors strut out of these dilapidated apartment buildings on their way to work. Many of the men in the neighborhood were drunkards. Yet I loved all-black Bedford Stuyvesant, despite its rundown buildings and the crime, despite the tenements and hoboes sprawled on the sidewalks. I loved America. I felt as if I had been transported to another galaxy.

Within a month I changed my whole style, switching to jeans and T-shirts. To go with my new American look I straightened my hair and fashioned it in marcel waves.

Black American women fixed themselves up stylishly and walked with an air of self-importance. The girls on my block were flashy, in very short skirts and clinging tops that showed off their figures. They seemed freer than women in Cuba. With Cuban girls you had to be careful. In Central Lugareño, males and females kept pretty much apart, but in America girls stayed out late at parties with their boyfriends, and parents seemed not to mind. In Cuba, women went out with boys only when escorted by a chaperone.

I began attending basement parties where we danced belly to belly in a manner called grinding. In no time I was having multiple relationships with black American girls. I always desperately needed cash. My weekly stipend from my father was far from enough to buy records, the new clothes I fancied, and my hair products.

My father was a construction worker, earning forty-five to fifty dollars a week, not much more than my stepmother did at her maid's job. She would rise very early in the morning, take the subway to her employers' home in Yonkers, and return at night. Soon after arriving in America, I began to hunt for employment. I could speak English but had difficulty understanding the American accent, so my choices were limited.

I found my first job in a small Jewish-owned delicatessen by the waterfront, where dockworkers came for lunch. A black Puerto Rican and I washed dishes from in the morning until nine at night. I worked

feverishly in June, July, and August, anticipating school in September. With the twenty-five dollars a week I earned, I was in heaven. Paradise ended abruptly one day when my Puerto Rican friend took me aside and said we were being exploited.

"We should be earning more. People who wash dishes earn thirty dollars."

"The boss did me a favor employing me," I said.

"No, it's us who's doing that fucker a favor. There are labor laws here in America."

I didn't know what a labor law was, but he sounded authoritative.

"If I ask him for a raise, he won't give me, but if we both ask he will have to give us."

What this guy said sounded logical. So we went to Mr. Goldstein as he was closing the shop. The Puerto Rican said we wanted to talk to him about our working conditions.

"What working conditions?"

"Mr. Goldstein, we need you to raise our salary to thirty dollars, or we'll quit."

Mr. Goldstein looked at us wide-eyed. "Well, fellows, you can't quit, because I'm firing you. Get the hell out of my place!" Opening the door, he kicked us out of his delicatessen.

"Motherfucker, see what you did? I lost my job!" I complained to the now-silent Puerto Rican. That was the first time I had cussed in English.

There was something else I would have to sample in time: the sweet center of the American pie. To get there, I enrolled at Boys' High School. Girls' High School was just a few blocks away, making things even more delightful. Outside the school gates, both sexes could be seen flirting.

Though Boys' High School was a black school, the principal and nearly all the teachers were white. They would drive there in the morning and would withdraw to their own white suburbs at sunset. They were

commuter whites who came into the black neighborhood only because they worked there. There were no white boys at all.

I settled into school well. Boys' High was an oasis to me, although it was located in one of the roughest parts of Brooklyn. At last I could sit in a classroom and not feel ashamed. In Lugareño, the white children would already be in class while we blacks waited in line for the school to dole out breakfast to us: a lumpy cereal called *gofio,* made of ground cornmeal mixed with hot milk. The poor whites who stood with us in the morning queue banded together with the wealthier white children during recess to taunt us: *pichóns, negritos,* and *esclavos*—slaves.

But here in America there were gangs, calling themselves by all sorts of crazy names: the Buccaneers, Corsairs, Evil Pirates. They were fixtures in every neighborhood, like fire hydrants. The Buccaneers and Pirates controlled opposite ends of my street. My building was at the lower end of the block under the sway of the Buccaneers. Sometimes in the early hours of the morning I listened to them down on the stoop, harmonizing to their favorite song—"Be Sure My Love" by the Dubs.

My initial attraction to the Buccaneers owed much to my general perception of American blacks. Black Americans walked with a swagger that showed they were powerful and unafraid. I saw them as people not given to much laughter, unlike Cubans. That serious look conveyed to me gravity and purpose.

My father lost no time impressing upon me that gang members were good-for-nothing sinners. I should carry a Bible with me and make it known to these fellows that I was a Christian. To him, that would be enough to get them off my back. He always resolved things that way, believing that a peace-loving person incurred God's protection. But I knew that would not work with the Buccaneers. Back in Lugareño, I had learned that you could not duck a guy who was intent on kicking your ass.

I knew they were likely to cut off my balls just for fun. I had deduced that much from our first encounter. It took place a few days after I had settled on the block. "Hey, nigger, come here!" one of the

Buccaneers had hollered at me, materializing from nowhere as I left the building.

I pretended not to hear and walked on, knowing that first meeting would set the pattern of my relationship with the gang. I had been postponing the dreaded moment ever since I arrived by making sure I was with an adult every time I came or left. If I was alone, I would wait until the gang vacated the premises.

I heard quick footsteps come up behind me. Terror coursed through my body. I was jerked around to face six agitated Buccaneers, meanness painted on their faces. Adrenaline shot through me as I saw their grimaces, but instinct told me to keep my eyes lowered. I must not appear uppity.

"Told you to come here, motherfucker!" one of them shouted.

"*Oh, qué pasa?*" I mumbled. "*No comprendo!*" I said, feigning a dumb look.

Jerry, the gangleader, looked at his pals and began laughing. Instantly, they all roared. It was a good sign. Tension plummeted. Jerry sported a long scar along his left cheek and was dark skinned with penetrating eyes, a broad high-bridged nose, and a narrow face. He exuded confidence bordering on arrogance and wore a perpetual half smile. His ascendancy over the others was total.

"Ain't you see the motherfucker don't speak no English, man?" Jerry mocked.

Picking up on that lead to save myself, I began mumbling silly phrases in Spanish: "*No comprendo! Me good amigo of you . . . mucho amigo*, heh." I grinned.

"Where the fuck you from, nigger?" Jerry asked.

I acted as if I didn't understand, continuing the parody of stupidity, to the delight of the Buccaneers, who visibly relaxed. My strategy was working.

"Bring a fuckin' dictionary for this nigger," Jerry mocked, to a roar of amusement. "You come here from where, motherfucker?" he asked, shushing the others.

I gave a bewildered look.

With extended arms, he imitated an airplane landing.

"Oh," I said innocently, pretending to catch on, "*me cubano!*" I used sign language, too.

They broke into laughter again. My charade intrigued Jerry enough for him to let me go. "Next time you enter or leave this fuckin' building, show some respect. C*omprendo?*"

I had survived my first showdown with them, but the next time I might not emerge victorious so easily. I developed the habit of looking out of the window to check if they were there before making my way down from our fourth-floor apartment.

Our brownstone building on Lefferts Place was the Buccaneers' headquarters. All eighteen gang members seemed to take up permanent positions on the front steps with no one murmuring a word of complaint. The whole neighborhood was afraid of them, but I was attracted to their cool, tough demeanor. They reminded me of the *jorocóns* whom I revered as a child—proud, fearless black men. I longed to be like them, whereas they pretty much tolerated me as the new kid on the block. Of course, I lost no opportunity to indicate that I would soon be one of them.

At Boys' High I was fortunate to have some black teachers, and I liked all my classes: biology, math, physics, English, history, French. I wanted to excel and gobbled up every morsel of information thrown my way. I took to my studies with a passion. The more I mastered the American accent, the more self-confident I became. Soon I caught the attention of my English teacher, Mr. Callender, a black Panamanian of Jamaican ancestry who fired my hunger for books. He introduced me to libraries, a previously unknown concept to me; the Brooklyn Public Library became my after school hangout. I would stay there, engrossed, until the librarian announced closing time. I devoured books, and Mr. Callender recommended some to me including *Why I Am Not a Christian*, by a British philosopher named Bertrand Russell, which changed the way I looked at religion, planting everlasting seeds of agnosticism in my mind.

Mr. Callender took an interest in four other guys in the class as well, one from the Virgin Islands, the others Americans. One day after his lesson, he told us to stay behind.

"You fellows are bright and could become leaders," he said, resolving to tutor us. He spoke about black history, encouraging us to read books and the *New York Times*. It was from this English teacher that I first heard Africa discussed in a positive way.

One day he offered to take me with him to a Sunday meeting of people calling themselves Christian Scientists. The building where we went and the opening ceremony, with an organ playing European classical music, reminded me of church, but the "sermon" was not a sermon, and the "pastor" was not a pastor. From that distinguished-looking, white-haired white man, I heard my first political lecture. He spoke about things happening in the world, the wars, the atomic weapons of Russians and Americans, the hunger ravaging many lands. He stressed the need for a new order based on peace, justice, and respect. I liked what he said.

Afterward, people chatted, readily introducing themselves. Everyone was friendly. At one point, Mr. Callender took my arm and led me to someone surrounded by people. Joel A. Rogers had written several books documenting the contributions of Africans to world history. I took down the titles, *Great Men of Color, Sex and Race*, and *Nature Knows No Color Line*, which sounded fascinating. I could find them, he said, at the National Memorial African Bookstore in Harlem, which Mr. Callender had already recommended. I could not have guessed that the meeting with this balding brown-skinned man would lead me to the path and mission that became my life.

My dilemma with the Buccaneers really began when they discovered that I attended school. School, they claimed, was for fools. The Buccaneers were all dropouts, so they built up a sudden resentment toward me. Our honeymoon had ceased.

"Cuban motherfucker! Come here!"

"Hey, Jerry. How you do?" I said, smiling from ear to ear. Using their names was a ploy to create camaraderie between us. However, beyond that survival stratagem I was still drawn to those fellows. I liked their in-your-face defiance. They were ultracool. At heart, I was one of them.

"Where's your fuckin' toll?" Jerry demanded. "You been coming in and out this building and ain't paid no dues!"

I made as if I didn't understand. I knew that the gang was in the habit of shaking down other neighborhood teenagers for money. At one point, they even began charging money to exit our building or enter the block. However, they never messed with adults or women. Until now, they had never bothered me either.

"Listen, nigger, in America people pay fuckin' taxes, man!"

Jerry swaggered over, placed a hand on my shoulder, and shook me roughly. He took a quarter from his pocket. "See this? Well, every time you go out, you pay toll. One quarter! When you come back, one quarter! That's fifty motherfuckin' cents. *Comprendo?*"

He cuffed my right ear. I knew better than to react. He stared me in the eyes, his face an inch from mine. I felt the heat of his breath but showed no emotion. Despite their intimidating demeanor, I knew they wouldn't hurt me unless I provoked them.

"Oh, yeah," I said, focusing on the quarter held up as an exhibit.

"Good, you *comprendo,*" he said, satisfied, letting me go.

Mr. Cooper, an affable police officer who worked with juvenile delinquents, lived on the first floor with his wife, but his presence was no deterrent to the Buccaneers. He was on good terms with my parents, and spent much time talking to me about how young people could easily mortgage their future. One single act could land you in prison forever.

"Don't get involved with these gang fellows," he warned.

"No, sir, Mr. Cooper. I'm a Christian," I said, reassuringly.

Two weeks later, Mr. Cooper asked me to accompany him and his wife on a trip. "Have you ever seen the outskirts of New York City?"

I had not, but I was thinking, Oh, shit, spending a whole day with two old people in the damned countryside! I would be bored to death. But I could not say no to Mr. Cooper.

With the Manhattan skyscrapers behind us, I had no alternative but to enjoy the trip. There was nothing to see but distant green hills and a meadowy landscape.

Mrs. Cooper had brought quantities of food and fruit. She had baked a huge sweet-smelling cake and made chicken sandwiches, packing everything in two large wicker baskets. After three hours, we turned off the highway onto a long, straight road that seemed to lead nowhere. I was surprised to see a massive brick building emerge in front of us. As we reached the gate and I saw policemen, it occurred to me that this was some sort of police compound. Mr. Cooper showed the security guard his ID card, and the electronic gates opened to another four blocks. Guards were everywhere.

I followed the Coopers into a four-story building. It was swarming with cops! We took the elevator to the second floor. Our every step was being watched. Mr. Cooper led us to a table, and Mrs. Cooper took the food out of the basket. Oh, Lord, a picnic at his workplace, I thought, aghast. But I said nothing; the Coopers had always been nice to me.

We sat in silence for some minutes. Suddenly Mrs. Cooper sprang to her feet. A young man was walking toward us, handcuffed, a guard at his arm. He smiled. Mrs. Cooper hugged him. Mr. Cooper embraced him, too.

"This is Charles, he lives upstairs from us," Mr. Cooper told him.

He briefly returned my hello, then turned to the Coopers. "Mom, Dad. . . ."

Realization jolted me. This was their son! Everything they had brought was for him. The three of them huddled together, talking. I was ignored.

The visit had lasted an hour when a guard came and said, "OK, time's up."

Tears ran down Mrs. Cooper's face. She clutched her son. Mr. Cooper looked on, silently. Darrell cleared his throat. "Good-bye, Ma; good-bye, Dad." We watched him being led away. A second later, he had disappeared down the corridor, but his presence remained.

In the car on our way back Mr. Cooper broke the long silence. "Darrell is only twenty-one. He's in there for murder."

I was astounded. Mr. Cooper told me his son had been seventeen when he killed a sixteen-year-old from a rival gang. "Charles, this is what I was talking about, what being in a gang can do. There's little chance of getting out once they throw you inside. Jail is hell. They deprive you of your name, your rights. You become an animal. You have to be ferocious just to survive. You're in constant danger of being brutalized, or killed. . . ."

Not long after my visit to the upstate penitentiary, Mr. Cooper's words were brought home in a brutal way. One evening, the gang dragged a neighborhood drunk to the top of our building, accusing him of not paying his taxes. The "trial" was swift; the judgment furious. The man was beaten to a pulp. I was at home when I heard neighbors shouting that someone had fallen from the roof. The police sirens wailed. My father told me to stay inside. The man was dead.

That murder and Jerry's arrest for it shook me. I could not believe he and the others had killed someone innocent of any hostility toward them. The Buccaneers lived in a space where respect for life was a meaningless phrase.

Defiant Jerry had opened the gates of hell and they had closed behind him, yet I felt regret. We were roughly the same age. He was jet black, like me. Knowing it was the end for him caused me pain.

"Jerry, why the fuck did you have to do that?" I mumbled to myself.

That incident, however, freed me of the increasing danger posed by the gang, which disperesed to avoid arrest.

10

MY FIRST LOVE

My heart raced and butterflies crowded my stomach as I noticed the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. Love visited me for the first time when Georgia Jeffries from Macon, Georgia, slipped into my life. I would know no peace from then on.

I had spotted her at the counter of the Bedford-Stuyvesant library. Her hair was pulled back in a knot. Her jeans were taut across slender hips, as though painted on, showing her well-rounded buttocks. A semi-transparent top outlined the mangolike contours of her breasts. She must have felt my eyes on her, for her sensuous mouth curved into a smile as she turned to face me. The smile lingered when she put on her coat and headed through the door. I dashed out behind her.

The dark-chocolate-hued girl was no more than half a block away. She walked slowly, allowing me to catch up. I straightened myself like a ramrod and deepened my voice to make it manlier.

"It's late and these streets aren't too safe. May I accompany you?" I offered.

"That's nice of you."

"What school do you go to?" I asked.

"Girls' High. And you?"

"Boys' High," I replied with pride.

"You got an accent. Are you West Indian?"

"My parents are, but I'm Cuban," I told her.

"Cuban? I ain't met no Cuban before," she said.

I was about to launch into a geopolitical lecture to increase my standing in her eyes when she spoke again. "Where do you live?" she asked.

She seemed pleased that I lived near her. I acted as if her smile left me unmoved, but my stomach lurched and my fingers clutched the books I carried. My brother Frank had warned me about girls: "More you like them, less you show it!" I dared not look at her directly. Each time she spoke, my body tensed.

"I'll walk you to your house; you never know, with these gang fellows around."

I spoke nonstop and walked quickly, since we were now in the heart of Buccaneer zone. But she forced our pace to a slow gait.

We walked for a half hour over a distance that normally took ten minutes.

She stopped at a brownstone building. "This is where I live," she said, "with my mother. Why don't you come and meet her on Saturday?"

This girl liked me! We exchanged phone numbers, and I said a polite good night. I felt ecstatic. That night I flopped onto my bed with an enormous smile on my face. My heart was thumping. Racing. Skipping. I had experienced nothing like this before. I was in love!

Three days after our first meeting I went to her home. It was as if we had known each other much longer than a thirty-minute walk. Her mother chatted with me before retiring, leaving us alone. Georgia led me to her room and slipped a 45 onto an old stereo set in the corner. A raspy voice crooned, "Georgia . . . Georgia on my mind. . . ." She said the song reminded her of her home. The singer was Ray Charles.

I could not bear the intensity of my feelings. At that point she was sitting on the bed. I moved toward her and rolled her back onto the mattress and we kissed.

"I love you," I said.

"Me, too," she whispered.

After that kiss we were inseparable. Every day after school we went straight to her house and into the bedroom. She would prop her face on her hands and listen intently to my stories about my native Cuba, where Fidel Castro had just taken power, propelling the island into world news.

To Georgia everything about me was good. She said my eyes were beautiful. She would kiss my nose and lips and declare those beautiful, too.

One night, I began undressing her. She made no sound as I removed her panties, but when I gently penetrated, her wracking sobs were uncontained.

"Are you sad?" I asked.

"No, I love you, that's all."

I soaked up Georgia's words. Her room was our oasis. Besides Ray Charles, Bessie Smith, and Leadbelly, she introduced me to Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan, and Dinah Washington. They all sang blues, a beguiling music I had not heard before. After we made love, I would stay with her until three in the morning listening to music.

"I love you, Charles," she would sigh. I had reverted to Charles Moore since arriving in America; I did not want the past to intrude into our budding happiness.

Georgia's mother was always pleased to see me and baked buns when I was there. She was open to our relationship, but my father was against it, afraid I would drop out of school. He kept telling me I must study and make something of my life. He aspired for his children to have a better life and set the highest standards. He wanted me to be an engineer or a doctor. I was not prepared to give up Georgia, so we saw each other exclusively at her apartment.

One day when I phoned Georgia, her mother did not know where she was nor when she would be back. I walked over to her house, meaning to surprise her on her return.

"Hi, Charles," Mrs. Jeffries greeted me.

"Hi, ma'am, is Georgia back?"

It was 9:00 P.M., and she was still out. Mrs. Jeffries let me remain in the living room, but our conversation was stilted. Two more hours crawled by. Shortly before midnight we heard keys in the door. Georgia walked in, looking like a rabbit cornered in brilliant headlights. Her mother stared at her and left the room without a word.

"Where the hell were you?" My anger had seethed long enough.

"Let's go into my room," she answered.

She sat on the bed and looked at the floor.

"What's wrong?" I asked, my blood boiling.

"I can't tell you," she whispered.

"You can't tell me where you were?" Had I imagined the last six months, the movies, the silly jokes, the lovemaking?

"Do you love me?"

"Yes." My voice was deathly cold.

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes."

"Then don't ask where I was. One day I will tell you."

"One day?" Each of her answers stoked the flames.

"Charles, just come and hold me, please."

She looked unhappy and helpless. I stood rooted to the spot. I did not want to relinquish my anger so quickly, but my resolve collapsed when she began crying.

"Negrita, what's happening?" I had nicknamed her Negrita—"my Negress"—as black men in Cuba did with the women they loved.

"Just hold me."

I was a weakling in front of her. She held me desperately and kissed me. My lips. My nose. My eyes. She held me and cried. I pressed her back onto the mattress, kissing her.

"Not tonight," she said, her tears flowing.

"Why, what's happening?"

"I'll tell you, but not tonight. Just go now."

"You don't want me?"

"Yes, I do, but we'll talk later. Now I just want to sleep."

I did not understand. All I felt was ardent desire.

I walked back to my house, went quietly into my room and to bed. The next day when I phoned Georgia, her mother said she had already left. I searched for her in the library, but she was not there. After school I called Mrs. Jeffries, who said Georgia was not home yet. I walked over to her place, deciding to wait on the steps outside.

I waited and waited. Ten o'clock ticked by, eleven o'clock passed, and there was no sign of her. It was almost midnight when I saw her slight figure coming down the street. Her head hung as if the muscles supporting it were severed. Her shoulders were stooped. There was fear in her eyes when she saw me.

She opened the door and headed for her room, putting on a Ray Charles record. I felt like smashing the record player to smithereens.

"Turn off that music!" I shouted.

She complied, sitting on the bed with downcast eyes.

"Where the hell were you? Who were you with?" I asked, in one breath.

She did not reply. She looked uneasy.

"I know you were with someone," I accused. "Who are you going out with?"

"I'm not going out with anyone," she answered softly.

"You're lying!" I shouted. I was nearly out of control.

"OK." She sighed. She led me to the bathroom, opened the first-aid cabinet, and took out a little sachet.

I grabbed the packet from her and tore it open. A fine powder fell out. "What is this?"

She looked at me sadly. "It's dope. Drugs," she whispered feebly.

I could not think straight. I emptied the powder into the sink and washed it down the drain.

"Why are you taking this shit? Promise me you won't anymore."

"I promise," she said.

That night when we made love she cried continuously.

I left her home at 2:00 A.M., and for the next two or three days everything was wonderful again. We were happy again. But within a week, Georgia disappeared and no one seemed to know where she was.

"No, Charles," Georgia's mother said each time I called, "she's still not here."

I began to be convinced she was seeing someone on the sly. Jealousy gnawed away at my entrails. I could not go to school, could not

eat or sleep. I imagined what I would do if I caught her with somebody else.

One night I decided to confront the other guy. I scoured Bedford-Stuyvesant for hours until I spotted her. I was walking down a street full of bars, and she was standing on the opposite side talking to a much older man who evidently knew her well. My heart sank. She spoke animatedly. He wore a suit with a hat tilted to one side. My first impulse was to grab her and tackle the man physically. I sized him up and felt I could beat him—but I stayed on the dark side of the street, waiting and watching.

After a while they went their separate ways, he into a bar and Georgia in the direction of her house. I followed her.

"Georgia!" I called out as she was inserting the key into the front door.

She spun around, startled.

"What the fuck are you doing out at this hour?" I said.

"I went to the movies," she stammered.

I restrained myself until we went into the room. Then I slapped her.

"You bitch!"

She raised her hands to cover her face, but I hit her again.

"The movies? You're a liar! You were in a bar with a guy. You've been going out with that motherfucker. You've been lying to me!"

"Charles, I'm not lying to you. I'm not going out with anyone. I love you."

"You love me?" I shouted, immune to her tears. I was sorry I had hit her; I knew a man should not hit a woman even in anger. What I was doing was horribly wrong, but I could not stop. I grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her hard.

"I'm going to kill that motherfucker!"

She held on to me with a terrified look in her eyes.

"No, no, Charles. Please. Please," she pleaded between sobs.

I tried shoving her away, but she clung more tightly.

"Sit down, Charles, please sit down. Wait, wait. I'll tell you. I'll tell you."

I sat on the chair; my eyes brimmed with rage. I waited while she cried and trembled.

"Oh, Charles," she finally said, "he's the one who sells me the dope."

"My God, you're taking that shit again?"

"I can't stop it," she whispered, brokenly.

I sprang to my feet. I flung open the bathroom door, rummaged through the cabinet, knocking everything to the floor. Finding nothing, I stumbled back into the room.

"Where is it?"

She opened her bag. I snatched the small sachet from her and flushed the drugs down the toilet.

"Stop it!" she screamed.

"You bitch! You promised me!" I shouted at the top of my voice. "I'll recognize that motherfucker; I'm going to fetch the police and get him in that fuckin' bar."

"No, no, no," she sobbed.

I stormed out of the apartment, slamming the door on her screams.

All kinds of scenarios crossed my mind. Maybe Georgia had become a prostitute and the guy was her pimp. I did not know what to do. As I approached the club, I noticed a policeman with a nightstick standing on the corner. I was tempted to blurt out the whole mess to him but hesitated, not wanting to get Georgia into more trouble. I simply went home. "Goddammit, goddammit, goddammit," I sobbed.

For the next three days, I refused to go to school and did not call her. I maintained that strategy for a week, hoping she would call me. Eventually I grew desperate and phoned. No one answered. I walked over to her brownstone and rang the bell, but no one was in. I went home and phoned again. This time her mother answered.

"Where's Georgia?" I asked.

She didn't answer my question. "Charles, can you come by?"

"Yes, I can, but where's Georgia?"

"Just come and see me," she replied.

My heart pounded. I had not called Georgia for a week to punish her. But now I was scared. I ran to her house. Mrs. Jeffries looked dazed when she opened the front door. I brushed her aside, heading for Georgia's room.

"Where's Georgia?" I demanded.

"She left five days ago," her mother said. "I've called the police. I haven't heard from her, and I'm worried."

I did not wait to hear anymore. I headed straight for the bar where I had last seen her. I combed the streets of Brooklyn until 1:00 A.M. The next day I did the same. For three weeks, I searched. The streets became my home. I spent my time looking in bars, riding the subway, waiting outside Girls' High School. Georgia was nowhere. She had evaporated into thin air. Only when I questioned Mrs. Jeffries did I learn the truth.

"Charles," she said wearily, "when my daughter met you it was a new beginning, but she was on cocaine."

Georgia had told her mother she wanted to get off drugs for good; to go to college, marry, raise a family. A searing pain settled under my skin. Georgia was an only child. Her father had abandoned them. Now she had vanished.

Weeks passed. I called her house every day; the news was always the same. She had depended on me to help her, but I was too wet behind the ears. I had handled it all stupidly. Remorse crushed my spirit.

For months I believed that Georgia would resurface in my life as softly as she had entered it. I would ask no questions, just hold on to her tightly. I loved her; I knew it now. But I never saw Georgia again.

11

THE REAL LIFE: MY BOHEMIAN FLING

My parents tried to preserve me from the evils of America by forcing me into their church, a white church, but they unwittingly opened a door leading in the opposite direction. It was there, in 1959, that I would have my first experiences of interracial sex.

My father had no more respect for the "devil worship" of the black churches in America than for the African-derived religions that thrived in Lugareño's black quarter. Black religious worship incorporated drums and tambourines, dancing and hand clapping. The bodies of men and women contorted as spirits careened through them. People hollered and sweaty faces shone with pleasure. I was attracted to such churches. My father hated it.

"Dem churches is too vulgar," he complained. "Carrying on like dat is no way to worship God!"

Moreover, the neighborhood "shouting" churches had all-black congregations; he was against what he termed "race separatism." God should not be worshipped according to race, he protested. His solution was to take the family to a "decent church," a racially mixed church in downtown Brooklyn. There I would not only be off the streets and out of Bedford-Stuyvesant's troubled environment but might even find job opportunities.

"If you mix with the right people, son, you get the right tings," he kept repeating.

Every Sunday we journeyed from our neighborhood to find salvation in a mainly white Baptist church. But God was the last thing on my mind. What drew my interest was the most profane of opportunities: white girls. The church's imposingly solid door, slightly ajar, allowed me a glimpse of the universe I had only dreamed of entering.

What a difference from Lugareño, where one of the worst things that could befall a Negro was for a white woman to complain he had been fresh with her. That could bring the Rural Guard to your door, unless of course you were a *jorocón.* Their stories of love affairs with white women made me long for a day when I, too, would taste the forbidden flesh. The instant I set foot in Brooklyn Baptist Church, I knew that day had come. Young Christian women with milk-white skin surrounded me wherever my discreet gaze wandered. They sang in the choir, read in my Bible study class, and, for heaven's sake, sat right beside me in the pews!

Reverend Norman Blosoth, our pastor, was a lofty German American fire-and-brimstone preacher with a shock of blond hair. Because of my assiduous presence at the church he soon drew me into the church's youth activities. One day he summoned me to his office after service.

"Charles, the church has chosen you to go on a retreat," he declared. A rare opportunity to become a better Christian was being offered to me, he explained. "One day, you will spread the Lord's gospel among your people!" My father and Gladys were ecstatic.

The retreat was in upstate New York, in the Appalachian Mountains. More than a thousand girls and boys participated. The few blacks stood out like raisins in a pot of rice; they avoided me and I them, not wanting to draw attention to ourselves. Otherwise, everyone was friendly. We prayed and worshipped in small groups. At night, we held hands and sang hymns and Christian songs around the campfire. While I chorused "His Eyes Are on the Sparrow" along with everyone, my eyes were trained on a bigger prize: Doreen.

Doreen was a goddess. She was taller than me, fair haired and green eyed, with skin so pale you could see her blue veins through it, giving

her an almost ethereal appearance. She reminded me of women I had seen in films. Untouchable, I thought, but then I caught her looking at me from under carefully hooded eyes. She grew bolder, locking glances with me then turning away, always cautiously. My heart palpitated. Oh, God! I thought. Was it possible? Could this girl be interested in me?

My tongue felt as if it were glued to the roof of my mouth every time I saw her, but I managed to ask her to sit beside me on the hayride. Not long after, I got even bolder.

"Can we walk a little and talk?"

She consented.

The moon lit our way along the path leading to the lake. After a while she stopped. We shouldn't go too far, she said. I don't know what came over me; I took her hands. I was trembling. My fear intensified with every beat of my heart, but she did not move her hands away. So I drew her toward me and she did not resist. It was perfection, the way she closed her eyes and opened her lips. I went in for a lengthy sip, then drank and drank. For so long I had been thirsty for lips, fingers, and cheeks the color of hers! I touched her breasts, ran my hands over her body. She sighed. And just when I felt I was about to succeed, she pulled back.

"Somebody might see us; let's go back to camp," she whispered.

Only then did I think of what we were doing, the consequences of anyone happening upon us. I shuddered. We hurried back.

Doreen and I shared several such encounters. Whenever I came close to conquering her, she resisted my undressing her, stopping me at the brink. But I did not care, since each time I slipped slightly closer; soon she must relent. My body ached in yearning for this, the greatest sin: that moment when her soul would everlastingly be blackened and mine washed clean in her whiteness.

Doreen turned out to be an incurable romantic whose love for Frank Sinatra and Johnny Mathis, two syrupy balladeers she brought into my life, rivaled her devotion to Christ. She filled my head with Mathis singing "Small World" and "It's Not for Me to Say," with Sinatra's "Poinciana" and "Full Moon." I was on cloud nine.

At that retreat, I became a convert. To me this was the real Christianity; not the hypocrisy of the churches in Cuba where the people you worshipped with were the very ones who made their children play in segregated parks and across chicken-wire fences with their darker-skinned friends. It was unthinkable that a *negrito* should get close to their daughters. But here in America I had kissed and fondled a white girl. I had not merely flirted with the idea of possessing her, I had nearly achieved my goal. What the *jorocóns* in Lugareño bragged about was the gospel truth. This was incredible.

After the experience of that summer camp, I went out with several young white churchwomen. Each new conquest made me hanker for more. But while I could kiss them, even remove their panties, I could not enter their secret garden. These chicks were serious about the virginity thing. To hell with that! I wanted a tight white *bollo* of my own.

Toward the end of 1959 I discovered a bohemian hangout on the Lower East Side of New York City bountifully endowed with available and willing white females—Greenwich Village, hallway into the world of sweet American bohemianism.

The Village was an extraordinary place: cosmopolitan, easygoing. I fell in love with its tree-lined streets, sidewalk cafés, and animated neighborhood markets. The friendly faces of those frequenting it suggested open-mindedness. Strolling about, I had the feeling of floating in a world where I neither stood out nor was different from anyone else. I was just one in a crowd. I could be whomever I chose to be. I was deliciously colorless.

The Village was also the home to the beatniks, mostly middle-class whites who smoked marijuana, wore unorthodox clothes, read poetry, and listened to black music. This was my first encounter with what I identified as intellectuals and also with whites whom I truly liked. The discovery of the Village made my heart radiate a new happiness. Walking alone down its streets gave me a sense of fulfillment. I felt free. I

had finally connected with life. I resolved to grab whatever experiences came my way.

One memorable day, aimlessly walking down a Village street, I ran into a couple who seemed on their honeymoon, showering each other with affection. Something clicked as we introduced ourselves.

Arnold was twenty-four, seven years older than I, and had ash-blond hair. Nina, a striking, slender brunette, was about my age. It felt good that they were interested in me. They were very mature and very political. In fact, if my friendship with Arnie and Nina flared like a brushfire it was mainly because I was Cuban, for they embraced the Revolution and Fidel. Arnie's enthusiastic admiration of Fidel Castro, who had seized power in Cuba in January the previous year, eventually rubbed off on me.

The newspapers and television were full of news about my native country, and slowly I began taking an interest, soaking up whatever information came my way. They took me to poetry readings in cramped apartments, to Central Park, to all kinds of films, and to my first political meeting. I attended my first rallies with them, feeling the intoxication of being part of a multitude that thought alike. From then on, Arnold, Nina, and I hung out as the Three Musketeers.

Arnie introduced me to art films. He lent me a book, George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*. Through him I learned much about jazz, the music I had loved since childhood. He opened my mind to ideas I had only heard vaguely of in school. My new friends spoke incessantly about Marxism, socialism, fascism, anarchism, Trotskyism, Stalinism. With Arnie and Nina, I discovered the fascination of an "ism" at the end of a word: Bolshevism . . . imperialism . . . capitalism . . . racism . . . anti-Semitism. I did not know what the last of those meant.

"Jews," said Arnie, in a quiet voice that made me more attentive, "were massacred in pogroms in Eastern Europe throughout the Middle Ages, much as Negroes were lynched in the Southern states."

Only then did I realize that my new friends were themselves Jews, not just whites.

"You didn't tell me you were Jewish," I said, surprised.

"Why should I have?" Arnie answered softly.

His answer seemed logical. Yet, in my case, being black precluded the option of not telling. How, then, I wondered, was a lynching the same as a pogrom? I did not share that thought lest I jeopardize our budding relationship.

The Greenwich Village women were much more sophisticated than the girls I had dated until then. Mostly they were models, dancers, actresses, artists of some kind. They could be picked up quite easily. With luck, one would end the evening in their fancy high-rise apartments. The apartments all looked alike: expensive stereos, abstract art, plush white rugs, and king-sized beds with satiny covers. After a few drinks, the action began. That is how I entered paradise.

I went to the Village every night, hoping to hook up with some fine white chick. The pool of available pretty white females seemed inexhaustible. I went from one bed to another. I was seventeen and they were sometimes ten years older, but I ripped into them with the fury of a hungry dog. They would caress me as they might a doll or a poodle, and I loved it. These women would lie beside me saying how much they loved black men, that our black skin was beautiful. Could they be telling the truth?

Back in Cuba, I was a faceless black, poor and ugly—just a *pichón*. I had always been ashamed of my features. My mother used to pinch my nose with clothespins, guaranteeing that would make it narrower. She taught me not to push my lips out, so as a child I learned to talk with my lips sucked in. Since arriving in America, I used skin bleach and hair straighteners. Yet here were these splendid white women saying they liked my lips, loved my skin, adored my hair! I worshipped these goddesses of beauty. Their milky skin excited my passion. I could not have enough of them. If my addiction to white skin was a disease, then I was chronically ill and content to be so afflicted.

Outside in the real world the winds of revolution and drastic social change blew mightily. The civil rights movement in America had begun,

with blacks all over the country challenging a centuries-old order of racial indignity, segregation, and powerlessness. Millions were battling colonialism in Africa and Asia for their countries' independence. The Cold War between the Communist and capitalist blocs threatened to erupt into a third world war. But I was interested in nothing that might disrupt my maiden voyage to the utopia of interracial delights. I was living in a wonderful cocoon, self-immured within walls that made me impervious to any telling realities.

School in the day, the Village at night—my double life excited me. But the voracious interest that Boys' High School had at first evoked in me was waning. The uneventful company of my peers, the predictable perorations of my instructors, bored me. Only the English teacher, Mr. Callender, held my attention. I found myself increasingly attentive to his counsel.

Callender's classes were laced with fascinating sociological and anthropological data. It was he who first drew my attention to books written by blacks or relating to them. At his urging I began reading black newspapers such as the *Amsterdam News*, and the two black magazines that were around, *Ebony* and *Jet*. Because of him I became ever more interested in black music, history, and literature. One day, when I had exhausted the material on blacks at the local library, he gave me the address of a bookstore in Harlem: the National Memorial African Bookstore.

"You'll find everything you need there," he said. That was January 1960.

12

LEANING TO THE LEFT

Books, books, and more books were piled from floor to ceiling, perilously crammed on shelves that buckled under their weight. The National Memorial African Bookstore remains in my memory as the academy that set my mind ablaze and groomed my soul. It was there that the most compelling encounter of my youth took place; thereafter nothing in my life would be the same.

Tucked away on the corner of Harlem's 125th and Lennox Streets, this dust-ridden bookshop, with all its books and hundreds of framed photos, posters, and assorted items hanging from the walls, was like an art gallery and museum put together. Run by a diminutive old gentleman, addressed by everyone as Mr. Michaux, the bookstore served as a meeting place for Harlem's activists, who would gather in its basement.

Lewis Michaux was a fire-and-brimstone black nationalist who moved with slow deliberation around the perpetually crowded bookshop, where more customers came to talk than to buy. He did not seem to mind. In fact, he had hung a banner at the entrance that read "House of Common Sense and Proper Propaganda."

"How much for this, Mr. Michaux?" someone might ask, as though buying a bag of potatoes.

"For you, only a few dollars, my brother," the old man would answer.

I was crouched behind a stack of books when Mr. Michaux, who must have been in his late seventies, spotted me.

"What are you looking for, son?" he asked, slowly walking over to where I was.

Frail, he was shorter than he at first appeared, his nappy salt-and-pepper hair supporting a skullcap. His slanted eyes peered at me, and his weathered, furrowed face struck me as somewhat sinister looking. That first impression soon dissipated. Mr. Michaux had a serious look about him, his yellowish-tinted face creased in a way that made him appear angry, but behind the façade lay a large heart that offered a world of knowledge and generosity. I saw infinite kindness in his eyes when he smiled.

"I'm looking for books on blacks, sir," I responded.

"Well, there ain't nothin' here *but* books on blacks, son."

That first day I was in the bookstore until past midnight. Activity there grew livelier at night, but I could not afford to miss my last train to Brooklyn. When I bade him farewell, Mr. Michaux invited me to return.

"Come to gain knowledge, not to buy it," he said half mockingly.

I became an assiduous visitor to the bookstore. I had no money to do more than browse, but Mr. Michaux did not insist on me buying. I began to request books, and I would sit in a corner and read. One day I asked if he had any books on a country that was in the news, the Congo.

"Oh, I see, I see. You want to know about Lumumba?"

It was 1960, I was seventeen, and events in both Cuba and the Congo were making headlines. In June, the Congo had declared its independence from Belgium and the political crisis that ensued became world news immediately. When I first saw the name and photograph of the Congolese nationalist leader Patrice Lumumba in newspapers, something in his face filled me with pride. I devoured everything I could read about him. But the new prime minister was in trouble with the Western powers whose "imperialism" he excoriated. I wanted to know more about the Congo.

Michaux looked at me and smiled. "Wait here," he said.

He returned with a small bench and urged me to sit down. He handed me a booklet.

"Read this one first," he said.

It was *King Leopold's Soliloquy*, written by Mark Twain. I read it in one sitting, then reread it that same day. It was horrific—the story of the extermination of several million men, women, and children in the Congo by the Belgians sixty years earlier. It told in graphic terms how they had imposed their rule there. Forced labor. Beatings. Shootings. Bloodshed. Damning photographs showed Africans with amputated limbs. I was shocked.

That's how I was introduced to the world of Africa.

Michaux's bookstore became central in my life. Every day after school, I rushed straight to Harlem and read until it was time to catch the last subway back to Brooklyn. This wrinkled old man became my teacher and the National Memorial African Bookstore my new school.

Mr. Michaux seemed to have one purpose in life: to talk to people about Marcus Garvey, Africa, and the history of black people. He probably did not sell fifteen dollars' worth of books daily. Still, the bookstore was a hive of activity. He had a way of making everyone who came in part of the family, introducing newcomers to the regulars.

"I have a little Cuban boy here," he would say, calling me over to meet whoever it was. That person, in turn, might introduce me to someone else, and so my circle of friends in Harlem widened.

I also entered the world of Communist politics and Revolution in 1960. The interest Americans had in events in Cuba rubbed off on me, and I directed my attention to the news about "my" country. I began to feel mortified that others knew more about the new leader of Cuba than I did; I was ignorant about this Revolution people were talking about. What did Fidel Castro stand for? Why should I support him, as everyone I knew did? I resolved to find out, and connected with an outfit called the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC). Soon I was attending its meetings assiduously in the company of my friend Arnie.

The FPCC, which abounded with leftists of all sorts, divulged positive news about the Revolution. Founded that year by Robert Taber, a

liberal white journalist, and Richard Gibson, an African American newsman, the organization teemed with members of the Trotskyite Socialist Workers Party (SWP). Berta Green, its amiable secretary, was an SWP militant. I learned many things about the Revolution from her. My first copy of the *Militant*, the weekly Trostkyite tabloid, came from her hands. I devoured it and thereafter went to SWP-sponsored meetings where I was introduced to another set of people, black leftists such as Dan Watts, an architect; Robert Maynard and Calvin Hicks, journalists; and the poet LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka).

I voraciously read books and pamphlets. I listened enraptured to discussions about the power struggle in the Soviet Union that led to the emergence of Joseph Stalin, a dictator who eliminated all opponents. Revolution . . . socialism . . . capitalism . . . Trotskyism . . . Marxism . . . my head was buzzing.

Throughout 1960, I lived two separate lives: one that satisfied my father, another that would have horrified him. He never suspected that my coming home late every night had nothing to do with studying, at least not the sort he envisioned. By then my circle of friends and acquaintances was restricted to assorted leftists and I regularly attended their heated meetings. It felt good to be relating to whites on a political basis, as equals. When they invited me to their homes, I took notes of their conversation as if in a classroom.

I was learning a lot, but not from Boys' High School, where I slept through classes, finding them utterly boring. I was sick of school, period. The FPCC and the SWP were different academies altogether. Marxists had coherent explanations for everything.

I came to understand how exploitation functioned and profits were generated. I liked the idea of the class struggle as a reason for all the ills of the human social condition, more so the idea that racism would vanish once communism came into its own. I now had a credible explanation for whites' hatred of blacks. Capitalists had invented racism in order to divide and rule. Do away with capitalism and racism would disappear!

I noticed that every black leftist man had a white woman on his arm. At meetings and parties, invariably white women were coupled with black men, and black women paired off with white men.

"That's the meaning of the revolution: no more racism," they said. Because of that belief, more than ever I was drawn to socialism and communism. I was glad for an ideology that provided a political legitimancy to my unilateral inclination toward white women.

By October 1960 I considered myself a Marxist, albeit a peculiar one. True to form, I was a free-floating molecule, unattached to any mainstream. I avoided meetings of the American Communist Party, feeling an automatic aversion to that organization. I was attracted to Trotsky's ideas but did not call myself a Trotskyite and was loath to join the Socialist Workers Party. I was allergic to joining anything ever since being refused entry as a kid into the all-white Boy Scouts, to which I had wanted to belong with all my heart. I instinctively identified with the little I knew about anarchism, which seemed better suited to my own antiestablishment character.

I had developed the habit of dating several women simultaneously, in case one dumped me. Among them was a dark-haired Jewish woman, Lorna, an SWP stalwart I had met at a FPCC rally. Lorna was a diehard Trotskyite. Immediately attracted to one another, we began sleeping together at once. That was the great thing about those leftist white women: it was hello, a suggestive smile, then bed. They were frank; either they liked you or they didn't—none of the tedious probationary period of courtship to which other women subjected me.

Lorna patiently tutored me. We would talk for hours about Marxism and then make love. She introduced me to Isaac Deutscher's trilogy *The Prophet Armed*, *The Prophet Unarmed,* and *The Prophet Outcast*, books on Trotsky's struggle in the Soviet Union. They had an impact on me equal to what I had felt on reading *King Leopold's Soliloquy* at Michaux's bookstore. My head exploded anew to discover that Stalin had killed millions in concentration camps. Stalinism was but another form of fascism.

My education in Marxism continued after Lorna was no longer part of my life. Parallel with my political radicalization, my nationalism became increasingly assertive. Events in Cuba and the Congo provided emotional anchors. But my views of the Soviet Union became critical because of the lectures I attended at the headquarters of the Trotskyite SWP. The Trotskyites maintained that the Soviet Union manifested a deviant form of Marxism. I was aware that Russia was under the thumb of what they termed a "Stalinist bureaucracy." I did not want that brand of socialism to take hold in Cuba. Yet the Revolution needed Russia's help to survive.

In the midst of that whirlwind of conflicting thoughts and divisive issues, I met the man who shook the foundations of my nascent Communist aspirations and sowed the first grains of suspicion about Marxist socialism.

Harold Cruse was a black Trotskyite scholar I ran into at a FPCC meeting soon after he returned from a trip to Cuba; I was eager to hear his impressions. He supported the Revolution but had misgivings about the role of oldtime Communists in it. His bitter experience as a former member of the U.S. Communist Party had led him to distrust them. He wanted to know why he saw no blacks among the new Cuban leadership. Wasn't half of Cuba's populace black?

"It's untrue that Marxism, socialism, communism, solve the race question," he said bluntly as we sat in a café in the Village. "Race is something Marxism hasn't considered."

I could not have been more taken back. Could communism and racism coexist? I did not want to believe Harold, but the evidence he marshaled was overwhelming. He explained that anti-Semitism, a variant of racism, had existed in Europe for at least two thousand years. Russia, he said, was a deeply racist land. People like Trotsky, himself a Jew, had faced anti-Semitism there before and after the Revolution. Stalin was fiercely anti-Jewish, and, conversely, the Trotskyites were fervent anti-Stalinists.

Harold's explanations were so keen, I knew I had come upon a goldmine of well-rounded knowledge.

"Race is something Marxism has avoided dealing with because most white Marxists are themselves racist!" Harold said peremptorily.

He said that Jews were well placed to know that racism was rooted in history. "Yet Marxists go around telling Negroes all sorts of fairy tales about hatred against blacks being a recent phenomenon," he underlined.

Harold was the only black I knew who was as involved with the Marxist left as with the black nationalists in Harlem, where he lived. He spoke with quiet authority and vast knowledge. I had begun to feel a rare human warmth in the womb of communism, so his reasoning conveyed a depressing prospect. If communism and racism *did* rhyme, black leftists were deluding themselves to think otherwise.

There was the possibility, nevertheless, that he might be wrong. In desperation, I held on to that feeble straw, but the seeds of doubt had been planted. Never again would I see the world of socialism and Marxism with the pristine acceptance and naïveté that I had until that unsettling encounter. I could no longer float in the placid waters of leftist politics so trustingly.

13

WHAT IS A WOMAN?

The woman who would send my life into a spin entered one day through the front door of the National Memorial African Bookstore. I was awestruck by her poise and by her short, Afro-styled hair, which crowned the deliberate movements of her body. I instantly knew she was a dancer by the way she held herself. It was the first time in my life I had seen a black woman with natural hair. She was beautiful.

"Hello, sister Maya!" Michaux called out.

His voice was warm, conveying that he was especially fond of this person. I looked up from my stool into the dark eyes of the tall and stately woman, dressed in a long skirt—Maya Angelou.

When Mr. Michaux's introduction came, I went forward with the awkwardness of a child on his first day in school. Her statuesque height accentuated my shortness, and I felt dwarfed. I was embarrassed, but she smiled.

"Hello, little brother," she said, extending a long, slender arm toward me.

Her eyes shone when I confirmed I was from Cuba. There was something in those large, deep brown eyes that drew me to her. I immediately surrendered to a wisdom and an authority that had not been present in my life in the form of a woman since my mother left our home. I was excited but also nervous. Maya spoke to me briefly, then turned her attention back to Mr. Michaux. After a while she went to the door to leave.

"Good-bye, little brother," she said, with a smile that made me feel special.

As the door closed behind her, I sensed that this imposing woman was not about to vanish from my life just like that. Indeed, she was to change it.

I ran into Maya frequently at Michaux's. Cuba, Castro, and the Revolution fascinated her. The more questions she asked, the more I realized how little I knew about the Revolution unfolding in my own country. I told myself that this was one woman to whom I would not, could not, lie. Something in Maya Angelou brought all my conflicting emotions to the surface. I felt discomfort and yearning at the same time—discomfort from feeling intimidated. I would soon realize how much of the best in me emerged at her contact.

One day she invited me to a jazz club in the Village where two of her personal friends were performing. It was an expensive joint, but as a guest of Maya's I got in free. Maya's friends, vocalist Abbey Lincoln and her partner, drummer Max Roach, I loved instantly, and in time they became my friends, too. I had not heard their music before and in truth did not understand their style of jazz. Only later did I appreciate their famed avant-garde status, when their album *We Insist! Max Roach's Freedom Now Suite* was released toward the end of the year.

I grew politically conscious by the day. Now that I hung out with black people, I felt a bit uncomfortable that my sexual relationships were exclusively with white women. Yet nothing could have made me give up that highly titillating side of my life. That was my private life, my own personal business. However, very soon my parallel lives would collide.

One of the women I had been seeing, Helen, was a high-school English teacher about five years my senior. Unlike the other women I dated Helen was dark haired, with dreamy dark eyes and long eyelashes—a real bombshell. She was Jewish and was crazy about jazz. Max Roach was one of her heroes. When she found out I had met him and Abbey Lincoln, she pestered me to take her to see them perform. I anticipated the looks of envy I would draw walking into the club with the finest looking white woman I had ever met in New York.

That evening at the jazz club, Helen was practically in heaven. So was I. I proudly introduced her to Abbey, Maya, and Max. They were courteous—in fact, extremely so. I sat with my date at a table away from everyone else, but even from afar, I felt the ice. Helen did, too. Tension hung over us like a rain cloud ready to burst. I knew it was because of Helen. I had broken a code in bringing a white girl with me to listen to Abbey Lincoln scream her guts out about the black experience. My skin prickled with the realization that I had committed a serious error. I was mortified before Maya, Abbey, and Max. I was embarrassed before Helen. The evening was a nightmare; when it ended I fled the club.

It took me some time to understand that what had offended Max, Abbey, and Maya that evening had less to do with Helen than with me. They were not bigots and I had not once heard them utter a hateful comment about other races. They were justifiably displeased at the way I had come into the club exhibiting a white woman as if she were the sole symbol of my worth. My conked hair and bleached skin were blaring statements of my unresolved issues about racial identity. I still needed a white crutch to assert myself.

But there was more. They had hoped I would connect with the message of black pride that their music sought to convey. I had broken the spell that Max's furious drumming and Abbey's chilling, piercing vocals attempted to weave between us. I had rejected the pact of redemptive ethnic intimacy that their music offered.

Only much later, as I listened to *Freedom Now Suite* over and over again, would I realize that on that night I had taken my white girlfriend to listen to the greatest, most explicit statement of black rage and protest ever recorded in jazz music. And it had all passed over my head.

It was a while before I next visited the National Memorial African Bookstore. I would not have admitted it, but I was afraid to meet Maya, ashamed at what had gone down at the club.

"I was wondering about you," said Mr. Michaux when he saw me.

I made some lame excuse and got busy on the books. I browsed nearly all day. My heart jumped with trepidation and joy when the old man's voice sprang to life:

"Hi, sister Maya!"

Maya entered as majestically as always. She looked my way and her eyes shone with satisfaction. The magic was there once again.

"Little brother," she called out to me.

My feelings for her danced over my face. I rushed to hug her, my featherweight height straining clumsily to measure up to her imposing stature. She went about the bookstore with me in tow, speaking to Mr. Michaux all the while. She bought a book and lingered. Her floating laugh filled the place. I realized how deeply I loved her. Maya cared about me and made me feel special. But I knew I had disappointed her.

"Little brother, I want to see you," she said. "Can you come to my house this weekend?"

I nodded yes. "Of course."

I had not been to Maya's home before so I dressed particularly well for that Sunday. I knew I looked swell in my dark suit and tie. Along the way, I grew apprehensive. Was Maya inviting me to bed? But when I reached her two-bedroom apartment on Central Park West, I knew this date had nothing to do with sex.

Her place was a tidy and simple apartment with upholstered furnishings in brown and orange and a braided rug embellishing the living room. Maya sat down with a drink in her hand, dressed in a long skirt that covered her legs almost to her ankles. Her Afro made her look even more imposing.

At one point she got up and fetched some records, placing them on the small, low table between us. I read the names of the artists: Nina Simone, Odetta, Miriam Makeba. She had me listen to some of these singers, whom I had not heard before. What struck me from the pictures on the album covers was that these black women whose voices reverberated in the apartment all wore their hair natural like Maya's. That made a powerful impression on me, since my own hair was straightened

and fell slickly over my head. Maya had left aside one of the LPs, which she now autographed and handed to me, anticipating my surprise. It was her own album, *Miss Calypso*, recorded four years earlier in 1956, when I was still thirteen. I knew she was a dancer and actress—she was currently rehearsing for a play called *The Blacks*—but I had not known she was a famous singer as well.

I was in for a greater surprise when I read the biographical notes on the album's sleeve: "Was born in Cuba twenty-seven years ago . . . Her father is a full-blooded Watusi, tallest native tribe in the world." Born in Cuba of a Watusi father? Maya's sonorous laughter inundated the living room as she looked at my astonished face. I too began to laugh; the marketing gimmick on her album sleeve brough us closer together. "I am from the United States," she confirmed. "I was born and bred here."

She said many black American artists had to pretend to be from the islands to get work. "It is more advantageous," she explained. "For a black artist to achieve anything here in music and theater, you must be from somewhere else. That's America for you!"

That day, Maya had a serious, prolonged conversation with me. My country of adoption was not exactly what I thought it was, she said. America was indeed a land of great opportunities, but I should recognize it was also a place that imposed severe limitations on people who looked like me.

She spoke softly, and I realized how much her deep, rich voice sounded like my mother's. That thought disquieted me, yet the truth in her words began to seep through every fault line of my being: I must be careful how I walked and with whom. There were dangers lurking at every turn for young men like me—drugs, alcohol, and what she termed "wrong company." One wrong turn was all it took.

Although the experience I had had with Georgia made me wary of addiction, in Greenwich Village I had discovered pot. I had never drunk liquor before coming to America, but I could hold my own now. None of that seemed threatening to me, but I kept silent, not wanting inadvertently to reveal my predilection for the bohemian life she seemed to warn me against.

"It all depends on the choices you make," she continued. "And those choices are influence by how you feel about yourself." She began speaking about the civil rights struggle that was starting to unfurl in America. I did not know who Martin Luther King Jr. was. I knew practically nothing about the topics Maya broached. I admitted my ignorance. "That's why you are here, little brother: to know," she said.

Maya was studying me. It was difficult to hold her probing gaze. Usually it was the other way around: I looked women in the eyes, and they would look away. But Maya had become the woman whose approval I sought. Her eyes burned into my consciousness.

"Little brother, don't you like *black* women?" she asked, softly.

I was speechless. The question was preposterous!

"Are you afraid of them?" Maya went on, staring intently.

This was too much! Why would I be afraid of a black woman? What was this about?

"Of course I like black women," I answered clumsily. Figuring she was going to mention Helen, I said I liked dating all women. "I choose women as human beings, not on the basis of color," I stated. I said I judged people by their character. I was a humanist, an internationalist. I did not care for racial pigeonholing. I believed in world fraternity.

Maya sat impassively through my peroration, but a slight smile danced around the corners of her eyes. I realized that those words could have come straight out of my father's mouth.

"That's all fine and good," she said. "But universalism isn't worthwhile if it doesn't make you love yourself first. Do you love yourself, little brother?"

I was upset. How could Maya ask such a question?

"Listen, little brother, next time I invite you some place, don't march in with one of those white women as if you were a gladiator! If you can't come with a *sister*, come by yourself," she said.

I was taken back.

"And if you don't know any sisters, we'll introduce you," she added.

Maya's eyes seemed to bore into my brain. Her eyes searched mine, but mine were fixed on the floor. She then delivered another jolt.

"Tell me, little brother, do you know what a woman is?"

It was absurd! This cross-examination was disconcerting. Why was Maya playing such games? A woman was a woman. What else? I mumbled something to that effect. There was a long silence.

"Little brother, to be a man you must know what a woman is!"

What was Maya implying? What gave her license to question my manhood? Anger rose inside me, but I did not want an argument. I loved and respected Maya. Fifteen years my senior, she reminded me of both my sister Esther and my mother. So I swallowed my injured pride and sulked silently. No one had questioned me before about the carefree life I had become addicted to. I saw nothing wrong with sleeping with as many women as I could. What was so wrong with the fact that all my girlfriends were white?

After a while, Maya smiled, breaking the ice. "Little brother, *ésta es tu casa*," she said.

I was disconcerted. Not because she had said "this is your home," but because I had not had the slightest inkling that she understood Spanish.

"I didn't know you spoke Spanish," I said, relieved to change the topic.

"*Un poquito, nada mas*," she replied, flashing a warm, reassuring smile.

We talked a little longer, but Maya had made the point for which she had invited me to her home that day. It had been about my hankering after *white* women, about me straightening my hair, bleaching my sking, and desperately fleeing from my black self. She rose, walked me to the door, and we hugged. But I felt a pang of sadness; I was not living up to the expectations of someone whose approval I sorely craved.

As I rode the subway back to Brooklyn my mind replayed our conversation all the way home. *Do you know what a woman is?* Of course I knew! A woman was someone to have sex with and, eventually, some-

one to marry. A woman was a *bollo*, and more *bollo*! At seventeen, I had had some of the best *bollo* in New York. Beautiful white women wanted me in their beds, carried away by the fury of my passion. I was bursting with self-confidence.

Do you know what a man is? Of course, I knew what a man was! A man was *cojones*, and more *cojones*! I stood only five feet six inches tall, but my body was lean, my muscles steel hard. I knew how to use my fists and was learning to use my mind as well. I had enough *cojones* to sell; I was afraid of no one.

America had given me the chance to become a different being. In this country I could be no one in particular. That feeling of nonallegiance, of invisibility, of belonging nowhere, was new to me, and I sought proximity only to those who heightened it. I felt quite comfortable with whites. Being accepted by them was a source of pride; their friendship validated me.

Besides, white women loved me: my black skin, lightened a shade lighter with Pond's bleaching cream; my ample lips; my tight muscular body; my coarse hair, albeit chemically straightened. These white women taught me about music, literature, dance. In their beds, I was becoming sophisticated. Why should I care what Maya thought of my predilection for them? What should I care what Maya thought about *anything*?

As the subway hurtled along its tracks, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the darkened glass door. I ran my fingers through my straightened hair and liked its look and feel. I was a goddamned good-looking, black son of a bitch, with plenty of *cojones* and lots of luck! What was better than living in America?

Of course, I was increasingly aware of some unpleasant aspects of life in America. I had learned the potentially lethal danger of a run-in with white policemen. One late night as I traveled back to Brooklyn, I was violently pulled off a subway car, mistaken for a pickpocket. About to have my skull cracked open, I fell back on the dumb foreigner *no comprendo* act I had perfected with the neighborhood gang. I avoided a beating but was very shaken.

I made myself believe that that aberrant incident was a misrepresentation of America. I felt a deep love for this country and wanted sorely to be part of it. Unknowingly, I had arrived at a crossroads the day I trekked into the National Memorial African Bookstore. My mind wouldn't stop racing with all sorts of questions. I was no longer at peace.

The plucking sound of the two guitars, the rolling thump of the drums, made me very nostalgic that night in the smoke-filled Café Rafio in the Village. Thoughts of my island floated into my mind, but I chased them away.

That night, it wasn't music that disturbed my mind. Maya was the cause of my turmoil. But why should I pay so much attention to what she had said? I'd be damned if I would let Maya dictate my life with her foolishness about "black pride." I liked *whites*—period! I felt good being around them; they accepted me. Thanks to consorting with liberal whites in the Village, I had graduated from black to Human Being.

In Cuba there was a term for a black who only associated with whites: a *piolo*. Since childhood I had connected it with looks of disgust on the faces of blacks. I now considered myself above such prejudices. No one could force me to date only black women. Was I a *piolo*, after all?

Yes, I wanted these sophisticated white women. No one was going to ruin my prospects! Women were women, no matter what color. So what if my individual preference happened to be for pale skin, flowing sun-kissed hair, and light-colored eyes? That was my right. Wasn't it?

As I engaged in my furious mental monologue, my eyes met those of a young woman I had seen before at this club. Curvaceous and utterly blonde, with blue-green eyes that always seemed on the verge of tears, she was just the type to whack my heart into submission at first sight. As it turned out, Karina was of Irish origin and from a well-to-do family. She studied at the Martha Graham School of Dance.

We met several times at the club, and one night I offered to escort her home. At her studio apartment, we chatted and listened to music

for a while until I saw the unmistakable look of desire surface in her gaze.

"You're so beautiful," she said, as if she had just discovered me.

We laughed and fell into each other's arms in an embrace that felt special. That night we made love furiously. She seemed as enthralled with my midnight-black skin, coarse hair, full lips, and broad nose as I was with her delicate, chalky beauty.

Karina took me to poetry readings and parties in the Village, where she introduced me to her bohemian friends. Though modern dance, theater, and ballet did not appeal to me, I began spending much of my time with her. The passion that surged between us erased the reality that she was twenty-five and I was seventeen and still very green. Besides the volcanic clash of our bodies, something new was growing inside us. Before I realized it, I had developed a serious crush on her.

But my idyll with Karina had another effect. Practically everywhere we went beyond the Village an ominous silence hung over us. The hostile stares that our presence evoked in certain public places lodged in my awareness. Fleeting or sustained, those frozen stares spoke of *transgression*. At first I was defiant but eventually had to face up to the soul-shattering fact that the oppressive atmosphere had nothing to do with my foreign ways, halting accent, and non-American body language. It had to do with the color of my skin.

For how long could I straddle the tense divide between two worlds that negated each other politcally and socially as much as they did in the more intimate sphere? In Cuba, I had know of the interracial sexual taboo, but now I was living it and in ways that made me uncomfortable. I rejected the racism embedded in the eyes of those whites who were revolted at the sight of a mixed couple. However, I began to feel a certain shame at the curious looks that I got from blacks. Why? What was so terrible about a black man and a white woman being romantically linked? And why was I so unilaterally attracted to white women? Was I a *piolo*? My mind was in utter chaos.

14

ENCOUNTER WITH MYSELF

On my way home from school one wintry day I noticed a group of people standing on a Brooklyn corner while a man on a soapbox harangued passersby at the top of his voice. He was flanked by two flags—one the American stars and stripes, the other red, black, and green.

Nostrand Avenue and Fulton Street was a busy intersection, and although there were always a dozen or so people listening as if in a trance, I had not stopped before. That day, however, as I walked by, the speaker seemed to shout right at me.

"Hey, hey, hey, Mr. Negro!" I turned, and he was staring at me. He was a black soapbox speaker, a Garveyite black nationalist. "Look at your hair, Mr. Negro! You're ashamed of your hair!"

Accusingly, he said that Negroes who straightened their hair were also ashamed of their noses, their lips, their skin. They were ashamed of being black! They were ashamed of their origins in the continent of Africa!

"Look at Mr. Negro! He doesn't know he's a lost African."

This man had probably said the same words every day and I had paid no attention. This time he appeared to address me directly. What did he have against my straightened hair? I liked my straightened hair; it was easier to comb and looked more attractive.

Standing there on the sidewalk, I recalled the scent of melted grease and the crackling sound as my mother ran a hot iron comb through her own hair to remove the kinks. I never saw her hair in a natural state. "Ah pressing out di bad hair," she would say, heating the comb on a little coal stove.

I remembered the day she called out, "Lito, come! I have a big surprise." She took some white stuff from a jar and applied it to my hair, saying I must wait a while.

When it started scorching my scalp, I hollered, "Mada, it burning!"

She poured water on my head and sat me before a mirror. What I saw was the greatest transformation ever. I had straight, glossy hair, just like the Indians and whites. I felt exhilarated. I had dreamed of having hair like that.

"Dis is a gift fi you. But it expensive, me can't do it all di time," she said.

"But I want me hair like dis all di time," I implored.

When she had no more of the product left, she used potassium mixed with water. The potassium left bleeding sores on my scalp, but it did the trick. So when I went to America I continued using hair straightener.

"Hey, Mr. Negro, look at your hair!" the man shouted again, jolting me back to the present. Processed hair, he said, was just like dog's hair.

Who the hell was this guy to suggest that my hair was like a dog's? What he said was preposterous.

"Black people are the only people who have hair that can't be found on any animal," he yelled. "They should be proud of it, but ain't."

The man raved on about hair, and then on and on about how beautiful the noses of Africans are. I had never considered African noses and lips beautiful. In Lugareño, the white boys laughed at our features, likening our nostrils to saxophones, our lips to bloated beef, and our hair to the *marabu* bush that was full of prickly thorns.

The speaker had hit a sensitive spot. I was riled that he used me as a target in front of the fifteen or so other people listening. After a while I turned and left. But I could hear him in the distance.

"Hey, Mr. Negro! You're running away from yourself. Come back to your senses. Come back, Mr. Negro!"

Days went by, but the words of the soapbox speaker kept coming back, chipping at my hard-won self-esteem.

Hey, Mr. Negro, you're ashamed of your lips.

Of course I was not ashamed of my lips!

Hey, Mr. Negro, you're ashamed of your nose.

Nonsense. I was not ashamed of my nose.

Hey, Mr. Negro, you're ashamed of your African hair.

Ridiculous. I was not ashamed of my hair; it was just easier to handle when straight.

I could not get that man's litany out of my mind. That guy, whoever he was, didn't know what he was talking about! So why did his nonsensical talk bother me?

My first impulse was to take another route home from school, but I did not. One day when I reached the soapbox corner, I stayed to listen. The same speaker was there, talking about the man Mr. Michaux so revered, a certain Marcus Garvey who had founded an organization called the Universal Negro Improvement Association. I did not know then that Garvey had visited Cuba in 1921 and caused a stir by wanting to set up black unions among the West Indians and Haitians.

The orator expounded at length. Africa was the cradle of mankind. All Africans should be proud of themselves. Until the Negro discovered that collective self-help was the only way out, he would remain in shackles.

Curious to hear more, I got into the habit of passing by regularly.

There were several soapbox speakers who talked of Marcus Garvey's plan to establish an empire in Africa. I learned about the Black Star Line steamship company he had built to promote commerce between black countries and take skilled people to Africa to participate in building up the continent.

The books I was devouring at the National Memorial African Bookstore had opened me up to Africa. That continent seemed to be on the lips of everyone I met through Maya. They spoke with pride of Ghana, which had acquired independence in 1957, and of Guinea, which had done so in 1958. Kwame Nkrumah and Sekou Turé, presidents of Ghana and Guinea respectively, were celebrated as if they were movie

stars. The media too was bustling with news about the black continent, so I had become intoxicated with the sense of pride that the name, Africa, now evoked.

One day after listening to the orator for hours, I went home, grabbed the bottle of hair straightener, and poured its contents into the bathroom sink, watching the swirl of water carry the thick white substance down the drain. I emptied my skin bleach down the drain, too. I threw the bottles in the garbage can in the kitchen and returned to my room. Before falling asleep, my mind drifted to Cuba, my mother, Georgia, Maya—I felt good!

My delicious life of sexual exploits in the Village ran parallel to my informal schooling in Harlem. But in Harlem I was neither faceless nor colorless. All the faces were black, and mine fit right in. In Harlem I was *home*!

It had been a while since my last visit to the National Memorial African Bookstore. That day when I arrived at Michaux's I was lucky to find Maya about to leave. She greeted me with an approving smile that made me feel warm inside. I was sure she noticed that my hair was no longer conked, but she said nothing.

"Abbey and Max are playing Saturday," she said. "It'll be very special, and I want you to come."

I was happy; she still trusted me. I assured her I would be there.

This time I went to the club by myself, and Maya proudly introduced me to a number of people; two of them in particular drew my attention. Jean was a year or two older than I, and Laura, in her mid twenties. Both wore their hair natural in short Afros, and both were beautiful. While there was an obvious seductiveness about Jean, I felt challenged by Laura's discreet, more remote attitude. We hit it off immediately. A sadness about her expression affected me. She had a way of not looking straight at you, as if she were bashful, though she was not. Something candid in her eyes told me she was interested in me; she was not out seeking just any man.

Laura was wearing a light brown cotton blouse with a V-shaped neckline that revealed just enough cleavage to be sexy, beautifully accentuated by a thin silver necklace. She wore sandals and a simple, tight-fitting knee-length skirt, showing her legs. She aroused my desire right away. But it was the look in her eyes, and her elusive smile, that drew me to her.

At the end of the evening I found myself following Laura to Lower Manhattan. Her modest studio was full of books, mostly novels and poetry. At the time I had read neither a novel nor a book of poems, although I had avidly digested more than a hundred factual books on historical, sociological, and political matters. I wondered what could be of interest in a novel.

I wanted us to go to bed immediately, but Laura wanted to talk. I did not see what there was to *talk* about; I was used to the wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am style of Greenwich Village. She sat me down in her tiny kitchen and made us sandwiches while talking about her family and where she was born. Frankly, I felt impatient to get down to the nitty-gritty. For her to have invited me home at that hour must mean she, too, had sex in mind. However, she ignored my hints. She asked me about Cuba and why I had come to the States. I answered with little conviction, uttering generalities to her probing about my origins. But she insisted.

"Tell me about your mother," she said, unknowingly invoking the very subject I wished to avoid.

"What about her?"

Laura must have heard the discomfort in my voice, for she gave me a lingering look.

"You don't seem to know much about your parents," she said.

She was right. Where in Jamaica were they from? Who were their parents? How did they happen to pick Cuba as a land to migrate to in search of employment? I had never asked such questions. My parents had raised us in overall silence about their earlier lives. They acted as if knowledge of their past could harm us; considering the shame I

bore about my foreign background, I was not exceedingly curious about their pre-Cuba years. But why bring all that up at a moment like this?

"It's because I want to know about *you*," Laura responded softly.

In America I had succeeded in erasing the part of my past that made me uneasy, and I was not going to be forced back there. I was burning with lust and felt we were needlessly losing time. Moreover, this certainly was not the moment to introduce the subject of my mother, who was safely relegated to banished memories. True, those ever-sad maternal eyes haunted me at moments of solitary reflection, but I always managed to repel such images. Deep down, I felt something akin to hatred toward her, a feeling I assumed would keep our paths from ever crossing again. My mother was a done deal, pretty much as if I had had none.

Finally, after about an hour, Laura took me into her bedroom. We showered together, and I felt an intense desire to take her right there, but she pushed me away, laughing.

We lay naked on her bed. She had one of those record players on which you stacked several discs and let them fall into place, making the music last for hours.

We listened to Sarah Vaughan. I closed my eyes, surrendering to the song "If You Could See Me Now."

After a while, I felt Laura's fingers touch my body. I sprang onto her, my stallion instincts ablaze.

"No," she whispered, "not like that." She eased me off, rolled over, and positioned herself on top of me.

I was shocked. No woman had done that with me before. Then something else occurred that was new to me. I went limp!

I panicked. My only concern was how to get my virility back before she noticed. I no longer felt her kisses nor heard the music. I was in a state of havoc.

Realizing I was not returning her caresses, she lay back and held my hand. I felt ashamed. We both stared at the ceiling. Ella Fitzgerald was scatting in the background. It was 4:00 A.M.

"Is this your first time making love to a black woman?" she asked softly.

The question alarmed me. I had insatiably consumed one white woman after another, often more than one a day, and this had not happened before. Georgia, the only black woman I had been in love with, had been totally dependent on me while trying to kick her drug habit, so I had always been in control. With Laura, I felt inadequate, overpowered by her assertiveness.

"Is it the first time?" she insisted.

"Of course not," I shot back, an edge of defensive aggressiveness in my tone.

She disregarded it and began caressing me again.

"Don't be ashamed. There's no need; such things happen," she reassured.

All I wanted to do was get up and run away. I was both ashamed and angry.

She gently turned me around and brought her face closer. With her body half on mine she began talking about mundane things: where she worked and what she did. She was a secretary at a major bookstore in downtown Manhattan. She liked working there because it enabled her to buy books at a cut price. As she spoke, I relaxed more and more, yet it bothered me that she seemed to connect my lack of performance with her color.

"You won't get mad if I ask you something?" I said eventually.

"Of course not."

"Why are you black women so racist?"

"Racist?"

"Yeah. Like, you're all down on black men who date white women." Instantly I regretted my words. Why in the world did I have to spoil the moment?

She did not move. A long silence enveloped us. When she spoke again, her voice was a whisper. "It's not about racism on our part. It's about the way some of you carry on with those white women, strutting

about with them as if they were war trophies. Meanwhile, many of you treat us like dirt," she said.

I was shocked.

"You bring them in our midst, worshipping them like goddesses, expecting us to kiss their feet, too. *That* is what I call racism, and it's sickening!"

Laura did not stop. She spoke quietly of the portrayal of black men as oversexed studs, of the rape of black women by white slave masters. I knew enough about such things to hold my ground. Of course enslavement had scarred black people beyond measure. It was true that black women found themselves alone and vulnerable during those terrible centuries; no other people in history had suffered what blacks had. It was also true that black men had been in no position to protect the physical or moral integrity of their womenfolk or themselves. But why dwell on the past?

"Scars can hurt more than fresh wounds," she whispered.

"Black men didn't cause those wounds. White men did," I countered.

"White women did, too," she said. "In ways that were just as brutal."

Enslavement had been a terrible experience for black men as well as black women, I said. She began to speak almost to herself, ignoring my insistent interruptions.

"For four hundred years we black women had to fend for ourselves . . ."

Was that the black man's fault? Of course not!

". . . raise children we had not desired, or have those we desired seized from us . . ."

But black men were in chains, too.

". . . our bodies defiled, our lives trampled, our humanity torn to shreds . . ."

My chest was heavy. The weight of hundreds of years had settled upon it.

She had closed her eyes, maybe the better to immerse herself in the scent, sounds, and terrors of the past. It was a past I, too, was trying to connect with, as if it held the key to the mysteries of my own life.

In the silence of her room, I felt I was being drawn toward a perilous abyss. I fought off reticence. I let her hand, softly resting on my arm, pull me along with her; back, way back into the epoch of blood. The era of our common exile. The hell beyond all hells.

". . . black women endured those centuries completely on their own . . ."

Through mistiness, I was smelling what she smelled; seeing what she saw: Women with linen headwraps, slouching around iron pots blackened by the smoke of charcoal. Women stirring cornmeal. Swarms of scrawny children, many yellow skinned and blond nappy haired. Women with an indecipherable look in their eyes, humming slow ballads to placate hungry bellies. Women with strong, weary bodies. The sun setting. A distant hum of male voices as the men returned to their earthen-floor barracoons.

". . . centuries during which black women and men were forcibly kept apart from one another; forbidden to marry, to make love with one another. . . . They felt each other's touch only when ordered by slave masters to copulate in public to reproduce human cattle. . . ."

I lay silent. I no longer wished to open my eyes. I wanted to stay in that world a little longer, long enough to change the course of the history that had produced people like Laura and me. I wanted to obliterate that past, bring down the wall between us. But she loosened the pressure on my arm, forcing my eyes open.

"I wish I could go back and erase all that," I said, feeling the weight of centuries.

"We can't go back, but we can change things."

"Everything is so fucked up." I sighed.

"Not everything," she said.

Silence settled gently between us again, and we let it finish our unspoken thoughts.

She rolled to the side of the bed and got up. Her sensuous back had a deep groove running down to her buttocks. I liked it. She stooped to pick some records from the rack and came back to me after placing them on the player.

"Who is that?"

"Billie Holiday," she said.

I was half lost in the music and the mellow, raspy voice that commanded it. "What's the song?"

"'Don't Explain.'" She brushed my lips with a fleeting kiss. "Do you like poetry?"

"Not really."

She stood up, slowly. I took a lingering look at her body as she went to her desk. Her deep brown, beautiful full hips and legs pleased me. She came back with a folder, taking up the same position in bed as before, on her side with her face close to mine and her body pressed against me.

"Close your eyes," she said.

Daylight began to filter through the windowpanes. Laura put out the bedside lamp and a soft light inundated the apartment.

I was mesmerized by her voice as she read, explaining each poem beforehand.

She put her head in my arms, took my hands, and caressed them as we listened to the music. Dinah Washington sang "This Bitter Earth." My eyes were closed.

I felt the warmth of her body beside me. I rolled over and covered it with mine. I kissed her fleshy lips, tentatively at first, then increasingly zealously. I kissed her nose, her eyes, her hair. It was the first time I had kissed hair that was not straight. I kissed her breasts, moved down lower and kissed her legs. As they parted, I began kissing her sex, until her body trembled. Gently she grasped my shoulders and pulled me toward her. I went into her, slowly and softly.

Then we lay on our backs contentedly, eyes closed, fingers intertwined.

I left Laura's apartment on a cloud.

That weekend, I told Karina my first lie. Nothing seemed to have changed in our relationship; at least, not that I perceived. What *was* different was the way I felt about myself. Traveling into Laura's world planted doubts in my mind. What made a *white* woman so special to me, to the point of excluding all others?

I began seeing Laura on a steady basis. Each time the magic between us spread further. There was no denying I had fallen in love with her; a new woman had entered my life while I was already sharing it with someone else. Yet my affair with Karina had to remain secret, not only because she was a rival but because she was white. I shuddered every time the thought crept into my mind in Laura's presence. And she picked up on the least furrow of my brow, attentive to everything going on inside me, the unspoken turbulence eating at my soul. But why was I suddenly feeling shame, of all emotions, regarding Karina? Yes, I was ashamed of having an affair with a *white* woman. However, I was not faking my deep feelings for Karina; I loved her. I had gotten myself into a mess.

"What are you thinking?" Laura asked in her velvety voice.

I was startled from my reverie. "Nothing," I said, trying to avoid her eyes.

"You always say 'nothing' whenever you're deep in thought," she responded. Her ability to see beneath the surface both intimidated and fascinated me. She was attuned to things about me like no one else. She addressed me with an authority no woman had used before. I felt hostage to her constant questions about what was in my mind. "Do you really love me?" she asked.

The question brought me back to the moments when Georgia had asked that same question. Why did women feel the need to ask that right after making love?

"Would I be here with you if I didn't love you?" I said.

"That's not an answer," she replied, a faint look of distress in her face.

The more involved we became, the more difficult things were, because of Laura's inquisitiveness and my own tendency to compare her with the other woman in my life. Both women were generous and open. Both made me feel like the most important person in their lives. I felt pride that I was the one to satisfy their quest for love. However, I wanted an unstressed relationship with Laura like the one I had with Karina. With Karina I was king, no questions asked. I was the one who mentored her about Marxism, the Revolution, the world order—all the things that held my interest. I was in love with two women who could not be farther apart from one another.

With Laura, the situation was reversed. She drew new facets of life to my attention, so I traveled farther along the road of music and novels. I even began to enjoy her poetry recitations, captivated by the rhythm of her voice, the feeling of ecstasy I got from listening to the rainfall of her words while reclining my head on her soft belly. I was falling deeper and deeper in love with this woman, yet felt terrified about where it was all leading. What about the inevitable moment when I would have to reveal there was another woman in my life, who was white, blonde, and blue eyed? Laura became more demanding, asking more details about how I lived. Dissatisfied with my evasive answers, she said, "I don't think you're being honest with me. Are you seeing another woman?"

My normal response would have been to lie my way out of the corner, remorselessly, but I saw too much trust in her eyes to do that without feeling I had committed an act of unforgivable treachery. Hanging my head, I admitted that, yes, there was another woman.

"Who is she?" Laura asked. I told her.

After a while, she said, "I understand. I think it best we stop seeing each other."

It was foolish to end things just when we were getting to know each other, I told her. I had begun to feel something very profound for her.

Her eyes were downcast. "It won't work," she said. When I asked her why, she said, "I know it won't, because you haven't yet found yourself."

That day we made love for the last time. I saw her several times after that, but she steadfastly refused to continue our relationship. Our last contact, over the phone, was sad. She said perhaps in the future we could forge a friendship, but for now she wanted to be left alone. There was finality in her voice.

Despite all that she had taught me, I attributed the end of our connection to her jealousy of a white rival. But in retrospect I realize that at twenty-four Laura was in every way a mature woman. It was enough for me to be appreciated as a good lover. She had wanted not a sexual fling but a meeting of equals. She had tried to get me to look inward, but I had resisted. I didn't know how to respond to a woman who wanted to talk things out, to arrive somewhere together. I was not yet ready for such a woman.

15

TWIN STARS IN MY SKY

My growing involvement with the left eroded my boyhood illusions about the United States. The civil rights movement had been brought to my attention, and I followed the situation in the Southern states as eagerly as I did events in Cuba and the Congo. Those three realities became enmeshed in my consciousness as the entangled roots of a tree.

In February that year, 1960, four black students at North Carolina A & T State University initiated what was thereafter called a sit-in. They sat at a whites-only lunch counter in a Greensboro Woolworth and refused to get up till served.

"We are Americans," they said, "and we shall exercise all the rights guaranteed in our Constitution!"

Within two weeks, that brave action spread to fifteen Southern cities and five states. It was followed by the Freedom Riders, whose bus trips all over the South and sit-ins at segregated bus stations defied segregationist mobs, police, and state officials. The brutality of white repression and the proud defiance of the Freedom Riders made these events instant news worldwide. The black revolution in the United States had begun. My admiration for black Americans was at its zenith. I had seen no black person in Cuba stand up like that to whites!

In March, the massacre of unarmed black protestors by the white police in South Africa brought the term *apartheid* into my vocabulary. Wherever I looked, race seemed to be a dominant part of the realities of the world.

Fidel Castro had been in power a year, and reports coming out of Cuba led me to believe that his regime was doing away with racial dis-

crimination. That consolidated my support for his regime. As his revolution gained my total support, I became more aware of the cracks in American society. This dichotomy posed an emotional predicament for me, given my attachment to America. But its pervasive racism and the marginal position to which black Americans were relegated now touched me personally. The more anti-Castro the United States became, the more nationalistic and anti–United States my political stance became.

That summer my attention focused on the Black Muslim brotherhood known as the Nation of Islam. Its members were on every Harlem street corner, selling their weekly newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*. The men stood out in their neat attire: dark suits, white shirts, and distinctive bow ties. Their close-shaven heads and no-nonsense look inspired pride. At Mr. Michaux's bookstore I had heard Minister Malcolm X, the Nation of Islam's spokesman, and its leader the Honorable Elijah Muhammad mentioned in the same breath. I decided to attend one of the Muslim's mass rallies.

The rally took place indoors at 369th Field Artillery Armory, on 142nd Street and Fifth Avenue. Although I arrived early, the armory was already jam-packed with thousands of people by 8:00 A.M., and the throng outside was swelling. Being inside the armory that day was like being in an altogether different country, under a different government. The bow-tied, karate-trained security guards known as the Fruit of Islam reinforced the feeling of being in a black man's land.

It made me proud to see thousands of blacks, sitting or standing in such a disciplined manner, all ears to what a tall, slender, light-skinned man with reddish hair was saying. The speaker, Minister Malcolm X, took my mind and my soul by storm. He told us: It is the white man who has brainwashed you and me, brothers and sisters. Why, he has so brainwashed us that if someone came to you right now and said, "Here's half of the United States; take it over and govern it," you would swoon and not know what to do. In fact, you would go running after the most

derelict white man in this country and tell him, "Please, Mr. White Man, set up a government and run it for me!"

The crowd roared in approving laughter. Deep inside I knew what he said was true.

"The problem with the Negro is that he doesn't have confidence in himself. How can you respect one another, your wives, your children, if you don't respect yourselves?"

I joined in the chorus of response, "That's right, Brother Minister!"

"How can Negroes change their condition while they disrespect their womenfolk, despise themselves, and only prize that which is white?"

Again we shouted, "That's right, Brother Minister!"

"Brothers and sisters, most Negroes feel that what is black is bad and what is white is right, and that no black man or woman exercises an authority they are bound to respect. Now, if that isn't Nazi brainwashing of the worst type, brothers and sisters, then I don't know what is!"

He attacked the United States of America as being the "chief imperialist nation of the world." Nothing was more powerful than the dream I nourished throughout my childhood, going to bed every night and awaking every day with America on my mind. But the scales had fallen from my eyes. Malcolm's harsh denunciation befit the reality.

"America is the number one oppressor of so-called colored people around the world; the leader of a pack of white imperialist nations. Everywhere a crime is committed, it is in her defense, or in her name, or with her as an active accomplice. Why, America is a monster, brothers and sisters; a wolf wearing sheep's clothing."

When I left the armory late that afternoon, I felt that something beyond merely unusual had happened to me. The Black Muslims had ceased being an object of curiosity and became the first organization in my life that I felt the urge to join. I followed their activities closely and read stories on Africa, Cuba, and Asia in *Muhammad Speaks*. I was eager to hear Minister Malcolm X speak again.

It was Mburumba Kerina, an Ovaherero nationalist from South West Africa (present-day Namibia) whose wife was a black American, who led

me to the Muslim mosque in Harlem that was under Malcolm's leadership. Maya had introduced me to Kerina, the first African with whom I had direct contact. The knowledge about Africa that he imparted was priceless, and I sought his company thereafter.

Kerina had sat emotionless through Minister Malcolm's electrifying speech. By contrast, I responded enthusiastically. As we left the mosque, he commented, "That has nothing to do with Islam. He is substituting politics for religion." I was vexed. I had been seeking precisely the political explanations Malcolm X offered. "I came to hear about blacks, not religion," I retorted.

We disagreed sharply.

Kerina represented the South-West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO). A petitioner before the United Nation's Committee on Decolonization for his colonized country, which was under the control of South Africa, he introduced me to the practical realities of Africa and also to UN circles. He seemed to know everyone who mattered. Through him I met my next batch of Africans: Paulo Gumane, petitioner of the Mozambican nationalist movement UDENAMO; Max Zollner, a Dahomean diplomat; and two Tutsi petitioners from Rwanda-Urundi who belonged to the UPRONA, a nationalist movement led by the monarch Mwami Kigeli V.

I became friendly with the Tutsis, whose impressive stature drew considerable attention at the UN. One of them, Ambroise Bunkanyabo, said the Belgians wanted to divide their country in order to retain control and were manipulating their Hutu countrymen. The Hutus, he claimed, were "puppets of the Belgians."

I noted there were always rival organizations from each African colony. For instance, other petitioners from Kerina's country belonged to the rival South West Africa National Union (SWANU). In the case of the Tutsi petitioners from Rwanda-Urundi, their political opponents on the homefront were Hutus, who supported a rival movement called PARMAHUTU. At the time I had no practical idea of the underlying cause for enmity between them, but I noted the intra-African fractiousness.

My discussions with African petitioners made Africa less a terra incognita for me. Each conversation deepened my awareness of the African continent's immensity, complexity, and diversity. However, it was the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which had recently gained independence from Belgium, that became my fixation.

In June 1960, Patrice Lumumba defeated his rivals to win the elections, but no sooner had he become prime minister than all hell broke loose. It seemed rooted in the phrases he spoke on the day the Congo proclaimed independence from Belgium, June 30, 1960: "We are going to show the world what the black man can do when he works in freedom." Every fiber of my being identified with these words.

Lumumba was my first political hero. I wanted to be like him, yet he was accused of being a Communist. Was it communism to want Africa for the Africans, to fight for dignity for blacks? I reasoned that if he was a Communist, then so was I. I did not mind; the word "communism" had come to have positive connotations for me, thanks to my association with the assortment of Marxists within the FPCC and the Socialist Workers Party.

Events in the Congo became so personal to me from reading the newspapers and talking with Africans that when I heard Lumumba had sent a mission to the United Nations, I decided to look up the Congolese delegates. I met Lumumba's representatives, Alphonse Lema and François Misano Ngoie, and told them I wanted to go to the Congo. They heard me out. Their ambassador, Thomas Kanza, had not yet arrived; I had to discuss the matter with him.

"When is Ambassador Kanza coming?" I asked.

"At any time; until then we can't make any decisions."

Lema said that if I really wanted to help, I could come to the office and do some translating for them, since I spoke some French. I accepted. Surprisingly, the secretary at the UN Mission for the Democratic Republic of the Congo was a Belgian woman, but they seemed to have confidence in her. My job amounted to cutting out press articles on the

Congo and pasting them into scrapbooks and translating newspaper stories, giving the delegates the gist of the content. Neither Lema nor Ngoie spoke English, so my high-school French was put to use in ways I had never anticipated.

Because of my "job" at the mission I went regularly to UN headquarters on the East River in Manhattan, sitting in the gallery during Security Council meetings to listen to the African delegates speak of colonialism and independence. The realization that I could understand and relate to what was being discussed fired my passion for reading more. I consumed whatever publications would keep me informed and up-to-date. In addition, I met many diplomats: Achkbar Marof from Guinea; Kenneth Dadzie from Ghana; Omar Loufti, the Egyptian ambassador. I also became more aware of the Caribbean and Latin America in terms of the politics reshaping the face of the planet.

I HAD BEEN HELPING at the Congolese mission for several weeks when a third member joined the other diplomats. During his brief stay in New York I was to accompany him to various appointments. On one occasion we broke custom and began to chat as we went to a private meeting in Brooklyn.

"I hear you want to go to the Congo and are waiting for the ambassador."

"Can I send a message with you to him?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied.

When I went home I decided to write to Ambassador Kanza and entrust the letter to the visiting diplomat, who was about to leave.

"I need you to give this letter to Ambassador Kanza and explain that I want to go to the Congo to be useful," I said.

"What can you do in the Congo?" he asked.

"Anything," I replied. "I want to let Ambassador Kanza know this."

"You are *speaking* to Ambassador Kanza," he said, looking me in the eye.

I was stunned. I had been going around for a week with the very man I had waited so long to meet!

Kanza asked me to be patient. "You will go to the Congo," he said assuringly.

My heart almost burst with joy.

Meanwhile, I had been skipping school to spend all this time at the UN. I would attend some classes then head for the mission. On weekends I would copy what I had missed. Catching up on homework and passing the classroom tests despite my outside activities made me realize I was pretty smart. But I felt there was so much more to learn.

My parents were unaware that I was missing classes. The only person who knew what I had been up to was Mr. Callender, my English teacher. I would leave school and, using my meager allowance from my father, take the subway to Manhattan, get off at Forty-Second Street East, and rush to the UN building. I would sit in the Security Council gallery, listening rapturously to the speeches of the ambassadors from Guinea, India, Ghana, Egypt, and Indonesia attacking the West.

Entrance passes to the UN were only available through a diplomatic mission. The Congolese mission had given me a special pass. I dressed in a suit and tie and was taken for an African delegate. The Scandinavian guards greeted me when I went in and out. Once I even used the diplomats' entrance with the Congolese.

I threw myself wholeheartedly into a thousand different activities. None involved any money. I would have refused payment had any been offered. The Congo was in trouble, and it was gratification enough to be of use to Africa. I was content to be a part of it all and felt important. I'd been catapulted from a dusty Cuban town of fewer than two thousand inhabitants to the heart of world politics. The UN was a huge organization where big questions deciding the future of the world were debated. The fact that I, a teenager, could gain access and follow the Security Council deliberations bolstered my self-esteem.

In that summer of 1960 I began realizing how serious it all was. That summer, many things converged: the situation in the Congo, the Revolution in Cuba, the fire-and-brimstone speeches of Malcolm X, and Marxism. "Revolution" became a magic word to me; I would follow its headwind toward the dignity I had yearned for since childhood, though that might mean being thrust into the vortex of a storm.

18

WHITE WARRIOR

With the Revolution beleaguered and a U.S. invasion of Cuba imminent, September 1960 marked a political but also a personal watershed. Fidel Castro's seismic arrival in New York to address the United Nations General Assembly led to an encounter with the Cuban leader in flesh and blood that would completely redefine the course of my life. Never again would I see myself as a mere bystander to world events.

I had secured a job as a night clerk at the Brooklyn branch of the Dimes Savings Bank, which removed me from financial dependence on my father. However, I was increasingly involved with the July 26 Movement, the political arm of the Castroite Revolution. Though I was not an actual member (because of my inveterate reluctance to join anything), I worked on its behalf in Harlem, spreading the good word about the Revolution.

I became secretive. In those days, pro-Castro Cubans in the States met in discreet restaurants or bars in Spanish Harlem. While music played in the front, we went to a back room to talk. We knew that all pro-Castro supporters were under increased FBI surveillance since Castro was said to be a Communist.

My information on Cuba came from the media, the July 26 Movement, the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, and people like LeRoi Jones, Harold Cruse, and Robert Williams who, after trips to Cuba, gave testimony in meetings about what they had experienced. Using these sources, I began to speak on Harlem street corners. People applauded. Though I had no firsthand knowledge of recent happenings in my country, not having been back since arriving in America

two years before, I felt proud to be Cuban, credentials enough to speak authoritatively.

That is how, at seventeen, I came to the attention of the FBI. From then on, the bureau's files—to which the Freedom of Information Act gave me limited access three decades later—chronicled with monotonous regularity my involvement with leftist and "subversive" causes:

> On September 24, 1960, [FBI censure] furnished a list of names of persons invited to the reception sponsored by the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC) for Cuban Prime Minister Fidel Castro. The name of one Carlos Moore, not further identified, was . . . on this list. . . .
>
> On [FBI censure] a confidential source who has furnished reliable information in the past advised that on [FBI censure] was held in Brooklyn, New York. This source stated that one Carlos (last name unknown) (LNU) attended this meeting. He was described by the source as a Cuban Negro, five feet six inches tall, weighing 135 to 138 pounds, being 18 to 20 years of age. According to the source Carlos LNU spoke in support of the Castro regime. . . .
>
> On [FBI censure] source advised that Carlos LNU was a Cuban and came from Camaguey, Cuba. Carlos and his sister, name unknown, in November of 1960, were observed at the LEL headquarters in Brooklyn, New York. According to the source, movies of the Cuban revolution were shown. . . .
>
> [FBI censure] One Carlos More, a native from that country, was the main speaker. Source stated his speech concerned the [FBI censure]. His speech throughout was a typical communist line [FBI censure]. . . .
>
> On April 26, 1961, a third confidential source who has furnished reliable information in the past advised that on April 21, 1961, the FPCC held a rally at Union Square, New York City. One of the speakers was Carlos Moore, along with several oth-

ers. All of the speakers defended the Cuban revolution and demanded that the United States cease her intervention in Cuban affairs.

On April 28, 1961, a fourth confidential source who has also furnished reliable information in the past advised that during a rally at Union Square on April 21, 1961, sponsored by FPCC, one of the speakers was Carlos Moore. Moore stated he is Cuban and wished that the State Department would deport him because he wants to go home. He indicated that the United States is now a small stick, "destroy capitalist [sic] and the capitalists will never return to exploit the people." He indicated that the United States was afraid that other Latin American countries will follow Cuba.

On May 29, 1961, a fifth confidential source who has furnished reliable information in the past advised that within the previous week he had [FBI censure] set forth that More [sic] was a Cuban who was to return to Cuba within a few days via the Island of Aruba and Venezuela. . . . On [FBI censure] a seventh confidential source who has furnished reliable information in the past advised that on [FBI censure] was held at the Central Plaza Annex, New York City. One of the persons in attendance was Carlos LNU, a Cuban Negro. This source stated that Carlos was a speaker and stated [FBI censure]. . . .

On June 2, 1961, Carlos Moore, Apartment 21-A, 163 Lefferts Place, Brooklyn, New York, furnished the following information concerning himself to a Special Agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Carlos Moore: He was born November 4, 1942, at Camaguey, Cuba, was unemployed but formerly was a clerk at the Dimes Savings Bank, Brooklyn, New York. He was five feet six inches tall, entered the United States in May of 1958, as an alien for permanent residence and that he had attended Boys High School in Brooklyn, New York. . . .

> On [FBI censure] an eighth confidential source who has furnished reliable information in the past advised that a meeting sponsored by [FBI censure] at [FBI censure] Source stated that Carlos More [sic] spoke in English and his were the strongest anti-American remarks of the evening. His comments were highly pro-Russian and pro-Red Chinese. He referred unfavorably to segregation in the southern United States. . . .
>
> On [FBI censure] source furnished a newsletter of the New York chapter of the FPCC, dated March 27, 1961. This letter contained a notice that one Carlos Moore would be the feature speaker at a party sponsored by the Young Socialist Alliance (YSA), at the Casa Club, 691 Columbus Avenue, New York, New York, on Saturday, April 4. . . .
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> The April 30, 1961, issue of "The Worker," page 12, column 3, contained an article entitled "3000 at Rally Hit Invasion." The rally at Union Square, New York City, was sponsored by the FPCC and according to this article, one of the speakers was Carlos Moore, a Cuban youth.
>
> Bufiles contain a copy of "New York Chapter Newsletter #4, Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC), 799 Broadway, New York City 3, OR 4–8295," dated 3/27/61, in which it was stated that Carlos Moore will be the featured speaker at a party sponsored by the Young Socialist Alliance at the Casa Cuba, 691 Columbus Avenue . . . on Saturday, April 8."

For the next quarter century my name was on the FBI list of foreigners considered a threat to America's national security. My entire life changed. Having stopped being politically gullible, no longer immersed in the racial self-hatred that undermined my soul, and having become assertive of my civil rights made me a marked man. Ironically, at the point where my concern for the lot of others was at its highest, the country I had believed in since childhood proscribed me as dangerous. However, what pushed me over the critical line separating normal citizen from

"subversive" was the string of events surrounding Fidel Castro's visit to the United States that fall.

Castro and his delegation initially went to the exclusive Shelburne Hotel in Midtown New York, but their stay at that hotel was short-lived. The American press printed grotesque stories about him, saying he had brought live chickens with him and was plucking and cooking them on the expensive rugs of his suite. Depicted as a barbarian, Castro in retaliation moved out of the Shelburne and into the Hotel Theresa, on the southwest corner of Seventh Avenue and 125th Street, the only black-owned hotel in Harlem. Castro declared that since he had been treated as a Negro, then he would live among them. The move made headlines worldwide:

> CASTRO MOVES TO BLACK GHETTO AND SAYS HE PREFERS TO LIVE AMONG NEGROES

Black Harlemites went wild. Thousands surrounded the hotel. Day and night, they chanted "Fidel! Fidel!" The black population of America opened its arms to Cuba's leader. It was a powerful propaganda coup, suggested by the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. Malcolm X went to the hotel to welcome him on behalf of the black community. World leaders on official visits to the United States scored heavily by going to see Castro at his Harlem headquarters. The Egyptian president Gamal Abdul Nasser was one such, as was the Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev also paid Castro an impromptu visit on September 20. Residents keeping a round-the-clock vigil applauded enthusiastically each time one of these powerful leaders appeared. Castro had deftly pulled the racial rug from under Uncle Sam's feet, and with every passing day that the Cuban leader was holed up in Harlem, the heat mounted.

Awakened by the phone one morning, I jumped out of bed and was excited to hear someone speaking Spanish on the line. The call was

on behalf of Julio Medina, head of the July 26 Movement in the United States. I knew that call meant something big was in the making. I hurriedly dressed and rushed to the restaurant where members often met.

"Fidel is in Harlem, and we need you to work the crowds," I was told.

I did not have to be asked twice. I was more than willing.

Night after night I addressed the hundreds who gathered to listen, shouting until I was hoarse. Those were euphoric moments. I stirred the crowds into a frenzy that defied the biting cold. Since there was no doubt in my mind that Castro had reversed the situation in favor of blacks in Cuba, I fervently extolled the Revolution's success in eliminating racism. It was of no import that the Revolution was embodied by a wealthy white Cuban lawyer/politician of Spanish origin. Castro had my full support. I had become quite popular in Harlem's black nationalist circles, so I was all the more credible when praising the Revolution's racial achievements. I mentioned the head of the army, Juan Almeida Bosque, even though he was the only black in Cuba's leadership. Still, I offered him as proof that Fidel meant business.

I also spoke to the crowds about those Cubans who were running to Miami to flee the Revolution. "They are the most corrupt, racist white people of Cuba," I shouted from my platform.

Once they arrived in Miami, these whites were saying that communism had taken over Cuba and that the Revolution was red and black. That convinced me that the Revolution was our thing. I told the crowds as much: "It's our Revolution, and the man on the ninth floor of the Hotel Theresa is our man!"

All blacks with any self-respect must support the Revolution, I said. People applauded wildly when I spoke. I was "Brother Carlos" or "Carlos the Cuban."

Not everything about the Revolution lived up to my expectations, but I felt obliged to overlook them, or minimize them as temporary aberrations. Some things had caught my attention, such as the all-white

membership of the July 26 Movement; I was aware of being the only black Cuban in New York speaking on its behalf, although I formally did not belong to it.

Because of my good standing with the July 26 Movement and the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, I was placed on the list of those invited to attend a private reception for Castro. The event was the same week that Castro was scheduled to address the Fifteenth Session of the UN General Assembly on September 26.

After working the crowd all day in Harlem, I had barely enough time to dash home to change into my dark suit and tie before rushing to the hotel, which by then was surrounded by an army of police and FBI agents. Roadblocks had been set up.

I arrived at 5:00 P.M. and waited outside until one of the July 26 Movement security men identified me to the Cuban guards, who frisked me and let me through. They were all white, but they were my white brothers who had liberated Cuba. Castro had been joined by Juan Almeida Bosque, the black army chief. Otherwise, Castros's retinue was lily white!

Some three hundred people were at the reception, talking, sipping drinks, and waiting, many since seven o'clock that night or earlier, like myself, just to see Fidel. Around nine thirty there was a sudden rush to one side of the room, and, in a perfectly orchestrated movement, all heads turned in that direction. Several men entered, some in plain clothes, some in olive-green uniforms. Some of those in uniform were bearded, but towering above them was one particular bearded man of dignified demeanor, the man whom the entire world had come to know simply as Fidel. In a chorus, everyone shouted his name and pushed toward him. Pandemonium broke out, and the dour-faced bodyguards had to restrain people from rushing up to hug him. Castro himself embraced the blacks closest to him, and soon it seemed as if everybody was in his arms. I was at the back of the room, and there was no way for me to get through that thick crowd.

The ceremonies began. Robert Taber spoke of how much Fidel Castro and the Revolution meant to the world. In a grand gesture, Castro called forward the owner of the Theresa, Love B. Woods, to thank him for opening up the hotel to him.

Suddenly, I felt someone tug my arm. It was one of the July 26 Movement officials, a security man. "*Ven rapido!*"—Come quickly!—he commanded, shoving me through the crowd, straight up to where Castro was. In no time I was between Castro and Woods, surrounded by bodyguards, being blinded by the flashbulbs of clicking cameras. The Movement's official was whispering in Castro's ear. Turning to me, the Cuban leader extended his hand.

I merely uttered, "Comandante."

He smiled back. "What are you doing here?" Castro asked.

"I live here and I'm studying," I replied.

"We need young fellows like you in Cuba," he encouraged.

"I want to go back," I replied eagerly. But he had already turned his attention to other faces, distributing appropriate greetings and weary smiles.

My love for Fidel Castro was genuine, profound. The Revolution he ushered into Cuba was changing the face of our country. In a flicker of a second, I'd decided on my next big step in life: I would return to my country.

I took Castro's words to mean that Cubans who mastered English and were revolutionaries were needed at home. At that time, the only people who spoke English in Cuba were rich U.S.-educated whites or blacks of West Indian heritage. With the whites fleeing en masse, the only residents left who spoke English were people like me—*pichóns*! For once, the term *pichón* exploded in my mind with a keen pride, a vengeful joy.

I was only seventeen and a half but felt not at all out of place among the leaders of the Revolution. At one point, I approached Major Juan Almeida Bosque; I was thrilled to meet the black hero of the Revolution. "Comandante," I said, "the people are very happy to see you."

Almeida addressed me easily, without pomposity. "You speak English very well. Who taught you?"

"My parents. I am a *pichón*," I said proudly.

Almeida was an easygoing and humble person, legendary yet unassuming. I was surprised when he told me he had just arrived in New York. He had been on army business in Oriente province, the island's far eastern end, when Castro requested his presence in the United States. He was flown from Oriente to Havana, then on to New York to join Castro in Harlem.

He looked tired and haggard. He confided that, having arrived in New York so worn-out, he wanted to rest for a while, but Fidel had insisted he walk the streets of Harlem, shake hands, and talk to people. Something just did not sound right.

Two voices vied within me. One asked, *Why fly in Major Almeida? If Castro hadn't come to Harlem, would Almeida have been brought?* Everyone else with Castro was white. The second voice said, *Fidel sent for Almeida precisely to show black Americans how much the Revolution has turned the entire race question upside down.* I tried convincing myself it was no big thing, but I could not shake the thought that something was amiss.

Castro's electrifying speech to the UN General Assembly on September 26, 1960, overrode any doubts I had and galvanized my support for the Revolution. He mentioned the indecent way he had been treated since arriving in New York. Because of the humiliating harassment, he had decided to go and live among his black brothers who had similarly been mistreated by U.S. imperialism. He spoke of the media's accusation that the hotel where he was staying was for prostitutes. Such charges, he said, stemmed from the fact that it was a black-owned hotel.

It was a fantastic speech. I was especially glad that Castro unhesitatingly defended my hero, Patrice Lumumba. Africa was everything to me, and the Cuban Revolution was but an extension of Africa, and Fidel an extension of Lumumba. Castro spoke about racism and apartheid,

accusing America of being behind crimes against blacks, Asians, and Native Americans.

The speech was moving, and long after Castro returned to Cuba the impact of his words remained. His visit placed me irreversibly in the arms of the Revolution. But there was still a minor problem I could not resolve. Something happened that evening to make me examine more intently this whole issue of black and white. I was ill at ease with the thoughts my mind conjured. Why had I met the July 26 Movement people only at restaurants? None of them ever invited me to their homes. We met on neutral ground, and they gave me instructions on where to make my speeches, where to distribute fliers, whom to contact. I understood the need for security because of the threat of infiltration. But all the same . . .

Why had no blacks come from Cuba with Castro or the other Cuban delegations? Why were all Cuba's UN diplomats white? Why were all government ministers white?

The one person I could have talked to about all this was my brother Frank. I had introduced him to Marxism, taken him to meetings of the Socialist Workers Party and the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. His zeal for the Revolution was now as strong as mine. But to share my concerns with him would have been to plant doubts in his mind. Would that not be an act of disloyalty?

I was not even sure myself why I was troubled.

17

SHOWERS OF BLOOD

Patrice Lumumba's assassination in January 1961, only announced to the public a month after the event, carved into my soul like a knife. I do not think I loved anyone outside of my family as deeply as I did Lumumba. His murder sealed my fate as a militant for black causes everywhere.

I had never met Lumumba, but he dramatically influenced my life, instilling a love for the African continent and its peoples as none had until then. The members of the Congo Mission to the UN, who also adored Lumumba, had kept me abreast of developments. Every day some new plot surfaced, a new attempt to unseat him from the fragile throne he had built with the power of his words: "We will show the world what the black man can do when he works in freedom!"

When Prime Minister Lumumba was arrested in December 1960 after a treacherous military coup d'état, my heart sank. I felt I was beside him, living each treason. The time for small talk was over. I contacted two people who enjoyed my utmost confidence. Maurice, from the French Caribbean, was working at the UN as a translator; he was key to what I had in mind. The second person, code-named "Jomo" (after Jomo Kenyatta, the "Burning Spear," founder and first president of independent Kenya) was a black American in his midtwenties with solid military experience.

"They are planning to kill Lumumba. We can't just stand around doing nothing," I said.

Each agreed that we needed to act. To minimize the risk of FBI infiltration or leaks, we also agreed to keep our plans temporarily to ourselves.

Jomo was serious and not very talkative. He had been in the U.S. Army for several years, intending to become career military. The racism he encountered, he said, made him change his mind. He didn't see why he should risk his life for a country that seemed to despise him.

"I listen to lots of people, but I don't know who is ready to give his life for the motherland," he said on our first meeting. We saw eye-to-eye from the outset, so it was to him that I first confided my plan. I proposed that the two of us talk with the Egyptian ambassador, Omar Loufti, whom I had met at the UN, about facilitating our passage to the Congo through Egypt. The campaign to get Lumumba freed from house arrest was led by the Egyptian president Gamal Abdul Nasser, whom I admired. I was sure the ambassador would remember me. Apparently he did, and he agreed to receive us. I explained to the ambassador what we wanted to do. The diplomat looked stunned. He stated that Egypt could not get us to the Congo. "If you give us the means to get to Egypt, we'll find our way to the Congo," I said.

Loufti stiffened. His voice became cautious. He did not think our plan was "prudent." Egypt did not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries. Cairo could not be responsible for creating a "diplomatic incident" and so on. This man was speaking like a bureaucrat while Lumumba's life was at stake!

I was outraged. "Lumumba is in prison!" I said indignantly. "They are going to kill him."

"We are doing all we can to get him freed, but it must be within the law," he replied.

"There's only one way to do it and that is to storm his residence and free him," Jomo said, speaking for the first time.

Ambassador Loufti looked horrified. "All I can say is that Egypt cannot help you get to the Congo or to Egypt, for that matter."

"Can you give us a visa, at least?" I queried.

"No," he answered drily.

Jomo and I left the embassy in disgust.

Our plan called for recruiting some twenty-five people with military experience and impeccable political determination, but after our rebuff by the ambassador, Jomo gave it a new twist. The larger the group, the greater the chances of infiltration by the FBI.

"You know, we shouldn't involve other people," he said. "We should handle this ourselves."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"We don't have to go to the Congo to get Lumumba released," he said. "The Belgians are in their embassy. We could go in with dynamite. Either they release Lumumba, or we blow up the place."

But the Belgian embassy was in Washington. We thought about the possibilities but concluded that the embassy's security would pose too much of a risk. Jomo finally decided. "Let's catch them right here in New York."

The intensity of the plan caught me off guard. The more I thought about it, however, the more it made sense. The Belgians did have a consulate in New York. Everything hinged on the explosives.

We agreed to meet the next day.

The Belgian Consulate was on the eleventh floor of a tall building on Forty-sixth Street, some blocks from the UN. To begin with, we had to find out exactly how many people were in the consulate.

Since I could speak French, we decided I should do the talking. By this time I could imitate the African accent quite well because of my contact with Francophone African diplomats. In French, I explained to the young woman who received us that we were African students who had come to do some research. I engaged her in conversation while Jomo reconnoitered. While I was speaking to the young woman, a white-haired woman who was in charge of documents came out of the back office. The young woman told her what we wanted. She took us into the information section of the office, and I explained that we needed documents on Rwanda-Urundi, still a Belgian colony.

We were there for more than thirty minutes. While I talked, Jomo counted the number of employees. There were six: two women and four men.

"Let's start going in regularly so that they get used to our faces," he suggested. And that is exactly what we did. We went to the Belgian Consulate every other day until the people were accustomed to having us around. They did not even notice that I did all the talking and Jomo never spoke. As I chatted, I would remind myself that these people had mutilated and killed several million Africans in the Congo. Their smiles were hypocritical; I knew they saw us as animals. I told myself to feel no pity for them.

Jomo and I continued to drop by the Belgian Consulate; we were plied with leaflets, which we threw away as soon as we left the building. During all this planning I did not think about dying. Only Lumumba mattered. Jomo, too, was infected with love for Lumumba, but as the quiet, methodical organizer, he kept his feelings to himself. I was excitable; he was not.

That terrible day of February 14, 1961, when news broke around the world that Patrice Lumumba had been killed I could not bring myself to believe it. He represented everything that was good, everything that was revolutionary. He had brought purpose to my life and indirectly helped to weld what were then disparate parts of my person. Because of him, I discovered my links to Africa. Because of the events surrounding him, my life took an entirely new direction.

I rushed to the Congo mission, hoping the media were lying, but when I arrived I saw tears in my friends' eyes. It was true. Lumumba, the warrior without armor, was dead. I wept inconsolably.

Word of Lumumba's assassination spread like wildfire. Hundreds converged on the streets of Harlem in shock. We walked around like zombies, riveted with pain and grief. Street-corner speakers railed. I was one of them.

The press reported the version given by the Congolese government: having escaped from custody, Lumumba was killed by "angry villagers"

who supposedly opposed his "Communist" leanings. Of course, we knew that to be a lie. We knew that Lumumba had angered the Western powers because of his nationalistic, anticolonial stance. The United States, Belgium, England, and France had not kept secret their intense dislike for Lumumba's brand of Pan-African nationalism. So we knew who the ultimate culprits were—Western imperialists, headed by the United States.

Maya and other women militants had came up with a plan for a massive demonstration. The march would begin in Harlem, take us to Manhattan, then to UN headquarters. Some of us would enter the Security Council with passes. We circulated the word on the street.

That evening I stayed with a friend whose apartment I knew was safe. All I could think of was revenge. I called Jomo from there. We would go into action without further delay. I got in touch with Maurice and arranged in our coded language to meet two blocks from the Belgian Consulate. I would explain when we met.

"We have to travel tomorrow," I told him.

"OK," he answered laconically.

We decided that Jomo should not get involved in the demonstration at the UN. I had to, being the one with access to UN passes. Our objective was twofold: first, to have throngs of demonstrators outside the UN; second, to fill the Security Council, which accommodated some two hundred people, and create havoc. I was to get people inside the Security Council in batches of ten. The first ten would walk past security and go to the restroom. I would retrieve their passes, go back outside, and redistribute them to another ten people. Once that part of the plan was complete, I had to slip away to meet Jomo and Maurice. Only Jomo knew about our ulterior plans; Maya and the others had been kept in the dark.

The morning of the demonstration throngs of blacks marched the streets, screaming, "Lumumba! Lumumba! Lumumba!" I was inside the UN discreetly handing out passes to Maya Angelou, Abbey Lincoln, Max Roach, and others, for them to distribute. Everyone showed up well dressed as agreed, and we began filling the Security Council. At one point

the guards, suspecting something, tried to stop us, but we forced our way into the lobby. As they tried to block us we pushed, and a struggle erupted outside the Council chamber.

The Security Council was hushed as the U.S. ambassador to the UN, Adlai Stevenson, began his speech refuting charges that the United States had meddled in the Congo.

Suddenly, all hell broke loose. The two main doors to the council chambers were flung open and two black human tidal waves swooped and overflowed into the Security Council. The fifty or so of our people ushered in earlier rose in unison from their seats, brandished banners, and began shouting at a stunned Stevenson: "Assassin! Assassin! Viva Lumumba! Assassin! Assassin! Assassin!"

Fighting broke out in the aisles as brawny UN guards tried to beat us back. Bodies slammed to the ground. Others were thrown against chairs. Heads were rammed against the floor. Bodies rolled. The guards threw karate chops left, right, and center. I was knocked down and pinned to the floor. One of the women saw it, leaped on the guard, and hit him until he let me go. Jumping to their feet aghast, many of the white UN delegates tripped over one another in the scurry to get out of the chambers. The African, Asian, and Caribbean delegates remained in their seats, watching the bedlam in amazement.

Our demonstration at the UN was unprecedented. It was unheard of for protesters to disrupt the proceedings of the Security Council. Radio and television stations the world over flashed the news: for the first time since its founding in 1945, the United Nations was under what the media described as "terrorist" attack.

It is a wonder any of us came out unscathed from those forty-five minutes of dramatic, intense fighting and outpouring of rage. During that confrontation in the very bowels of the sacrosanct UN, I was ready for any eventuality. Lumumba's murder had made me cross the divide between fantasy and revolution.

None of our people was seriously hurt, but there was more scuffling before I could make my way out of the building. Those who had been

knocked down in the Security Council had mild bruises. Unbeknownst to me, TV cameras covering the "riot" filmed me as I left the UN building shouting, "Viva Lumumba!"

It was arranged with Maya and the others that they should march with the throng to the building housing the Belgian Consulate and demonstrate there. Jomo and I wanted to use the crowd to cover the other operation, of which no one else had an inkling. We wanted as many people as possible to come upstairs to the Belgian Consulate to block its entrances and exits and facilitate our escape.

After leaving the UN, I walked quickly to the next block and caught a cab to where I was to meet the others. The only person waiting was Jomo.

"You haven't seen anyone else?" I asked.

"Nobody else has shown up," he answered. We decided not to wait for Maurice. I found out later that he had problems getting out of the UN building. There were only two of us. How were we going to neutralize the Belgians? Jomo informed me that we didn't have the "shit" either. We had no explosives or firearms. Our plan was disintegrating; everything had gone wrong. But Jomo resisted the idea of calling it off.

"How can we pull it off without that?"

"We'll overpower them and set the place on fire," he said. Jomo had not come empty-handed; he had a bottle of gasoline. He was undeterred.

We took a cab to the Belgian Consulate. There were no police, so we went right up. We rang the bell, I flashed my smile, and they let us in. The white-haired Belgian woman brought out documents instead of taking us to the information section. I engaged her in conversation, as usual. I didn't see the younger woman.

Jomo was impatient to get it over. This distinguished-looking woman, who was in her late sixties, would be easy to overpower. But I kept glancing back at him, signifying that we should wait.

The truth was that now that the time had come, I balked at attacking that frail woman. We heard voices from the other offices but could

not tell how many people were there. We heard the phone ring. A man came out to ask the elderly woman to step into his office.

"What are you waiting for?" Jomo whispered.

"Wait, man, wait."

The woman came back. There was trouble at the UN, she said. "We're going to have to lock the door. It seems there's a crowd heading this way." She indicated that it would be unsafe for us to go out into the streets.

Jomo looked at me. *Let's go,* I read in his eyes. His plan was to jump them, then set the place alight before racing out the door and escaping. With my eyes I signaled *no.* We didn't know how many staff members were in the consulate and had not even gained entrance to the inner offices.

Suddenly, chanting rose to where we were on the eleventh floor: "Lumumba! Lumumba! Lumumba!" Peering from the window, we could see the huge crowd as it approached and encircled the building. It was now or never!

The doorbell rang. The same Belgian man who had locked the door opened it and uniformed police poured in. I gasped.

"Who are these guys?" they asked.

"Oh, they are African students. We know them," the older woman said protectively.

The policemen told the Belgians "a bunch of Negroes" had broken into the UN. These were some very nervous cops. They paced back and forth. I prayed they would not search us; Jomo had the bottle of gasoline on him. He was unperturbed.

Jesus, I thought, *had we begun to carry out our plan a few minutes earlier, we'd probably be dead by now*. But the look in Jomo's eyes said, *Why the hell did we wait?* We were eager to leave. At first the police prevented us, saying it was too dangerous. Finally, they let us go.

On the ground floor, Jomo and I found ourselves facing an army of police, swarming everywhere. They challenged us all the way out the door but we said we were African students. I spoke in French, which

they didn't understand. Jomo and I ceased to be "blacks"; we were harmless foreigners. We made our way through the police lines and melted into the crowd.

Someone shouted, "Here's little Carlos!" They hugged me and asked what I had been doing in the building.

"We were so scared for you. Sister Maya has gone inside to find you."

I had not foreseen that. "We have to get her out!" I shouted anxiously.

Maya was one of the few people who knew I had gone to the Belgian Consulate but had no idea what I planned to do. Fearing I was trapped, she had broken away from the crowd with the intention of getting me out single-handedly. A black guy noticed her: "No, sister, you can't go in alone." And he went with her. Maya came out after some time, but she had put her life in jeopardy to protect me. I would never forget that.

Jomo was angry. I could not blame him. I had stalled. We had failed. He had wanted to get it over with; he wanted revenge. I, too, wanted revenge, but when the time had come to grab the elderly woman and snuff out her life, I could not. The thought of killing paralyzed me.

My parents had taught me that nothing whatsoever justified killing someone. Their injunctions came vividly to the fore that day. Jomo's military experience had conditioned him otherwise; the role of a soldier was to kill efficiently and without remorse. I was incapable of harming an old person, a woman, or a child. Would I have crossed the threshold had it been a man?

When I met Jomo again, I avoided his eyes.

"I botched it," I admitted. "I just couldn't do it, not in cold blood."

Had we done it, we would have been dead, but that was beside the point.

"It's because you ain't got military experience," Jomo said. "In the army, they teach you to pull the trigger when the time comes, and that's it."

"I've made up my mind to go back to Cuba and join the army," I said, trying to redeem myself. The Revolution's defense implied sacri-

fice of lives, I said. I was ready to die for the Revolution. I would be returning to Cuba.

Jomo listened in silence, nodding approvingly; then it was time for us to say good-bye. As we parted, we knew there was a chance we would not see each other again. We shook hands. For two men who had been ready to die together it seemed like that was a silly gesture, so we hugged.

I had not been to school all week. I had not reported for work for two days, and everyone had seen my face flash on the television screen during the UN demonstrations. I was fired from my part-time job at the Brooklyn Dime Savings Bank. I no longer had any illusions about American imperialism. I deemed myself to be earnestly at war with the United States on several fronts: Cuba, the Congo, the civil rights struggle of black Americans. I would never revert to being the person I was before coming to America. My place was in Cuba.

CUBA INVADED BY MIAMI-BASED CUBAN EXILES. The headlines on April 17, 1961, were like thunderbolts. CIA-trained white Cubans, supported by President John Kennedy, had invaded Cuba. The Bay of Pigs invasion was on; the moment of reckoning had come. The same white Cubans who had helped Fidel Castro take power two years before were now doing everything possible to topple the Revolution he had created against their narrow interests and racist whims. Those people had beaten the drum of racial hatred in their campaign against Batista; Fidel Castro was their man. But once in power, he had exhibited another color: red! My commitment to the Revolution was total. I would die for it.

My heart sank as I read the news portraying the Revolution in its dying throes. "The Cuban people have risen up against Fidel Castro. . . . The Cuban army and air force have rebelled against Castro's regime. . . . Reports say Castro has fled the island. . . . Advances have been made to within a few kilometers of the capital. . . . Euphoric crowds cheer the liberating forces. . . . Cuba is living its last hours of the Castro nightmare." What chance did little Cuba have against the might of the United States?

That day, I went with some officials of the July 26 Movement to see the Cuban foreign minister, Dr. Raúl Roa Garcia, who had hurried to the United States to voice Cuba's position at the UN. He denounced the aggression against Cuba and stated that he would return to Cuba immediately to fight. We all wanted the same thing: to return home and fight where the fate of the Revolution was on the line. "The best battleground to defend the Revolution is right here in the United States," Roa said in his staccato manner.

I understood the need for a mass demonstration on behalf of Cuba in front of the UN Building. I would rally people in Harlem. The battlelines were drawn. After the incident at the UN, my credibility and popularity soared. The nights preceding our huge demonstrations found me haranguing the Harlem crowds. "The Revolution that brought dignity to black people is endangered by the 'Ku-Klux-Kubans' of Miami, the lynchers of Mississippi, and the white imperialists in Washington who murdered Lumumba!" I shouted.

"Fidel! Fidel! Fidel!" the crowd responded. Thousands of us, whites, blacks, Americans, Cubans, demonstrated outside that imposing glass building that symbolized the equality of all nations. "*Cuba sí! Yanqui no!*" we shouted.

From North Carolina, Robert F. Williams issued a bold call to black Americans to rise in support of our Cuban brothers.

Mounted on horses, the police charged, striking with truncheons. But no blow was more painful than the realization that, at that moment, honest and humble men and women were surrendering their lives for the Revolution. Through bullhorns, the police ordered us to disperse, but we chanted louder: "*Cuba sí; Yanqui, no!*" Feelings of impotence fed our rage. We shouted our indignation at the UN building, convinced the Revolution was in its last hours.

Two days after the invasion, the news took an altogether different slant; the tables were turned. ANTI-CASTRO FORCES ROUTED! read the headlines. The Miami forces had been crushed. We went from tearful despair to exhilaration. Fidel had come out on top in his clash

with *El monstruo del Norte*—the Monster of the North. But we feared the failure of the Miami exiles would lead to a full-scale U.S. invasion.

I was not about to let an American invasion of Cuba catch me still in the United States. My place was on the battlefront inside Cuba. Those who had perished at the Bay of Pigs had shed their blood as heroes. Not only had they stood up to the imperialists, but they had opened the way for socialism. I did not want to live for the Revolution. I wanted to die for it!

Since Lumumba's assassination, my credo was that revolutionaries who did not risk their lives for their beliefs were "paper revolutionaries." I had been unable to help Lumumba. I would not let that happen a second time. Cuba, too, was my Congo! My blood would mingle with that of those who had to face the brunt of a U.S. military assault.

The FBI was hot on my trail; agents had made attempts to contact me at my home in Brooklyn. I concluded they were trying to intimidate my parents. Thinking it best to show my face there, I went home to sleep that night. Sure enough, the next morning there was an FBI special agent at the door when I answered the bell. He questioned me for an hour. Among the things he wanted to know was my precise whereabouts on the day of the UN Security Council incident. They were closing in on me.

The July 26 Movement people agreed to put me on Cubana de Aviación's next available flight. The United States had begun impounding Cuban commercial airplanes, claiming indemnity for American property nationalized by the Revolution, so Cuba was about to halt its U.S.-bound flights. I had only a few more chances to get a Cubana flight.

The leftwing organization led by Calvin Hicks, On Guard, had billed me to speak at a mass rally on June 23. The flyers that went out announced that I would return to Cuba following my "farewell speech." Actually, the July 26 Movement had advised me to give maximum publicity to my departure in case the FBI was about to arrest me. Meanwhile, the movement hastily prepared my return to Cuba. In late May, I was instructed to be ready to leave on a moment's notice, perhaps

through Canada. As it turned out, I was to leave on what apparently was Cubana's last flight out of the United States.

When I told my father of my intention to return, he was furious.

"What in hell you talkin' 'bout? That damn Communist place! Bwai, a-what wrong wit you?" He held his head in both hands. He had not rescued us from the hell of Cuba for nothing, he railed. But his words flew over my head; I was leaving, regardless. I remained quiet, undeterred.

So much had happened in my life; I could not explain it to my father. Rather than lie to him I kept it all to myself. Yet something in my eyes was a giveaway.

"Lito, you done change," he said with sad surprise.

Knowing how far removed he was from anything political, I had meant to say nothing. But a slew of accusations against the United States spewed out of me.

"These Americans are a bunch of white imperialists and racists!" I ranted.

My father was speechless. "Lito, you done gone mad!"

"Daddy, I need my passport," I said as calmly as I could.

He said I was making a mistake; Cuba was a bad place. "Dat revolution thing is Communist. Communism is against God. Castro is di devil himself!"

My father's preaching no longer had any effect. It was one of his quirks that I shrugged off indulgently.

"Daddy, Cuba is my country. I want to go back. Please, just give me my passport or else I'll have to take it."

It was the first time I had ever challenged him. From the flash in his eyes, I could tell he wanted to slap me with all his might. But the instant we exchanged looks he knew—as did I—that he would never again raise his hand to strike me. He stood motionless, suspended in a void.

"I doh recognize me own son no more. The devil done take him!"

His voice cracked, and his tears flowed. He went to his room to fetch my passport, handed it to me, then turned and walked away. When he

shut the bedroom door behind him I wanted to rush after him, but I did not. I collected a few things from my room and walked out of the brownstone apartment on 163 Lefferts Place, forever.

My last two weeks in the United States were fraught with fear. I was convinced the FBI was about to bust me for the UN Security Council fracas that so embarrassed America internationally. The FBI had perhaps already uncovered the extent of my involvement in organizing the UN incident. Did it also know of our aborted terrorist attempt at the Belgian Consulate? I felt cornered.

I thought it best not to set foot again at 163 Lefferts Place. It hurt me deeply to not be able to say good-bye properly to my father. I had to lie to him when I phoned on the eve of my departure. I tried to reassure him that I was involved in nothing bad. I was merely against what the United States was doing to Cuba.

"Lito, me son, you has gotten off the Lord's road. Me want talk to you."

"OK, Daddy, I gonna come. We gonna talk, Daddy!"

The silence at the other end meant he did not believe me. The towering walls of a Revolution on which I had pinned all my hopes had risen between us. I was within, he without. Our worlds would not converge again.

18

DANCING WITH THE REVOLUTION

I LANDED AT CUBA'S José Martí airport late in June 1961, knowing that a page of my life had been turned and a new chapter had begun. I felt secure as I stepped on Cuban soil again, experiencing the tranquil sensation of being home, my enthusiasm overwhelming any anxiety about the unknown. I had no regrets at forsaking imperial America for revolutionary Cuba.

At the airport terminal, a combo of three white guys and a black fellow were singing "Cuba, Que Linda Es Cuba" and "Guantanamera," backed by maracas, a conga drum, and guitars. Their performance was not for people like me, but for the Europeans and North Americans that the Revolution was courting. There were no *americanos* on our flight, just us: ordinary Cubans returning home.

I breezed through immigration and left the airport by taxi, anxious to begin my new life in a Cuba free of the American Mafia, gambling casinos, and racketeers. A country free of beggars, pimps, prostitutes, and racial discrimination—a new Cuba the exact opposite of the nightmarish one I grew up in. I had returned with one purpose: to join the army and surrender my life, if necessary, for the Revolution.

As the taxi raced down the Rancho Boyeros highway toward Havana, my exhilaration gave way to reverie. New paths had opened for my country just when all seemed lost. I was grateful to Fidel for being the true revolutionary he was. I felt immense pride of country and thanked fate for helping me make the right choice.

The taxi veered right past the marble steps of the University of Havana and headed to the heart of Old Havana, where a room in a modest hotel awaited me. Havana was steeped in the magic of my childhood. That first night, as the city came alive, I let the sounds, the smell, and the humid heat of Cuba's bustling capital take hold of my soul.

On the third day of my return, a military officer came to see me. He introduced himself as a relative of a white Cuban activist in New York, Manolo, who was my chief contact with July 26 Movement. Manolo had asked this "cousin" in Havana to direct my first steps in Cuba. I suspected Manolo of being an intelligence operative, but since I detested the FBI and the CIA as instruments of imperialism I saw nothing wrong with the Revolution having its own agents abroad to defend it. I was not personally suited to that type of work, but I understood its necessity. Manolo's "cousin" was, I surmised, also an intelligence operative.

"Where is the letter?" he asked, referring to an introductory letter from the July 26 Movement chief in New York establishing my legitimacy. Fearing I might be searched at the airport, the Movement decided at the last minute to send the document via other channels, but it ended up in FBI hands anyway when a secret courier was busted in Miami.

> On November 10, 1961, [FBI censure] (protect), Inspector, U.S. Customs, Miami, Florida, advised that through a routine inspection on that date of unmarked luggage at Miami International Airport, which luggage was subsequently discovered to be that of [FBI censure] a considerable quantity of material pertaining to the July 26th Movement, New York, was disclosed. In this material was the following letter in the Spanish Language, a translation of which reads as follows:
>
> July 26th Movement
> New York, New York
> (No date)

> To Whom It May Concern:
>
> The bearer of this document is Mr. CARLOS MORE (not clear; could possibly be MOORE), an active member of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, who embraces the principles of the revolution and is a defender of the Cuba cause. For this reason, we ask you to extend to him the revolutionary consideration that he merits.
>
> Fatherland or death. We will be victorious.
>
> (Signed) JOSE SANCHEZ for July 26th Movement, New York
>
> Miami indices contain no identifiable information concerning CARLOS MORE or MOORE. It is recommended that the New York Office search its indices concerning MORE, through logical sources, identify him, and incorporate information in appropriate communication to the Bureau, with recommendation for any additional investigation, if such is deemed necessary.

So here I was back in a Cuba where fear and suspicion were the order of the day without the letter to confirm my status as a bona fide revolutionary militant. There was no way I could have known that that, in itself, would be cause for suspicion by the authorities.

There were some two thousand of us repatriates who after living in America had opted to return home. We were viewed with a mixture of admiration and wariness. On one hand we were seen as real revolutionaries who had abandoned the comfort of U.S. life to come and support our country. On the other hand, we were "tainted" by contact with the vices of the bastion of imperialism and capitalism.

While waiting for the July 26 Movement document, I felt that another introductory letter, by the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, could suffice. Delivered to me two weeks before my U.S. departure by Berta Green, FPCC's national secretary, it was signed by Richard Gibson, at the time the FPCC's most senior person as acting executive secretary since Robert Taber had fled to Cuba.

Manolo's "cousin" read and handed back this letter and told me to register as a *repatriado* at the Cuban Institute for Friendship with the Peoples (ICAP), the government agency that dealt with repatriates, taking the letter. ICAP would place me wherever the Revolution felt I would be most useful, he said, and left.

ICAP was situated in the plush residential section of Vedado, in a vast mansion formerly owned by a magnate who had fled to Miami. ICAP handled Third World affairs, liaised with the colony of pro-Castro foreigners, handled the affairs of certain African and Latin American liberation movements, and oversaw issues dealing with American blacks. Additionally, it was in charge of Cubans who had returned home. It would probably not have made much difference had I known then that it was a branch of Cuban intelligence. I understood the all-pervasive tension. The Revolution was in danger; Cuba's enemies were powerful. Nothing could be left to chance.

I wholeheartedly supported the Revolution and understood its need for self-defense. What shocked me was the character of the two men who lorded over that powerful agency. ICAP's president, Ramón Calcines Gordillo, who always wore civilian clothes, was cocky and imperious. His lieutenant, the director Giraldo Mazola Collazo, wore a military uniform, sporting a pistol at his hip, strutting about in heavy army boots as if he were a full general. Both were like feudal chieftains in their fiefdom. Calcines, a cadre of the prerevolutionary Cuban Communist Party, looked and acted fierce; Mazola had been the chief for Havana province of Castro's July 26 Movement rebel movement. Both men were feared.

My first meeting with ICAP officials was an unmitigated disaster that set the tone for the subsequent relationship. Mazola, who had finally granted me an audience, received me seated, motioning me to sit down before his enormous mahogany table. Instantly, our chemistry was at odds.

"What do you want?" he asked in a hostile voice.

"Comrade, I have come to register and—"

He cut me off. "You don't seek an appointment with me to register; there are procedures to follow and those are done at the secretariat."

I handed him the FPCC's letter of recommendation, which he read and deposited on the desk, staring long at me. He showed no signs of intending to return it to me. That was the only document connecting me to my revolutionary past in the United States.

"So?" he said. I was taken aback. In his eyes I read the message clearly: *Negrito, who the hell do you think you are?*

Mazola said I would be duly registered, which entitled me to a monthly subsistence allowance of 180 pesos from the state until a job was found for me. I disliked the idea of being paid for not working.

"*Compañero*, I don't want money from the state for doing nothing. I want a job."

He gave me a hard look. I should not expect just to get off the plane and have a job waiting, he told me. The Revolution was attending to urgent business. A revolution meant discipline, and that meant waiting one's turn.

"Once you have learned discipline, *compañero*, you can serve the Revolution!"

The harangue was demeaning. I left Mazola's office dismayed.

ICAP had rooms it rented out to *repatriados*. I was allotted one, a stone's throw from ICAP itself, in the former mansion of Eddy Chibás, the popular politician who had killed himself when I was a child. I went back to my small room conducting a fight with myself over the implications of it all. I had had a similar feeling that evening at the Hotel Theresa when I realized that the black Juan Almeida had been rushed to New York just so that he could be there when Fidel opened the hotel window to greet black Harlemites. His presence would not have been required had Castro stayed at the white Shelburne Hotel. The troubled feelings that seemingly banal incident stired up were impossible to shelve the more I discovered the subtleties of the intricate dance whites and blacks were engaged in under the Revolution.

I knew racial condescension when I saw it. I had grown up with it as a child in Cuba. I had experienced it in the United States. I knew, at first sight, that Calcines and Mazola were unreconstructed racists. There was no question about it: racism was not only alive and well in Communist Cuba, it was receiving new ideological legitimacy.

I dropped by ICAP every day to check my placement status; there was never anything. Some repatriates already had jobs. Was it coincidental that they were white?

I had skills, since I had mastered English and spoke enough French to be able to act as an interpreter or a translator. I began searching for a job on my own. I went everywhere I thought my qualifications might be useful to the Revolution, but my hunt led nowhere. I had no better luck at the Ministry of the Armed Forces when I tried to enlist in the army.

I had returned to Cuba with such fervor that I could not bear being idle. I went to some of the big hotels in the hope of meeting foreigners who might need my services as an interpreter. One day I met a French couple, a cartoonist named Robert Siné and his wife, Annick. We hit it off straight away, and I began acting as their guide. I went with them to nightclubs to hear jazz and the salsa music they loved, and to restaurants. Through them, I got to know something of Havana's nightlife. We spent hours talking about the Revolution. It might not be a proper job, but I had gained friends.

About the same time, I met another foreigner who much impressed me. Abdias do Nascimento was a black Brazilian visiting Cuba. I had seen his photograph in the newspapers, identifying him as founder of the Black Experimental Theatre of Brazil. That ignited my curiosity and I set out to find him. I located him at the Habana Libre Hotel.

Nascimento was a handsome and cheery dark brown man with a large forehead who loved the Revolution beyond words. His eyes shone with warmth and kindness. I was rewarded with a vast amount of information about blacks throughout Latin America. Brazil, he said, was a living nightmare for blacks, like the pre-Castro Cuba I was born into.

Every black Cuban must defend this Revolution with his blood, he said. I entirely agreed. I would never forsake the Revolution; it was the only hope we blacks had. I told him, however, that a number of problems persisted regarding race. I was hopeful they would be resolved but they were nonetheless present. Nascimento listened in silence.

I met Nascimento daily until he left Cuba a week later. I was already aware of the black dimension in Latin America, thanks to Marc Balin, but Nascimento gave those blacks a human face. When he left, I felt a pang of sadness; Nascimento was a kindred spirit in all respects.

My restlessness was assuaged when Robert Williams, the American civil rights leader then in exile in Cuba, made me a tempting proposal: to be his newscaster in a weekly revolutionary radio program, *Radio Free Dixie*. He had escaped a nationwide FBI dragnet intended to destroy him and his militant movement based in Monroe, North Carolina, relocated now in Cuba. His supporters had whisked him and his family out of the United States, into Canada, and on to Cuba earlier that year.

Beamed to the United States by Radio Progreso, the *Radio Free Dixie* broadcasts incited black Americans to revolt and specified ways to implement urban guerrilla tactics, fabricate homemade weapons, and commit sabotage. Although it enjoyed the backing of Cuban counterintelligence, the initiative provoked the hostility of a lobby of prerevolutionary Communists who had gained influence in the new regime and through ICAP did everything to thwart Williams's militant projects. My association with him placed me on a collision course with ICAP officials.

Since Williams was at the top of the FBI's most-wanted list, working with him dramatically heightened my profile as a subversive in the United States. The doors to America were now permanently shut to me. Once more I was trapped in Cuba as my father had feared, but that did not frighten me. I was glad to be involved in the Revolution.

I desired nothing more than to be useful to my country. An effervescent feeling was all around, the shared knowledge that we were building something together, however small our individual

contributions. I joined the People's Militia and began attending neighborhood meetings of the Committee to Defend the Revolution. But it was hard not to notice continually that the people in positions of authority were whites, with the exception of Juan Almeida. There was a defining pattern in the attitude of white revolutionaries: they felt we blacks should be grateful to them. It was there in the way they looked at you, as if to say, *Who the hell does this negrito think he is, coming here demanding a job?* It was in their tone of voice, the irked, robotic way they spoke. There was no mistaking it. I detected the cacophonous music of racism getting louder.

After everything I had experienced in America and the many friends I had made in my three-year stay, there now were days I felt restless and bored. I had no friends in Havana nor anywhere else on the island. My brother Frank had remained in New York, intending to meet me as soon as he could. On one of those lonely days, I had the urge to look up my mother. I vaguely remembered where I had last seen her, on the day we had left for the United States.

She lived in Old Havana, a pocket of poverty that the Revolution had not yet had time to abolish. Boisterous and steamy, its winding streets bustled with blacks of every hue. Decaying tenement buildings leaned against one another, block after block, gaudily strewn with laundry hung from every window, turning that quarter into a tiered maze of flailing banners. Old Havana was the shameful innards of a once-arrogant city.

My heart constricted when I recognized the building. I hesitated, then forced myself up the worn cement stairs. I asked a woman on her way down if she knew someone there named Rebecca.

"Rebecca? *Ahi, m'hijo*," she mumbled, pointing to a door on the next floor.

My memory had not betrayed me. She was still in the same place, without running water or indoor toilet. I knocked on her door.

"*Quién es*?" she asked, but I did not answer.

I heard her shuffling toward the door. I braced myself, but her voice provoked the same anxiety coursing through my body as it had when I was a boy.

"Lito!" she gasped as she saw me. She moved to hug me, but I froze. Realizing that I was resisting her embrace, she reached out to touch my face.

One naked lightbulb lit her tiny room, which was crammed full of possessions. I gave her a rundown on my life in the U.S. and return to Cuba.

"Are you working?" I asked matter-of-factly.

"Now and then."

"Are you all right?"

She did not answer. Tears flooded her eyes as she gazed at me.

I felt bad to see her living in such wretched conditions. There was a heavy silence, broken now and then by fragments of questions and answers. I was simply not used to her and could not feign what I did not feel. After an hour, I left, promising to return soon.

I had been in Cuba several months when, toward the end of the year, my brother Frank arrived, having fled the States through Canada. My first impression was that he had become much more of a Marxist than I ever was in New York. Frank fit right into things. He joined the militia, the Committee to Defend the Revolution, and various other organizations and was unquestioning of everything. His loyalty to the new regime was unswerving. I, too, felt loyal to it, but that did not preclude my awareness of things that ran counter to what I believed a revolution to be.

The government kept pounding into our heads that racial discrimination had gone from Cuba's landscape. To hint otherwise was to stir up trouble for a Revolution that had "given Negroes their due." The Revolution held expectations that must be reflected in everyday life. When it fell short, I could not acquiesce. My attitude was confrontational, whereas Frank's was disciplined and subdued. He was three years older than me and I looked up to him as I always had. Still, I could not understand his passive acceptance of the status quo.

"A revolutionary can't be racist," he countered when I brought up the subject. He raised all manner of arguments about why change would take many, many years. "It can't happen overnight. It will take many generations to solve such problems."

"Frank, we shouldn't have to wait many, many years. We must challenge it." A revolution was precisely to change things there and then, not in one hundred years.

Frank had been listening with detachment. Finally, he said, "Fidel, our leader, has said that everyone must dance with this Revolution, like it or not! That is all I know." With that, he got up and left.

19

NEITHER WHITE NOR BLACK

Within three months of my return, I made two encounters that rounded out the political consciousness I had gleaned in America. Two erudite people who seemed to have all the knowledge of the world were to teach me much about history and politics that had eluded me in New York. This new knowledge would lead me to question the racial orientation of our regime and place me on a collision path with it. However, it was in totally fortuitous circumstances that I met Walterio Carbonell and Marc Balin.

I had been going around in circles for months, playing hide-and-seek with an invisible enemy. Although I was fully in the camp of the Revolution and considered myself a Marxist, everywhere about me I could read signs that something was going wrong. Yet I was unsure where to direct my energies. I decided to complete the high-school training my involvement in politics had interrupted in the United States. After finishing the course at the Havana Pre-University Institute, I sought to enroll at the university to study sociology. I was surprised to be told that such a course was no longer available; nor was my second choice of anthropology.

Cuba doesn't need sociologists or anthropologists, but doctors, agronomists, and engineers, I was informed curtly.

I was dismayed.

I understood the priority given to the sciences; technicians were increasingly rare. The plentiful technical cadres that Cuba once boasted of had migrated by the thousands to Miami in a brain drain that the government countered by importing Soviets. But I could not reconcile

myself to the absurd idea that Cuba "did not need" sociologists or anthropologists. Moreover, the question that was increasingly worrying me—race—was one those disciplines focused on.

Since I was unable to land a job, I concentrated on my other passion—languages—and began studying Russian at the Abraham Lincoln School of Languages. I dropped out after a few lessons; Russian just did not appeal to me. But my brother Frank persevered, which was wise, since Russian was well on its way to replacing English in Cuba. The education system was awash with Soviet ideological manuals. According to these, slavery was a "necessary historical stage" of development. These unsophisticated manuals were promoted as Cuba's new gospel.

"They are rewriting history in a manner that's wholly alienating for blacks," Marc Balin said to me.

A sedate, dark-skinned, stocky man in his early thirties, Balin was Haitian. He had a moon-face and a soft look, sporting an open smile that brightened his handsome countenance. Endowed with an encyclopedic mind, he had two doctorates from French universities—one in economics, the other in political science—and grounding in sociology, history, and anthropology. He dressed sharply in suit and tie, cultivating the manners of a nineteenth-century French gentleman.

I had run into Marc casually while strolling along the Rampa, the long majestic avenue dividing the heart of New Havana, at a moment when I was hungry to talk with someone about the myriad thoughts and doubts that assailed me. I had stumbled on exactly the right person. That was in August 1961.

Balin was working in Paris when Castro assumed power. He moved to Cuba out of sympathy with the Revolution, hoping for a quick overthrow of the Duvalier regime in his country. During the day, he was an economic adviser at the Ministry of Industry, headed by Che Guevara. At night he taught economics at the University of Havana. He lived at the St. John Hotel in the bustling and plush Vedado area where all the big-time hotels and commercial shops were concentrated.

"I would give my life for this Revolution, but certain things that are happening cannot go unchallenged," he said to me in our first talk.

My identification with Balin was complete. The man was brilliant, well informed, and of the highest integrity. I had the impression he knew everything there was to know about blacks all over the world. He discoursed easily on the history of Cuba, Haiti, Venezuela, Colombia, Argentina—in fact, all the Americas. He was tremendously informed about Africa and Asia. From him I learned about the Olmec Empire, an ancient black civilization, predating the Aztecs, Mayans, and Incas, that covered Mexico and Central America, extending to northern Colombia. Black Africans, he said, peopled the Americas long before any other race. I was astonished.

"That is consistent with the African origin of mankind," he said.

He mentioned a book that blew my mind, *Nations nègres et culture*.{1} Its author, Cheikh Anta Diop, a Senegalese historian and anthropologist, posited that humankind had emerged in Africa and progressively occupied the globe at a time when there were no such peoples as Orientals or whites. Those two races, he said, had originated from the primal black population.

Again, my mind was set alight. I went to see Balin nearly every day. He knew more than anyone I had met about the wars of independence in Cuba and the "War against the Negroes" of 1912. He gave events a global context. I learned of the accomplishments of the Cubans Antonio Maceo Grajales, Guillermo Moncada, and Quintín Banderas, the Venezuelan Manuel Carlos Piar, the Haitians Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Toussaint L'Ouverture, and Henri Christophe. Our own revolutionary leader, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, a slave-owner (as was Simón Bolívar), initiated the independence war against Spain using his slaves as cannon fodder. I was taught in school to worship de Céspedes.

In one blow Balin had untangled the web in which I had been caught since my return. I began to see the extent to which racism had played a role in configuring the paths of world history. Everything began to fall into place.

"Do you think Fidel could be a racist?" I asked point-blank.

He pondered my question, smiling enigmatically. Then he said, "There's someone you should meet."

That is when I first heard the name of Walterio Carbonell.

Carbonell was a black Marxist historian Marc had met at the University of Havana where they both taught. He said Carbonell knew Fidel personally from way back. "He'll be able to answer your question," Marc said. He handed me a slim book by Carbonell. "Read it, but be careful because it was just banned," he cautioned.

"For what reason?" I asked.

"When you've read it, you'll see for yourself," he said.

Carbonell's book, *Crítica: Cómo surgió la cultura nacional* (*A Critique: On the Origins of Our National Culture*), had the same impact on me as when I read *King Leopold's Soliloquy* at Mr. Michaux's bookstore. I devoured the book.

Carbonell's charges were crafted in a language that avoided head-on confrontation with the regime. Nonetheless, its meaning was clear. The new regime was embarking on policies that reinforced racism regarding Afro-Cuban religions. The content of school material was racially biased, but was legitimized as historical fact by the new rulers. The old, paternalistic racism had simply been repackaged through the use of a Marxist jargon.

The book was like a thunderbolt!

Published earlier that year, *Crítica* provoked the ire of the revolutionary leaders. The government swiftly nationalized Yaka Publishers, the last remaining independent publisher, thus closing the only opening for revolutionary blacks to air their views. Then the book was banned. Carbonell was sacked from his post at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Here was the work of an authentic black Marxist stating unambiguously that the Revolution not only had not eradicated racism, but that the regime was scuttling the issue under the rug. I was neither imagining things nor making mountains out of molehills, as my brother Frank and others seemed to think. The beaches were desegregated, yes. All

hotels were open to blacks, yes. Schools were for Cubans of every color, yes. Blacks were more visible in places formerly reserved for whites. All that was true. But the racial mind-set of the most revolutionary whites had not changed significantly. Carbonell had diagnosed the problem squarely and had had the courage to state it publicly.

I was chatting with Marc in his hotel room one day when someone knocked at the door. A handsome, thirty-nine-year-old, cinnamon-colored black man entered. He had alert eyes, an infectious smile, and exuded self-confidence. A receding hairline accentuated his prominent forehead. Walterio Carbonell was a striking man. He spoke with authority but his voice was soft. There was an impressive dignity about him. Carbonell was instantly likeable, with a modest demeanor and easy, polished manner.

"This is the fellow I've told you about," said Marc.

Carbonell's smile stood somewhere between friendly and mocking. But he took me seriously from the start, not seeming to mind that twenty years stood between us. We shook hands and I told him how much his book meant to me, expressing admiration for his courage in publishing it. That day, Walterio and Marc launched into an involved conversation as if picking up from where they had previously stopped. They clearly relished each other's company. Every so often, they threw me an including glance, acknowledging my presence. I sat mesmerized at the knowledge that flew about the room, settling into my consciousness like rain after a drought. Their arguments echoed those I had heard from Harold Cruse the year before.

Racism was a pervasive phenomenon, rooted in history. Only a carefully directed campaign could eradicate it. Neither Fidel nor those around him understood that, he said. Worse, they acted as if Cuban blacks owed them something and should be grateful. The fact that many blacks had initially favored Batista, because of the racism of Cuba's ruling class, was a sword over their heads.

Those conversations between Marc and Walterio were veritable academic seminars on sociology, anthropology, and economics. I was elated

the day Walterio gave me a signed copy of his book thus dedicated: "To Carlos Moore, a young, intelligent fellow with whom I share so many things about the race. Walterio Carbonell."

Carbonell's gifted, encyclopedic mind broached the most diverse fields. He went from being dead-serious to being hilarious in a split second, buttressing his arguments with a stock of irreverent jokes and handy anecdotes.

Marc now suspected that his room was bugged, so Walterio took me on long walks along Havana's scenic seawall, the Malecón, where he could talk freely. Waves pounded against the thick concrete seawall as he related how he came to meet Fidel Castro at the University of Havana.

A student leader at the time, Castro was struggling to enter national politics while Carbonell, a member of the Cuban Communist Party, was establishing an organization to fight racism nationwide. They became friends and allies. He sympathized with Castro's political aims and was one of those who helped him in 1953 when he got into trouble after leading an aborted insurrection against Batista. Once in power, Castro made him ambassador to Tunisia, Cuba's first envoy to an African country. There, he came in close contact with the Algerian liberation movement and got to know the work of Frantz Fanon. However, he was recalled as ambassador after a car accident in which a Tunisian pedestrian died. Officials who resented his ideas thereafter used that incident against him. When his controversial book appeared, they called for his dismissal from the Foreign Ministry. The highest ranking black there, Carlos Olivares, a former comrade in his Communist Party days, conveniently orchestrated the offensive.

Walterio was a vast reservoir of data. He cited books and authors I had not yet heard of. He introduced me to the ideas of Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, Martinican theorists of a movement called negritude, a philosophy of black self-pride. He spoke about Richard Wright, the black American writer, and Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana. He bristled with ideas on how to approach the race question,

but said neither Fidel nor anyone around him was interested. And he was denigrated as a "Negro separatist!"

Carbonell's view of Castro was both critical and laudatory: "Fidel is an honest man. He's a revolutionary and a patriot who loves this country. But he's uninformed on matters of race and seems to conceive of blacks only in subordinate roles." Castro regarded the racial question as merely a product of American influence and the exploitative capitalist system. The historical, cultural, and psychological dimensions eluded him. "Not only doesn't he understand, he refuses to acknowledge the possibility that anything could escape his prodigious conceptual grasp," Walterio explained. "Fidel thinks he knows the racial problem better than we blacks do."

Castro considered racism an issue that the Revolution had resolved. He did not understand the distinction between racial discrimination and racism, said Carbonell. Discrimination was an effect, while racism was the cause. The first could be eliminated with a couple of speeches and good intentions; the second must be attacked at the root as a historical and cultural construct. It was simplistic to merely decree the end of racism, Carbonell underscored.

Castro's limitations on the question of race were glaring from the start. Two months after seizing power he announced the end of discrimination in public but said that private racism was a personal matter with which the government had no business interfering.

That was an irresponsible statement, Walterio maintained. What compounded the problem was that Castro surrounded himself with cronies who lacked the temerity to tell him he was wrong or who themselves had but a superficial understanding of racial nuances.

"Not even Comandante Almeida?" I asked. Carbonell's assessment of Juán Almeida was curt: he was a brave revolutionary but was primarily a soldier, and soldiers were trained to obey their superiors. Almeida considered Fidel his superior in everything. He was bound not to challenge him even if he were so inclined. "I can't even say Almeida himself, as a black person, has given much thought to matters of race. I don't know him that well," he remarked.

Carbonell felt that the regime's antidiscriminatory drive would sooner or later run its course without disabling racism. It was simplistic to decree equality. "You can't create a level playing field unless you adopt policies tailored to combat racism and historical inequalities," he held. But Castro equated such proposals with "black racism." His assault on the black social clubs was a case in point.

Carbonell saw the writing on the wall when Dr. Juán René Betancourt Bencomo, a sociologist and national president of the black social clubs, clashed with the regime over the question of race. Bentancourt Bencomo had acted for years as Cuba's civil rights leader and most outspoken critic of racism. In 1958 he had published a solid study on race relations, *Doctrina negra,* presenting a platform of measures to dismantle racism in Cuba. He was alarmed that the new regime, questioning the validity of specifically Afro-Cuban institutions, spoke of black racism.

"*Cuban*," Castro warned, echoing a phrase by Cuba's God-like José Martí, "is more than black, white, or mulatto!" The Revolution was color-blind!

Betancourt Bencomo sought to discuss these issues with Castro but was refused. So he took to an open forum, expressing alarm that the leader of the Revolution so misunderstood Cuba's racial issue:

> It is impossible for anyone to seriously and in good faith believe that by ceasing to refer to "blacks" and "whites" people will forget that these do exist, or that racial discrimination will be eliminated by such a miraculous method. The spectacle of daily life, which presents some as holders of all the material and moral goods, and others as the repositories of all misery and suffering, influences people's minds, creating in the victims an obvious inferiority complex and hardening the victimizer's absurd belief in their racial superiority.

The new regime could not—as had been done before—scuttle the racial issue under the table, he warned in the mass-circulation weekly

Bohemia. Concrete measures had to be taken, and a systematic policy designed, to combat racism. "The racial problem cannot be resolved with a handful of more or less prestigious but nevertheless token posts, nor with flattering proclamations," he said. Cuba's new leaders, he cautioned, "cannot fall into such traps . . . nor can Fidel fail to do something. History obliges him to carry the torch of the revolution into the remotest and most elusive interstices of our nation." The task ahead was clear: "If our black brother is to be freed from the centuries-old injustice that he has endured . . . , [t]hen *blacks and whites of good faith must be organized to this end*, for only a social force, supported by a government of the generosity and prestige as the present one, can realize the heroic task of unleashing a new socioeconomic force . . . arriving once and for all at the long-sought goal of national integration."

Betancourt Bencomo's admonitions upset the revolutionary leadership. The government unleashed attacks on him and reined in the organizations that were his powerbase—the black clubs. The police began to harass the national directorate of the clubs and myriad new administrative requirements made them increasingly unoperational: their functions were limited by law to weekends; the proceeds of their activities were confiscated; their members were discouraged from patronizing them. Whatever autonomous space blacks occupied in prerevolutionary Cuba was now destroyed. The regime's animosity toward the black clubs was clear; one by one, they began to close and along with them disappeared a specifically black leadership and vibrant Afro-Cuban musical tradition.

Betancourt Bencomo—black Cuba's most influential independent leader—fled into exile.

By June 1961, the regime had made short work of the 526 clubs that formed the confederation of black social clubs. Officially nationalized, they were turned into play schools. It was a devastating blow that beheaded the black middle class and destroyed its institutional base. Thereafter, blacks would have no independent voice at all.

To justify its action, the government accused the clubs of having "constituted a *serious obstacle to the concretization of the goals of Cuban*

cordiality, revolutionary integration, and social uplift promoted by the works of the Revolutionary Government." The truth lay elsewhere, said Carbonell. Fidel wanted to eliminate the possibility of an independent black leadership emerging within the Revolution, he surmised.

I had been out of Cuba when all of those events had taken place. In the United States, I had had no knowledge of such happenings; within the circles of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, only adulating paeons to the Gallant Revolution were in order. Other than Harold Cruse, I had not heard a single person challenge the validity of the regime's "color-blind" pretensions, nor question the real position of blacks in the new society.

Carbonell's insights were a breath of fresh air in an arid climate of government slogans!

I told him of the episode with Comandante Almeida at the Hotel Theresa, and my growing misgivings about Castro's outlook on racial matters. My second jolt had come after the Bay of Pigs invasion, when Castro exhibited the captured men on television. I was surprised that he singled out the few blacks who had landed at the Bay of Pigs for public humiliation. I did not believe that was warranted; in fact I resented the way he treated those men. Why were they less deserving of respect than their captured white comrades?

"You, Negro," Castro had shouted to Tomás Cruz, one of the handful of blacks among the invaders, "what are *you* doing here?" Cubans watched the whole episode live on television, and it gave rise to a bountiful crop of despicable jokes about blacks.

The black exiles reported ill treatment at the hands of their white captors, who dubbed them "Negro traitors," made them drink their own urine, and manhandled them. Captain Osmany Cienfuegos Gorriarán, a Castro protégé, repeatedly threatened: "We're going to shoot you, niggers, then we'll make soap out of you!"

Carbonell's analysis was razor sharp. To Fidel the few black counterrevolutionaries in that invasion were "ungrateful Negroes," not just political opponents, as were the whites. That incident should have pro-

voked national debate, with Castro being taken to task, he said. But who was in a position to challenge him? Independent-minded blacks such as Betancourt Bencomo had been eliminated; there was none that could stand up to Castro. Everyday more and more, Cuba was falling into a one-man dictatorship. An independent media no longer existed.

Each conversation with Carbonell scoured another layer of cobwebs off my consciousness. At last, I was getting a credible interpretation of the realities in which I lived. The speeches that spoke glowingly about the disappearance of racism from Cuba were false. The leaders of the Revolution were deceiving the entire nation.

Carbonell's vast experience gave credence to whatever he said. He was not expressing uncorroborated fears but was stripping bare a situation that most did not see. Contrary to the crude and simplistic paternalism of Cuba's revolutionary leaders, his analysis of racism was sophisticated; the solutions he offered to overcome it were ingenious. As he expressed his keen insights to me, the more I realized the dreadful harm the regime was doing by silencing him. Here was a real analyst of history and society who saw that which the revolutionary leadership refused to even consider.

I decided then and there to walk in the company of that man—truth was on his side.

Two days after I gave Carbonell's book to Frank he handed it back without a word. He still refused to face the facts.

"We must face up to it," I told him. "Something is wrong with the Revolution. They're lying about race."

"Are you calling our leader Fidel a liar?"

"I'm merely pointing out that to say racism no longer exists is a lie."

"Time will take care of such things."

"Time will not take care of such things. It's for us to tackle them. If it was right to denounce racism in America, it's right to denounce it in Cuba."

"So what do you propose?" he sneered.

"That we seek a meeting with our leadership to force a debate."

"Are you mad or what?"

I was not imagining things. When it came to racism, our leaders seemed to be wearing blindfolds. Many could be alienated by the stark contrast between rhetoric and reality. As a consequence, the Revolution would be weakened. My mind was set. I would travel to Santa Clara, three hours away by bus, seek an appointment with Comandante Almeida, the only black in the top leadership, and alert him to these issues. It was my revolutionary duty. Revolution was not solely about redressing past evils, but about writing an entirely new book!

Frank shrugged. "I wouldn't advise you to do such a thing."

"Fine, then I'll go to see Comandante Juán Almeida by myself!"

I WENT TO ARMY headquarters in Santa Clara and requested an appointment with Comandante Juán Almeida Bosque, chief of the Cuban army. I was told to await an answer at the small hotel where I was lodging. After two days, the phone rang in my room and I was asked downstairs. I hastened to the ground floor where some armed white men in olive-green uniforms stood around Comandante Almeida.

"I understand you want to see me. Who are you?" he asked, unsmiling. I reminded him of our meeting during the reception for Castro at the Hotel Theresa. His expression relaxed.

"All right, yes. What do you want?"

"I need to talk to you in private." I looked around, intimating that I did not want to speak in the lobby. "Comandante, could you please receive me in your office? What I have to say is very critical."

His eyes pierced mine momentarily. "All right. Come to my office tomorrow morning."

The next morning an army vehicle picked me up and drove me to army headquarters. I was taken to a spacious office where Almeida sat behind a large desk, flanked by two stern white captains. One held a notepad; the other just stared at me. I realized they were his personal aides.

"Sit down. What is it?"

My words came hesitantly at first. "It's about racism under the Revolution."

Almeida frowned, but he listened.

I related my personal experiences, as well as what other blacks had told me about being discriminated against. White revolutionary officials, such as Calcines Gordillo, Manuel Otero and Mazola Collazo, were slighting blacks. A new form of revolutionary racism was taking root in the country. Both the Foreign Ministry and ICAP were following discriminatory hiring practices.

Almeida, who had been sitting expressionless, his chin resting on fists that formed a V-shape, interrupted me. "What's the problem? Do you need a job?"

I explained what my experience had been with ICAP's leadership, even though I was qualified and spoke two foreign languages. "Mr. Mazola and Mr. Calcines at the ICAP won't employ me." I explained that I found them to be thorough racists.

Almeida raised an arm, indicating that I should stop. "There is no such thing any more in Cuba," he said firmly.

Before I could get over my astonishment, he was on the telephone to ICAP.

"Comrade Calcines, this is Comandante Almeida. I have here in my office a fellow called Carlos Moore. Do you know him?"

His face betrayed nothing of what he was being told by the voice at the other end.

"Well, he says he can't get a job on account of discrimination of some sort by ICAP." He listened, nodding occasionally. "I'll send him back and you take care of it."

Almeida put the phone down. His face hardened as he looked at me. "Comrade Ramón Calcines says they've been doing everything to get you a job. All you have to do is see him personally."

"Comandante—" I began, but he cut me off.

"Listen, there's been a Revolution here. There are neither whites nor blacks in Cuba—only *Cubans*! The Revolution has made us all equal;

we are fighting for the same cause. I advise you stop talking as you do, unless you want to end up before a firing squad."

I was in a state of shock.

Almeida stood, indicating our meeting was over. He instructed an aide-de-camp to see that my hotel bill was paid. I was escorted out and taken back to the hotel, where I remained for hours staring at the floor. I was crestfallen and deflated. Goddamn it, here was the only black leader in the Revolution telling me I might end up in front of a firing squad for denouncing racism!

That night, I went out walking. I did not know the city; all I wanted was to walk, aimlessly, and shrug off the thoughts that were assailing my mind. I ended up in a big illuminated park. I stared emptily into the night. What was happening? How could Almeida feign ignorance about a reality so visibly present in the new Cuba?

Almeida was loved and admired by all. He was the only black leader of the Revolution, but he did not even attempt to investigate my charges. Worse, he was sending me back into the hands of the very people I had accused. I could hardly believe what had gone down!

20

NIGHTMARE

After my meeting with Comandante Almeida I was squarely at a crossroads; the situation was worse than I had thought. His words reverberated in my mind throughout the bus ride back to Havana. I knew he was wrong, but now all of my options except retreat led to confrontation with the regime.

I shared my room with Frank; he had not yet found a place to live and my location was convenient for his journey to work. That night I recounted what had transpired. He listened in silence.

"You see what I've been saying?"

I felt Frank's burning eyes on me.

"Listen, you can't go around saying such things."

"These are not just 'things,' Frank," I retorted. "People are being shot every day for opposing the Revolution, yet this regime hasn't punished a single person for perpetrating racism. Don't you find that strange?"

Frank was silent.

The next morning, I duly reported to the ICAP and asked to see Ramón Calcines Gordillo. After a long wait, I was taken to Mazola's office instead. I was surprised. He looked at me with snake eyes and leaned back in his chair, grinning. I sat opposite him.

"So you went to complain to Comandante Almeida that we treated you in a discriminatory manner? You had the nerve to tell him we denied you a job because you're black?" he railed.

"Yes, that is the situation," I replied.

We had a sharp exchange, during which his voice rose to a shout. "All right, we're going to teach you a lesson."

He picked up the phone.

"I have someone here in my office I want picked up," he said with authority.

I stood to leave.

"Sit down, you!" he barked. "We've had enough of you!"

He was standing now. He had a pistol at his side, so I sat down. For about five long minutes we stared at one another in total silence until there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," he replied.

The door opened and two uniformed men entered.

"Take him away," he ordered.

It was unreal. I could not believe it was happening. The men took me by the arms and whisked me away in a car.

"Where are you taking me?"

They did not answer.

Villa Marista was a beautiful mansion in the residential area of Miramar, with groves of trees and a wall so high that no one from the street could see inside. I learned later that white Cubans who had fled to Miami had owned many such palatial mansions, containing up to thirty rooms, with smaller buildings in the grounds. The Revolution had converted these grandiose estates into prisons.

"Name?"

"Address?"

I was ordered to strip and given long, baggy pants and an oversized shirt to wear. Then I was posed in front of a camera with a number held up to my chest. Several photos were taken. I was left alone in a room for a long while. Finally, I was taken before an officer. I was alarmed but confident that the misunderstanding would soon be cleared up.

When I first arrived in Cuba, I could not figure out why people were so afraid of talking. It was unnerving to see them whispering, hiding what they said. I, by contrast, talked loudly about whatever I wished.

It made no sense that revolutionaries were afraid to talk to one another, in fear of the secret police, the G2, who were there to arrest enemies of the Revolution. But now I was faced with the grim reality that one did not have to be counterrevolutionary to be arrested by G2.

What crime had I committed? Who empowered a bureaucrat to have me detained? What right did G2 have to arrest me? I had constitutional rights! I needed to contact a lawyer. Where were my rights?

"You are here to *answer* questions, not *ask* them," the officer said, in a matter-of-fact manner, not once raising his voice.

He wanted names: friends, acquaintances, and tourists, *anyone* I had met since I had returned to Cuba. I was reluctant, so he began to name people, some of whom I did not even know. Finally, he started naming people I had known to a greater or lesser extent in New York.

"Do you know Richard Gibson?"

"Yes."

"William Worthy?"

"Yes."

"When did you first come in contact with them?"

Richard Gibson headed the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPFC) in New York. I had been an activist in that movement for the Cuban cause, and his was the signature on a letter of introduction on my behalf prior to my departure for Cuba, detailing my activities with the FPFC. Other than that, I knew nothing whatsoever about him. William Worthy, a friend of Gibson's and a FPFC member, was a black American newsman for whom I had done some translating during a visit he paid to Cuba. Beyond that, I did not know much about either. Why was I being questioned about them?

I knew Cubans were discouraged from contact with foreigners, particularly journalists. I understood perfectly the need to be alert to spies and enemy infiltration, since the CIA used tourists, journalists, and artists as convenient covers. But I could not accept that the state should dictate to whom an ordinary citizen could speak. That was the individual's prerogative, not the state's. I was now paying dearly for that judgment.

I attempted to regain ground by explaining the circumstances of my detention, which was the product of a personal decision by one man—Gilberto Mazola Collazo. Clearly, I was the victim of a set-up by ICAP officials.

"Comrade, this is a mistake. I saw Comandante Almeida just two days ago to explain that, although I am qualified, I've been unable to get a job . . ."

I tried to explain the nature of my disagreements with the ICAP officials, but the interrogator would not let me. He kept mentioning name after name, wanting to know the circumstances in which I had met each person. All the while, he was taking notes.

"Walterio Carbonell?"

"Yes, I know him."

"Marc Balin"

"Yes, I know him, too."

How far back had I been under surveillance? My mind was ticking fast. Had I been followed since my attempts to enlist in the army? Was I a suspect just because of my eagerness to serve my country? The fact that the army had not responded was an indication. It was clear that the secret police had been tracking my every move since I landed in Cuba.

"Who introduced you to Mr. Carbonell?"

"Dr. Marc Balin."

"Who introduced you to Mr. Balin?"

"I met him casually, in the streets."

"You don't expect us to believe that, do you?"

The questioning shook me.

My interrogator called two armed soldiers who escorted me to another building. The one armed with a machine gun led me to an already packed cell and pushed me inside with the point of his weapon. As the door clanged shut, I struggle hard to ward off the feeling of fear that overcame me. About twenty-five haggard, bearded inmates were crowded into what had probably once been servants' quarters. In the

cramped cell, whites and blacks lived like animals. A hole in the center of the floor was for defecating. The only way to shit was to get naked and use the hole. The others would make a circle, standing with their backs to you to give a bit of privacy so you could maintain some dignity. Across the ceiling ran a pipe, with a valve on the wall to turn the water on and off. Prisoners had to bathe and shit in the same place. Everyone slept on the floor on thin mattresses. It was humiliating for us all.

For three days, I could not sleep. I could not eat. I could not think. When food came for me, the other prisoners took it. On the third day a lanky black fellow, one of a half-dozen blacks there, came up and put his arm around my shoulder. He became a sort of protector.

"What are you in here for?" he asked.

I told him.

"You're going to be here a long time. The only way you'll survive is to start eating and get used to the idea that you are in prison."

On the fourth day he forced me to eat. "Listen, you've got to snap out of it. You're going to be here a long time, like all of us," he said. He explained that some of the guys had been there for two or three years. Everyone lived from day to day, not knowing what his fate would be. He claimed he had never received a visit from his family and did not know if they were even aware of his whereabouts.

"Are these men here going to die?"

"Some will," he replied.

Execution! Even though that word had become part of the everyday vocabulary of Cubans, it only achieved a personal meaning on the fourth night of my arrest. That night, as I lay sleepless in the dark—tormented, saddened, afraid—guards came to our cell. I heard them call out a jail number, jolting the other prisoners from slumber. It all happened in the dark, fast and precise.

I only saw the prisoner's back as he hurriedly gathered up his meager possessions and slipped on a shirt and trousers. A dozen or so other prisoners surrounded and hugged him in silence before he walked swiftly

toward the heavy iron gate. It opened slightly then closed with an unnerving, definitive clang. For a few seconds, the muted voices of men in prayer arose, then died down until we were once again swallowed by the silence of our own inner terror.

During almost a month at Villa Marista that scene repeated itself, with almost identical precision, perhaps half a dozen times. Each time, however, my mind refused to accept the truth. I told myself that surely my counterrevolutionary cellmates were lying, attempting to vilify the Revolution. I clutched at the possibility that those men were being removed to other prisons or to work camps. I told myself that I was not in danger of being executed for I was not a counterrevolutionary. I was a revolutionary, and soon my own ordeal would be no more than a nightmare safely tucked away in the past. I could not see myself in any other condition than that of a free man in a society that predicated freedom as its supreme goal. I believed in the Revolution!

Despite my certainties, as days passed I felt a growing unease at the approach of night. Then, all the justifications I had built up during the day evaporated, leaving me in the same state of suspended fear as the others. I approached every night with the same tightened throat, knotted stomach, and racing heart as the others. I was left with the same fight with self to build up the courage that would enable me to walk out of that cell with dignity, to die, if ever summoned.

After a week a soldier unlocked the door and called my name. I thought they had realized their mistake and were freeing me. Instead, I was taken to the interrogation room.

The accusations leveled at me were precise, involving statements I had made over the months. However, I had become more careful of what I said and knew exactly to whom I had expressed my concerns. Obviously, some of the people I had spoken with had relayed my words.

Over a period of three weeks I was taken out for interrogation several times and then brought back to the cell. Each time they came for me I prayed it was to take me from there for good. I told my friendly cell mate how the interrogations were going and he advised me to stick to my story.

"It's not a story, it's the truth," I said. "I'm innocent. I'm not against the Revolution."

One day, on my fourth week, they came for me.

My interrogation that morning was unusually bland. There were no longer blacks or whites in Cuba, just Cubans, said the interrogating officer. Fidel had declared that racism no longer existed. To affirm that there was racism in Cuba was to call the leader of our Revolution a liar. To attack the commander in chief was to attack the Revolution. Only enemies of the Cuban people attacked the Revolution. I had engaged in an act of *counterrevolution*, but the Revolution would show clemency.

After a few moments' silence and the shuffling of papers on his desk, the interrogating officer leaned forward, looked at me, and said, "You're being given another chance. You are going to be released."

The officer motioned to a guard to remove me. As abruptly as I had been thrown into prison, I was released after twenty-eight days, with neither explanation nor apology.

On my release, I learned why I had been freed. Robert Williams, the militant black American civil rights leader who sought asylum in Cuba soon after the Bay of Pigs, had bargained for my freedom. My brother Frank had alerted Williams to my arrest. Williams, whose popularity was soaring in Cuba at the time, contacted the chief of Counterintelligence, Manuel Piñeiro Losada.

Commonly designated as "Red Beard," Piñeiro Losada was a member of Castro's tight inner circle and acted as the liaison person between Williams and the higher-ups of the regime. Williams pleaded my case. I was not a U.S. agent, he guaranteed, but someone who had been "traumatized" by U.S. racism to the point of seeing it everywhere, even in revolutionary Cuba where it was absent. I would mend my ways if given a chance, and he, Williams, would see to it that I did. It worked; within weeks I was free.

"You're a damn fool," Williams exploded in the Hotel Capri suite in downtown Havana that served as his home. "Don't you know what

a firing squad is?" he said, pacing the room. "Next time, I won't move a finger," he thundered. He was furious.

I was in no position nor had I any desire to argue. As Williams railed against me, I sat motionless, my head bowed, eyes downcast, staring at the thick-carpeted floor of the luxurious lodging the government had given him for a home. I was grateful to him but knew he was incapable of understanding my stance. The thirty-seven-year-old civil rights veteran was an unconditional supporter of the Cuban Revolution and measured racism only in U.S. terms. He was too personally involved with the regime at the time to come to the conclusions that I already had. In time, however, he would also come to question the government's racial politics.

"You don't know what racism is," he shouted. "If you did, you'd be on your knees every morning thanking Fidel!"

Williams had put his reputation on the line to snatch me from the clutches of internal security. Most likely, he had saved my life. During those days few who fell into the hands of the G2, escaped unscathed and reemerged as rapidly as I had.

Frank fought to repress his joy at seeing me. "See what I was trying to tell you?" he said.

I felt drained and exhausted. "Frank, you really believe that what was done to me was just?" I asked wearily.

"It has nothing to do with justice but with your damned mouth. The Revolution has a right to defend itself."

"I've never attacked the Revolution. If I had, would I have gone to Comrade Almeida?"

Such logic was meaningless, he said. "Look at what's happened, that's what counts. You've just had a brush with death! You've got to learn to shut your fucking mouth!"

"So you agree with my arrest in the first place?" I snapped.

"Listen, if this weren't a democratic Socialist regime, you'd be rotting in jail or gone forever," he retorted. "I advise you to cool down. Next time, you may not be so lucky."

"Frank, do you realize the secret police have been following my every step?"

"If they have been following you, it's because you've been doing things that are not prorevolutionary," he replied.

"Is talking to people counterrevolutionary?" I did not wait for his answer. "Frank, it's not only me they've been following. They've been following each of us. They've planted people to talk to us, to pick up on our feelings about the Revolution."

He replied, "I think you've forgotten the saying our father taught us: 'The fish dies because it opens its mouth.'"

I had been photographed holding a numbered card to my chest, herded into a fetid, overcrowded cell, subjected to long interrogations, and accused of being a counterrevolutionary. It happened not long after my homecoming merely because I had argued with a top official. Yet Frank seemed not to understand the implications of what had been done to me. I knew he loved the Revolution, as did I, and would have given his life for it thrice over. But he was telling me to shut up and accept the same indignity we had both stood up against in the United States.

Frank went out. I stayed in the room. I was depleted. A wall was steadily going up between us. The brother I loved and trusted had changed. I had too. My arrest had polarized our relationship; arguments between us became commonplace. I felt he was blinded by a near-fanatical attachment to Marxism. He felt I was veering from the path of the Revolution. There was little common ground between us. Clearly we were on different wavelengths, different itineraries. It was terrible to come to grips with the fact that I could no longer trust my own brother nor expect him to act on my behalf in the face of trouble. But even if it meant ending up in a dungeon for the rest of my life, I would not shut up.

A WEEK AFTER MY release, I went to see Robert Taber, cofounder of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, who was then living in Cuba in the luxurious Foxa apartment building. He had fled the United States to escape

FBI harassment and possible imprisonment as an "agent for a foreign power." I told him my story and explained that the secret police had questioned me about the FPCC. A look of worry crossed his face.

I respected Taber immensely; he was a man of deep principle. He had thrown a successful career to the winds to take up the cause of the Revolution. But he was noncommittal. As he confined his conversation to generalities, I realized that his place might be bugged. I was in a world of shadows, where what was apparent might not be true and where the invisible governed reality. He was friendly, but I knew that my recent arrest made my presence in his place uncomfortable for him. I was now a political leper.

I left Taber's apartment feeling for the first time like I was trapped.

Soon after my arrest, I began experiencing sudden sharp pains in my chest and strange symptoms, like a tight, burning ball moving up and down in my stomach, my heartbeat quickening to a gallop. After a while, the ball would dissolve and my breathing would return to normal, but my shirt, trousers, and underwear would be drenched in sweat.

"Nothing to worry about, *compañero*," the cardiologist reassured me. He diagnosed an anxiety attack. He advised me to remain calm and take half a dozen deep breaths if an episode recurred; it would pass.

Most doctors in Cuba were middle-class opponents of the regime, whom we boycotted. Frank had urged me to see a revolutionary doctor, as this one was. Nowadays a doctor was not simply a physician; he was someone for or against the Revolution.

Counterrevolutionaries were enemies of the state and popularly called *gusanos*. Worms! Or, *escoria*. Scum! The enemies of freedom deserved the most noxious of epithets. People who wanted to restore American imperialist domination in Cuba, bring back racial segregation and discrimination, were nothing but vermin. The Revolution must protect itself; its survival was at stake. I agreed with Frank on that. I, too, had shouted, "Death to the scum and vermin!" at the monster rallies in Havana's *Plaza de la Revolución,* Revolution Square.

Since my imprisonment, however, I was deeply disturbed by the ordinary citizens who made it their job to spy on others. How could double-faced betrayal be revolutionary? I would never have felt comfortable with the idea of being even remotely associated with that opaque zone of the Revolution, the secret police. The idea of denouncing anyone to the G2 was repugnant and morally unacceptable to me. Within a few months, that repugnance would be seriously tested when, for the second time, I fell into the hands of internal security, accused of "racial subversion."

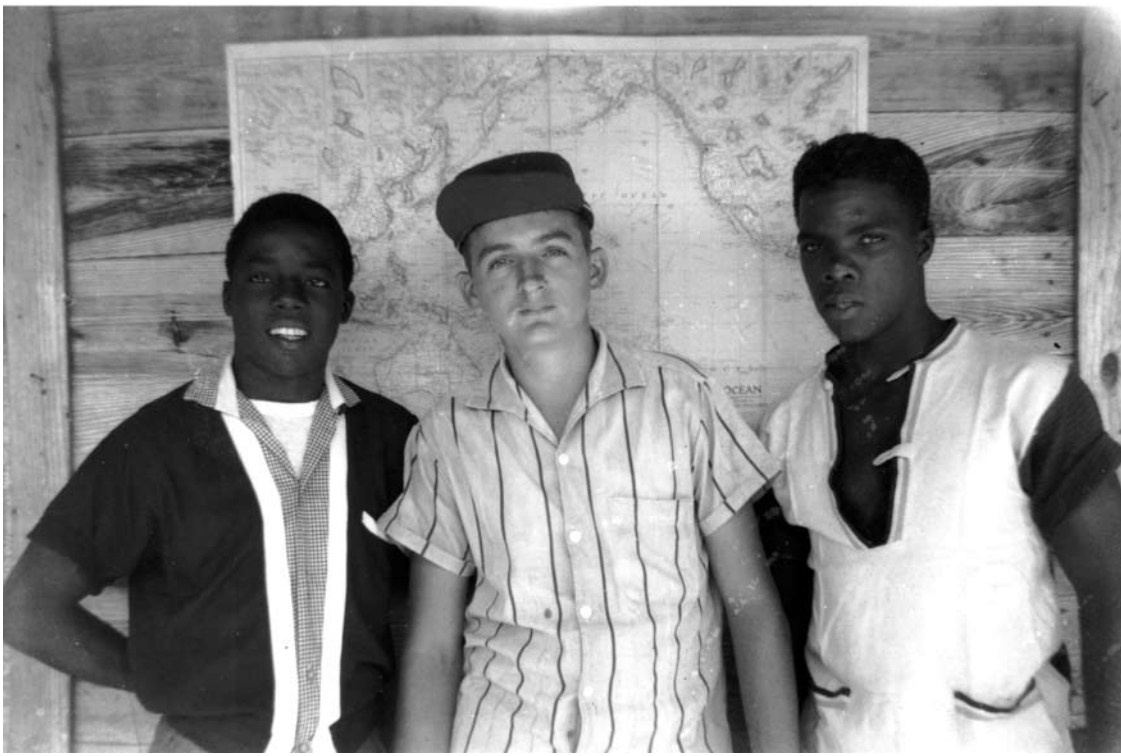
Childhood home in Central Lugareño (1997).

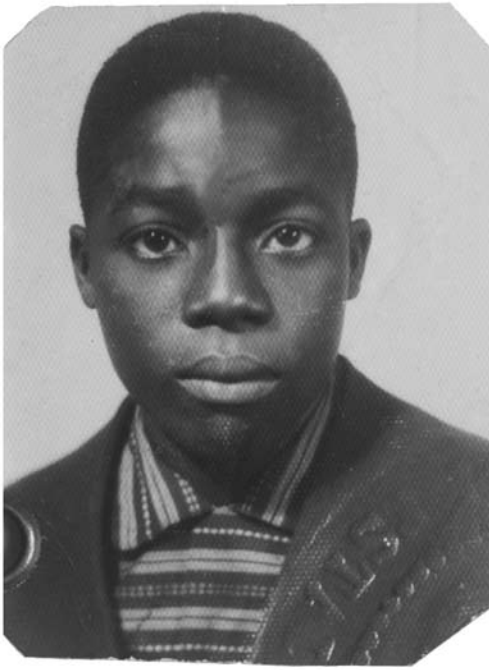
(clockwise from top left) My mother, Winifred Rebecca Wedderburn (circa 1955). My mother (circa 1958). My biological father, Whitfield "Trinidad" Dacosta Marshall (circa 1942).

(left) My adoptive father, Victor Theodore Moore, and my stepmother, Gladys King (1955).

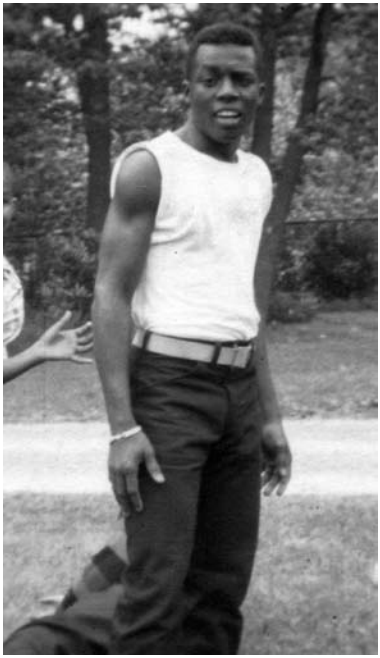
(above) My padrino, Don Miguel Rosado (circa 1950).

(below) With my childhood friend Chequelo and brother Frank in Central Lugareño (1958).





My passport photograph (1957).

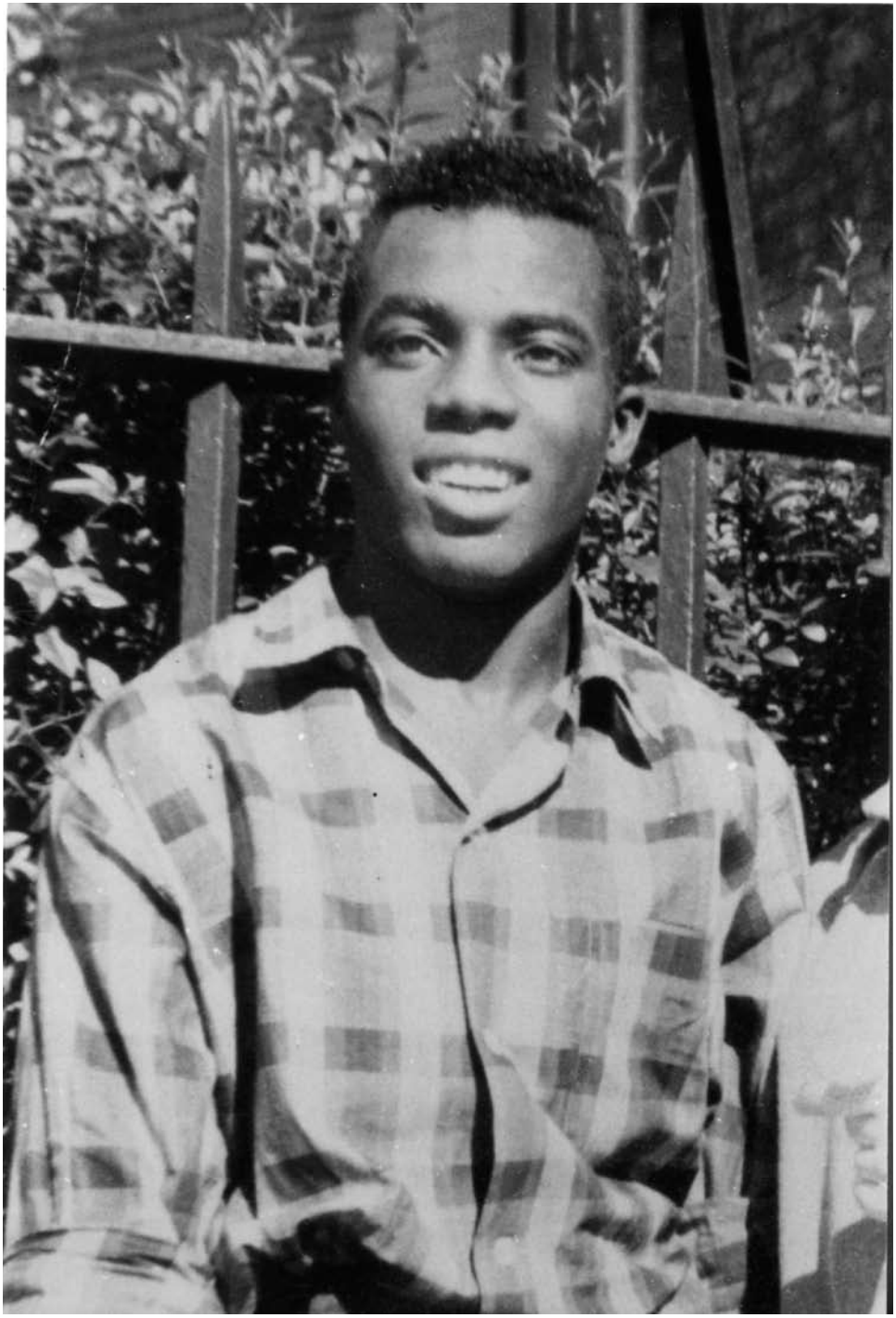


Already Americanized, in New York's Central Park (1958).

Just arrived in the United States, Bedford-Stuyvesant (1958).

In Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn's black community, with my first hair processing (1958).

With my Boy's High School classmates in Brooklyn (1958).



My bohemian persona, with conked hairstyle, Greenwich Village (1959).

Working the crowd in Harlem during Castro's visit (1960). Sign upheld in background reads: "US Jimcrows Fidel just like US Jimcrows US Negroes."

The year of my conversion to Marxism, New York (1959).

Speaking to Fidel Castro during his stay in Harlem. Hotel Theresa owner Love B. Woods on left, Harlem (1960).

Between Hotel Theresa owner Love B. Woods and Fidel Castro, Harlem (1960).

With Juan Almeida Bosque, Ramjohn Holder, and Robert Taber during Castro's visit to Harlem (1960).

Translating for Robert Williams, Havana (1961).

CARRIBEAN REVOLUTIONARIES

SPEAK OUT!

What are the relationships between Latin - American Revolutionary Movements and the Struggle for Afro - American Liberation?

Ramjohn AKARA
GUIANESE REVOLUTIONARY RETURNING TO THE CARRIBEAN

Luis Munoz SULLIVAN

AND

Peregin GARCIA
PUERTO RICAN LIBERATION LEADERS

Carlos MORE
CUBAN REVOLUTIONARY, WHO RETURNS TO HIS HOMELAND JUNE 24, FAREWELL ADDRESS

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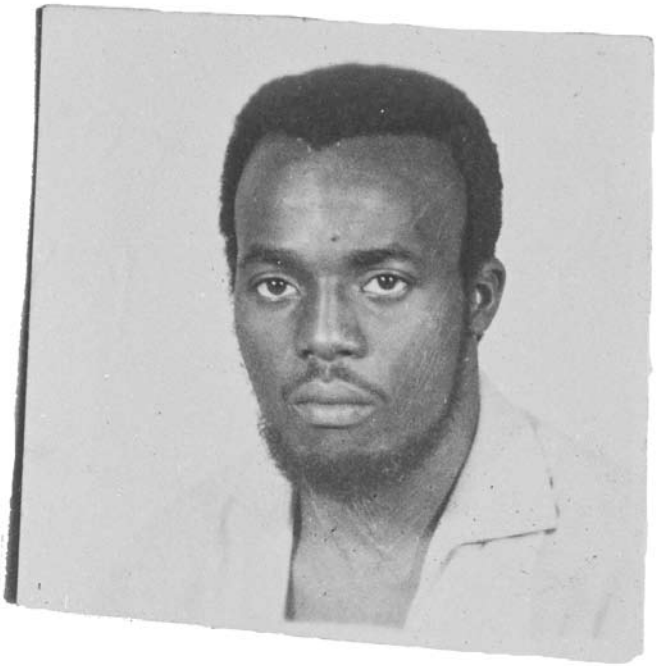
Flier from my activist days in New York (1961).

Speaking at the Ministry of Communications, Havana (1962).

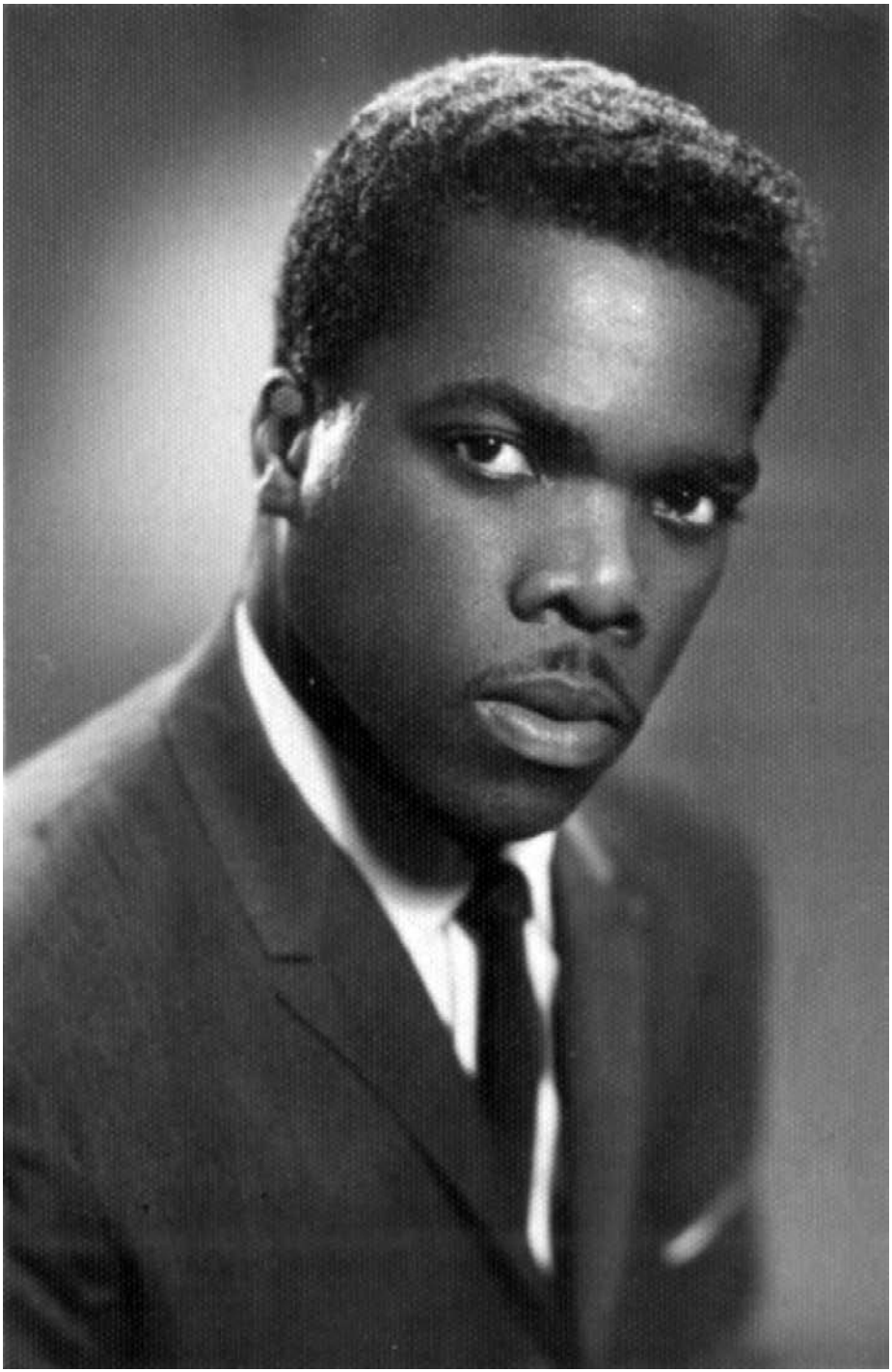


Just released from the work camp, Havana (1962).

During the October Missile Crisis, Havana (1962).

Freshly arrived in Paris in exile (1964).

With Malcolm X in Paris (1964).



My brother Frank, the "Indian," in Russia (1965).

Photo courtesy of *Visión*

With Alex Haley (left) and Aimé Césaire, founder of the Négritude movement, Miami (1987).

21

AN APPEAL TO FIDEL

At first, I had felt an ecumenical joy being on the right side of a Revolution. But just as my eyes had been opened to the harsh realities of America's democracy, so the scales had fallen regarding Cuban socialism. I now knew that I was dealing with an iron-fisted Marxist dictatorship and that people—revolutionaries—were afraid.

I had been jailed on orders of a bureaucrat and thrown into a cell with men awaiting execution. Anyone who criticized the government was dubbed an enemy and followed. Wave after wave of repression was unleashed. The island was plastered with huge billboards that read:

IF YOU DON'T AGREE,
GET OUT,
TAKE TO THE HILLS,
OR SHUT UP!

That slogan, lifted directly from one of Fidel's speeches, was on everyone's lips overnight. It unsettled me.

"To criticize the Revolution is to attack it!" Fidel had thundered.

At first, I justified the extremism as unavoidable, believing it would eventually slow down as the danger of imperialist aggression subsided. Instead, the avalanche gained ground, crushing the spirits of those, like me, who were initially convinced it was a passing thing. But the "passing thing" became more insidiously entrenched day by day, unapologetically claiming new spaces in personal life.

One of the Revolution's slogans—"Walls have ears"—had become vividly real. "Don't think G2 aren't still watching you," Walterio warned. "They are!"

Still, I believed in Fidel's honesty and impeccable revolutionary qualities. Fidel and the Revolution were one and the same to me. He was Cuba's only hope. My faith in him remained intact.

In early October, a month after I had been released from prison, Ramón Calcines Gordillo summoned me to ICAP headquarters once more. His attitude betrayed nothing of what had gone down a few weeks before: my arrest in that same ICAP building, my confinement for almost a month in a cell with men fated to die by execution, my miraculous release. People like him, all over the island, were the real bosses of Cuba. That much had dramatically been made crystal clear to me. I faced him this time keenly aware of that disproportion between our respective positions—he was power, I was nothing.

I remained silent as he spoke calmly, drily. He peremptorily announced that I was "assigned" to a job where my language skills could be put to good use.

"I hope you have understood," he said, dismissing me.

I certainly had—he was the *law* in the new Cuba.

At the Ministry of Communications international division, my task was simple enough: to read letters in English and French addressed to civilians in Cuba and indicate whether the content was subversive. That division of the ministry was, therefore, under the control of G2. My supervisor, Loynaz, a tall and slender, Paris-educated, dark-skinned man in his midthirties, told me his mother traced her roots to Haiti.

"You see, like you I am a *pichón.*" He smiled. We got on well, too.

Letters arrived at my desk already opened, attached to a form on which I had to tick off the ideological profile of the content: revolutionary, counterrevolutionary, or lukewarm. I shared that duty with a white Cuban named Helena. She told me that part of her family resided in the United States, but she had chosen to remain in Cuba to serve the

Revolution. She spoke little, worked a lot, and was very courteous. We got along well.

After a few weeks on the job, I trusted Loynaz enough to speak to him about my imprisonment. He listened attentively.

"I wouldn't go around talking about it if I were you. Put it behind you," he cautioned. I should not let it get the better of me. "You are young and intelligent; grab all the opportunities you can!"

Loynaz took me under his wing. He often called me into his office to offer advice and ask how I was doing. One day, though, he seemed annoyed with me.

"Why are you putting 'normal' on all these letters?"

"I see nothing wrong with them," I said.

"Listen, do you really want to keep this job?"

He explained that his division reported to another department in the ministry. The inordinate number of "normal" letters I was forwarding would surely attract attention. I protested that there was nothing to report.

"It's statistically impossible that all those letters are normal," he said with exasperation. "There are tens of thousands of secret counterrevolutionaries in Cuba whose relatives live abroad."

I argued that there was no way I would harm the Revolution by letting through a letter from one of its enemies. It just happened that for the few weeks I had been on the job, no such letters had fallen into my hands.

"You want some advice?" he said. "Start reading between the lines and come up with something. If you label every letter 'normal' you'll draw attention to yourself. It will mean you're covering up for counterrevolutionaries."

"These are ordinary letters people write from the United States to their families," I explained.

His tone grew stern. "Those people in the United States are counterrevolutionaries. It's statistically impossible that they write only niceties to their families."

I protested that I felt ill at ease reading private letters.

"When it comes to the Revolution there's no such thing as private," he said. He gestured for me to approach, then whispered in my ear, "I want to help you, but you must learn one thing: one can't make an omelet without breaking eggs!"

I nodded and left his office.

Reading people's personal mail posed another moral problem for me. I knew my supervisor was right about our need to defend the Revolution against its enemies. The corrupt *batistianos* now living in Miami were in cahoots with the United States to rid the hemisphere of the Cuban Revolution. Powdery explosives in tiny packets had been sent in some incoming mail, so I saw my boss's point. Had I found something truly counterrevolutionary, I would not have hesitated to indicate it. But to note "unfavorable" when a letter's contents gave no indication of counterrevolutionary activity was something my conscience would not let me do.

Scarcely two weeks after Loynaz called me into his office, my colleague Helena went berserk. She broke down crying, "I can't take this! I just can't do this anymore." Then she began screaming at the top of her voice. They took her away to the hospital and I never saw her again. A white fellow in his thirties replaced her.

"So, a *gusano* infiltrated us right here in the division, heh?" he smirked while ticking away at the forms.

I kept silent; I knew Helena was no worm.

Soon after I had emerged from prison, an offensive against *pederastas* (homosexuals), *prostitutas*, and *proxenetas* (pimps) began, becoming known as the PPP drive. Its origin was a speech Fidel had made about the dangers of loose morals and prostitution for a revolutionary society. The very night of that speech, truckloads of police descended like locusts on the streets, rounding up men and women suspected of homosexuality. People who wore blue jeans were picked up. Women whose hair was too short were picked up. Men who wore patterned shirts were picked up. Women in T-shirts were picked up. Men wearing bracelets were

picked up. All were considered to be dykes or faggots and thus foes of the Cuban people, enemies of the Revolution.

The Revolution was now dictating individual behavior. Everyone felt compelled to dress in militia uniform: green military fatigues, blue denim shirt, rugged, high-laced boots, green, lopsided berets. Those who did not were suspected of being lukewarm or against the Revolution. I detested that principle from its inception, so I continued wearing the jeans and colorful shirts I had brought from America. I also wore silver and copper bracelets on my right wrist; that was now decreed "unmanly." For me what mattered was my readiness to die for the Revolution, not the way I dressed. Events soon told me that I was wrong.

The PPP campaign posed yet another challenge for me. Until then, I had not particularly thought about the issue of sexual orientation. I had not paid attention either to the overwhelming influence of the Afro-Cuban cults. When gays, lesbians, and the cults became the targets of a government offensive, my aloofness gave way to a defense of them; but it was more out of defiance and nonconformity than understanding. I simply did not think the Revolution had any right to interfere with religious beliefs or sexual orientation per se.

At the time I had been dropping in on the state-sponsored National Folkloric Ensemble, which Sara Gomez, the filmmaker, had mentioned to me in passing. She was then filming anything related to Afro-Cuban religious ceremonies. I had told her of my own interest and my desire to learn the ritual dances. She had looked at me with her large expressive eyes and told me it was not necessary to go to the ceremonies to learn the dances; there was a special school for that right in Havana. I met the artistic director, Rogelio Martínez Furé, who said classes were free because the government was promoting the school. I began to attend as an onlooker.

The drumming and ritual dances were food to my soul. But with the PPP campaign in full swing, all painters, poets, and dancers were suspected of having a *muñeca quebrada*—a broken wrist, as homosexuals were designated. Many of the male dancers were indeed effeminate;

it was tempting to label anyone who frequented dance school as a homosexual, so I stopped going. I had too much on my plate already.

The PPP campaign crescendoed. People were encouraged to "sanitize" their work environment by rooting out homosexuals, prostitutes, and pimps. Many pointed accusing fingers at their colleagues, and those thus identified, regardless of the truth, disappeared. Rumor had it that Afro-Cuban religious leaders were being arrested and dumped in the same camps as PPP suspects. Alarmed at the turn of events, I went to see Walterio.

Since my arrest, he was one of fewer than a dozen people who kept in touch with me. Others studiously avoided me. "Listen," he told me, as the waves crashed relentlessly against the high wall of the Malecón, "when a dictatorship is formed, fear is the first thing instilled in people. Fear separates people into individual units." The Revolution was pitting one group against the other and splintering society. Those tactics, he said, were typical of Stalinism.

I asked him what our position on the antihomosexual campaign should be. I knew that some of his close friends were overtly gay. They were, expectedly, very critical of the PPP campaign and fearful that it meant an ominous turning point in the Revolution. But I was afraid that if we took a stand the government would use it against us.

"Stalin also implemented that sort of campaign, but a person's private life is private," Walterio said. I agreed but voiced misgivings about taking up the defense of homosexuals at such a hazardous juncture. "If we defend them, they'll say we, too, are homosexuals," I told him.

Walterio looked disapproving, his focus on the breaking waves. He evoked World War II and the Nazis' persecution of Jews. All over occupied Europe, he said people had been afraid to speak out. That silence, that connivance, had entrenched Nazism. "What would you have done in that situation? Identify with the Jews or help persecute them by your silence?"

The regime's negative list grew longer daily, he pointed out. "Today it's prostitutes, pimps, and homosexuals. It's also the babalawos and

paleros, the Afro-Cuban religious tradition-keepers, who are targeted. Tomorrow it will be you and me."

A true revolutionary cannot side with something unjust, nor should a victim of discrimination in turn discriminate against others. "There are no two ways about how to react to oppression," he said. "We resist it or support it."

He asked if I had heard of the Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, who had opposed Stalin. "Mayakovsky committed suicide during Stalin's purge of homosexuals." He also spoke of Federico García Lorca, a revolutionary who fought against Franco during the Spanish Civil War and was eventually executed.

"They paid with their lives," Walterio said. "No one has a right to condemn another for how they conduct their personal life. That is a private matter."

His comments affected me. There was no question that his assessment was correct. The government was applying terror to people whose only "fault" was their sexual orientation. Those conversations with him convinced me that I had to take a strong stand on this issue, too. As was the case with the followers of the Afro-Cuban cults, the rights of homosexuals were being grossly violated. The regime was victimizing a vulnerable segment of the population for no good reason.

But what could one individual do? Fear had taken hold of the entire island.

From the time I had been taught to defend myself with my fists, I learned one thing about fear. It could only be faced and overcome by confronting it, otherwise one fell prey to it. So, in mid-November 1961, soon after my nineteenth birthday, I decided it was time to act. A petition had to be addressed to the leader of the Revolution! Having collided with authority twice in less than six months, I knew I was walking on thin ice. But what else could be done if not acquiesce to the situation? I figured if Carbonell and others were sticking out their necks, so would I have to as well.

I contacted a number of trusted friends for a discreet discussion at my home. Most were artists in one field or other, such as Alberto, a Venezuelan actor, and Manolo, a poet, who both lived in my building. I was careful to invite each person separately, following Walterio's advice, and not discriminate in terms of people's private lives. I restricted my conversations to blacks, because what connected us was awareness that the question of race was being shoved under the rug in the name of monolithic unity against American imperialism. I knew very few whites who shared such concerns on race. People like Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon had elaborated a new vision of the complexity of race; it should inform the revolutionary process. Those works had to be disseminated in Cuba, for the benefit of blacks as well as whites.

Each time I met with someone, I put on music and laughed loudly, as though partying. I knew the Committee to Defend the Revolution was mindful of the minutest details of what went on in our building. To varying degrees, we were all aware that racism was hurting the Revolution, that the Afro-Cuban religious cults must be defended, and that the PPP campaign had to be resisted. We could not just lie low and hope things would improve. "If we break ranks we're finished. We must tackle the problem together," I said. Each person agreed. But I detected wariness in their eyes.

The discussions sometimes finished after midnight. At that hour some of those who came were apprehensive about going home for fear of being picked up, especially since a few of them were in a category of people the regime targeted. So I invited anyone who stayed late at my place to spend the night and leave in the morning. Whatever interpretation the building's Committee to Defend the Revolution might draw from my gesture, I felt that if those comrades had had enough guts to accept my invitation to discuss issues for which any ordinary Cuban would be jailed, I owed them a reciprocal gesture of regard for their humanity, which was being so callously attacked and ridiculed.

In the course of one late-night session an idea flashed through my mind. Why not seek an appointment with Fidel to explain our concerns

as a group? Everyone disagreed. I suggested an alternative: to draft a petition detailing instances of individual abuse. After all had signed, one person would take it to Fidel on behalf of the others. We should look for those who had suffered indignity on account of race, sexual preference, or religious beliefs.

So on New Year's Eve, 1961, there were half a dozen people at my place celebrating with an act of courage. We had agreed to draft a petition. That night we commemorated the fourth anniversary of the Revolution—four years of Cuba's survival in face of America's unrelenting hostility. We were proud. The contagious euphoria made me more confident. Goading me on was the belief that a solution to our concerns lay in frank dialogue with the leader of the Revolution, the man in whom we placed our trust. We were revolutionaries, united in our convictions, ready to lay down our lives so that the Revolution could survive and thrive. Fidel had to listen to us.

The next day, I rushed to see Walterio.

Carbonell was one of the most courageous people I had known in my nineteen years. Who else would have dared to openly challenge the regime's assault on the Afro-Cuban brotherhoods? Who else would have gone so far as to write a book denouncing the enthronement of racism under the cloak of Revolution? Who else would stand up for the rights of gays and lesbians at a moment when the regime was so ruthlessly clamping down on them?

"In a situation of oppression, everyone must make up their minds which side they're going to be on. On the side of fear or on the side of justice."

Walterio's words were barely audible above the resounding waves that crashed against the seawall of the Malecón. His face was unusually drawn. He agreed about the need to protest, but thought my plan risky. "The only way you may succeed is to understand Fidel's mindset," he said. He knew better than most how Fidel's mind worked, so his opinion carried weight. "Fidel is a great revolutionary, a brave man, but he can't stand anyone challenging his views."

He said that Castro considered disagreement on any issue as insubordination and treason. Fidel would shove anything he did not like under the carpet, destroying anyone who disagreed with him. "If you present him with a petition he will interpret it as a plot, and if only blacks are involved he will see it as black sedition." The question of race was taboo; to bring it up before him *as a group* was to court disaster.

The only course of action would be a *personal* letter, addressed to the chief of the Revolution. Walterio was convinced that nothing short of a person-to-person appeal would do. "For over a year I have been attempting to have a meeting with him myself," he complained. I thought perhaps I could succeed where Carbonell had failed.

It was January 1962, Fourth Anniversary of the Revolution: the Afro-Cuban religious leaders had announced it as a year of "war, fire, and destruction" in the world. Personally, it was the year where all of my guiding principles would be tested. I was steeled in my determination to take our protest to the chief of the Revolution. The trampling of individual rights, the persecution of Afro-Cuban religions, the abuse of power, racism—these were all incompatible with Revolution.

But, how to reach him?

The saying "If you want to see Fidel, you can find him anywhere since he is everywhere," was more folklore than fact. But one afternoon, nearing the end of April, I was on my way to an ice cream parlor with a group of African friends: a Rhodesian student, two Guinean students, and three Zanzibari revolutionary militants who had just opened a diplomatic mission in Cuba.

Suddenly, three black limousines traveling at top speed pulled up on the opposite side of the street. The car doors flew open and armed, olive-green uniformed men stepped out. They quickly surrounded one of the bullet-proof vehicles. Uniformed men materialized from nowhere; soon there was a thick line of them around the limousine. Instantly I knew that Fidel was in that car. I didn't stop to think. It was my only

chance. I ran straight toward the middle limousine across the street, shouted at the top of my lungs, "Fidel! Fidel! Fidel!"

The tall, bearded man in uniform had emerged from the limousine and was obscured by a wall of green uniformed men whose arms were raised in a commanding gesture for me to stop in my tracks. I believe a guard shouted "Halt!" but I didn't stop.

"Fidel! Fidel! I must TALK TO YOU!" I shouted.

Noticing me, Castro motioned to his bodyguards; I was close enough to the limousine to detect his bemusement. Allowed into the inner perimeter of olive-green uniforms and guns, I was frisked while the hardened eyes of bodyguards scrutinized my every gesture.

"Come here, you!" he said, gruffly.

I caught my breath and stood motionless before him, heart pounding. I had attained the goal that for months had exercised me. I was before the leader of the Revolution. This was the most defining moment of my life.

Fidel was as tall as I remembered from that reception in New York two years before, though I had not noticed then that his beard was not black but reddish in hue. His eyes, like two shiny, dark beads, gave no hint of warmth or recognition.

The leader of the Revolution scanned me up and down.

By now, a throng was assembling. A chant went up: "Fidel! Fidel! Fidel!" They wanted to see their leader. Dozens of arms reached out to him and the bodyguards forced the crowd back to the perimeter.

To us, Fidel Castro was much more than the Cuban head of state. He was our commander in chief, the only person who ranked alongside if not above our own parents. We knew him as "Maximum Leader" and "The Word That Guides"; there was nothing any of us would not have done to accomplish his commands.

"What do you want?" he asked in a hoarse voice, eyes narrowing like a viper's. That hissing look made me feel even smaller than I actually was.

I summarized who I was: I had been an anti-imperialist militant in America on behalf of the Revolution and had returned to throw in my

lot with other Cubans to defend the motherland. I worked with comrade Robert Williams as his personal interpreter and newscaster for *Radio Free Dixie*.

His face relaxed somewhat at the mention of Williams. At the time, Robert Williams was a big name in Cuba, where he lived in a sort of golden exile, admired and pampered. Castro saw America's racial dilemma as Washington's Achilles' heel and so considered Williams a huge asset in the war against the United States. Black American support became a top national security objective; all efforts were deployed to woo African Americans who, in turn, elevated Cuba to a Garden of Eden of race relations. Cresting that wave, Williams's weekly incendiary broadcasts, urging African Americans to revolt, were an act of retaliation by Cuba toward U.S. aggression.

"What do you want to tell me?" Castro asked.

"Fidel, there is *racism* in Cuba!" I blurted out.

His expression froze. The viper look returned to his eyes, sending shivers up my spine. There was no turning back. Any false move, any wrongly placed word, could doom me. I was all alone, face-to-face with my destiny, at the mercy of the one man who could make or break anyone he chose in Cuba. Walterio's instructions were explicit: *Don't say or imply anything he could interpret as defiance to his authority.*

In quick succession, I said it was untrue that racial discrimination was over. Revolutionaries were practicing it. I accused the leaders of ICAP and the Foreign Ministry.

"Comandante, I have proof of what I am saying—*there is racism in Cuba*. I went to see Comandante Almeida to complain about it. I was arrested for denouncing it."

At last I had spoken.

Castro leaned against the limousine, his cheeks flushed. The air was electric. The bodyguards' hostile stares bored through me. Those in the crowd nearest the three vehicles had fallen silent, while those in the rear kept up their chant: "Fidel! Fidel! Fidel!"

Castro's eyes locked with mine. The impersonality of his gaze made him appear imperious, beyond reach.

"It's because you are head of the Revolution that I'm telling you this. I've been looking for you for months. I was unjustly imprisoned for protesting against *racism* and—"

He cut me off, scrutinizing me from head to toe. His eyes settled on my copper bracelet, which I had defiantly resumed wearing despite knowing that the regime considered such things signs of American decadence.

"Revolutionaries don't wear that sort of thing," Castro blurted out.

His comment drew discreet laughter from the crowd near by. Fidel cracked a joke about boxers for the crowd's benefit. They laughed approvingly. He turned to me.

"*Chico*, are you a boxer?"

"No, *Comandante*. I am not," I replied.

"Then there is no reason for me to be afraid of you," he scoffed.

The leader of our Revolution was skillfully sidestepping my charges and not taking me seriously, burying in scorn the grave issue I had brought to his attention. I could not leave it at that. This might be my only chance to be face-to-face with the man who commanded Cuba's destiny; I had to speak my mind. I blurted out the words that had swiftly formed in my mind.

"*Comandante,* I don't agree with some things you said recently in your speeches . . ."

His look crucified me.

"Who are you to agree or disagree with what I say?" Castro snapped, his voice raspy.

The narrowed eyes sent an unequivocal message. I had pushed my luck to the limit. I had entered a danger zone. In that instant, I became sorely aware of the power of life or death that the leader of the Revolution had. My freedom hung in the balance.

Castro's voice took on an official tone. "Listen, *chico*, if you have a complaint, express it in the proper manner. You take it to my office; that is the right way—*not in the streets*!"

Pulling a notebook from the upper pocket of his uniform, he jotted down my particulars. I was to report to his office for an appoint-

ment. With an almost imperceptible motion signaling his bodyguards to remove me, he resumed his banter with the crowd.

Cheers went up. *"Que viva Fidel!"*

The chanting resumed: "Fidel! Fidel! Fidel!"

I rejoined my African friends. Trapped in the crowd, they had followed events from a distance. They were silent, disapproval in their eyes.

"That was a crazy thing to do," one of my friends, the Rhodesian, remarked. "You could have got killed."

He was right. I had committed the most imprudent act in my life. Cuba was living a moment of great tension; Castro was a target for assassination. The worst could have happened. I had risked my life, but it had been worth it. *Castro had listened!* I had stood my ground, done what I had planned for months. Now Fidel must investigate our charges.

That day, my hopes had been rekindled. We would request a discussion with the leadership of the Revolution. Carbonell and Betancourt Bencomo were correct. The Revolution needed to be reoriented in the direction of specific reforms that targeted racism selectively. Our leaders had to stop denying reality and come to understand the need for an entirely different way of dealing with racism and its legacy. The inherited privileges of Cuban whites had to be eradicated. The black population must be empowered. Only then would blacks and whites have a chance to reverse the cycle of hatred, resentment, and misunderstanding that continued to plague society despite the Revolution. I had no doubts that a frank discussion with Fidel could turn things around. Castro was the only leader in Cuba with the unchallenged authority to confront racism headlong. But he would have to be persuaded that he was in denial concerning race. If that could be done, the Revolution would be strengthened.

Racism had to be destroyed, or it would destroy the Revolution! I had risked my life for the leader of the Revolution to *hear* that demand.

I WOKE NEXT MORNING feeling tremendous determination. I was aware that a machine had been set into motion; there was no turning back.

No power in the world—no threat of jail or execution—would hold me back now. I would seek an appointment with the commander in chief of our Revolution, Prime Minister Fidel Castro, as per his instructions. I was surprised at the swiftness of the response from the prime minister's office: appointment granted for the following week.

Walterio was satisfied I had accomplished what he hadn't been able to. I had gotten though to Cuba's leader and *Castro had listened!* "I will present him with a letter, signed by as many blacks as possible," I said. Carbonell frowned; it would be unwise to submit a letter with names. The letter should bear mine alone. "He would take a collective letter as an act of subversion, especially if all the signatories are black." I should make sure at least one *white* person went along with me to the interview. "Preferably it should be a woman; and the fewer people you take along the better." I listened carefully: I knew that Walterio's was the voice of wisdom. His last advice: "Don't say 'we' in his presence." My only chance was to have Castro perceive me as a lone ranger.

The timing seemed right: Castro was embroiled in a fierce feud with the prerevolutionary Communist Party, suspected of having attempted a virtual coup d'etat. In a searing speech on March 26, he excoriated the old Communists, led by Anibal Escalante, whom he accused of attempting to highjack the Revolution. Their "abuse of power," "intrigues," and "sectarian" behavior had endangered the Revolution. Every revolutionary was entitled to denounce any "arbitrary" action suffered at their hands. Cubans were ecstatic.

I had secured the company of two trusted work colleagues, a white girl and a light-skinned black fellow, both friends of mine and diehard revolutionaries. I explained everything. Cuba was in the process of a strong "anti-sectarian campaign." Had not the leader of the Revolution recently exhorted Cubans to rise up against injustices committed in the name of the Revolution? They agreed to help, exhilarated at the idea of sitting in on a meeting with the leader of the Revolution. They had complaints of their own. They were aware of a number of injustices that had to be brought to Fidel's attention.

We went to the meeting with Castro dressed in our militia uniforms. Security personnel took us from one room to another until we were ushered into a large, white salon with an adjoining office. My two companions were immeasurably cheered by the unexpected opportunity to meet our leader in person. Through the half-open door we could hear Fidel issuing orders and glimpsed him moving back and forth. Then the door was shut.

We waited a full hour before Celia Sánchez Manduley, Castro's right-hand person, chief of staff, and confidante came through the door. She greeted us courteously and took a seat facing us. Her face was unsmiling.

"The commander in chief has asked me to attend to this matter. He cannot receive you today because of urgent matters of state," she said.

In truth, the Revolution was living perhaps its most dangerous hour: American plans to invade Cuba were progressing at breakneck speed. Since the failed Bay of Pigs invasion the previous year, the island was on almost permanent war footing; in speech after speech, Fidel warned that a frontal attack by U.S. troops was next. Anticipating the moment of reckoning, the Revolution had appealed to the Soviet Union for military help. We could not have known that the Soviets' positive response would erupt, six months afterward, in the most dangerous Cold War confrontation since World War II—the October Missile Crisis.

As spokesperson, I answered, "Compañera Celia, I met the prime minister last week and complained that some things were happening that, as a revolutionary, I consider to be wrong. He said I should bring it to his attention in his office. This is what I have done."

"I am aware of all that," she replied.

I handed her an envelope, which she opened. Nobody was closer to Fidel than Celia Sanchez. She was the only person with authority to open his correspondence. She read the letter then surveyed us with expressionless eyes.

"I hope you people know what you're doing." She shook our hands and left.

We were confused by her response. What did she mean by "you people"? I sensed my companions' apprehension. We left the prime minister's building, worried, each headed in different directions. That evening when Frank came back to the apartment I told him about the meeting with Celia. Until then I had kept him in the dark.

His eyes were incredulous. "Carlos, you have made another serious mistake."

"To denounce what is wrong in a Revolution?"

"You've made a very serious mistake," he repeated. "This time you're in *real* trouble."

"Fidel has called on us to rectify the errors of the Revolution," I flung back at him.

"It is not the Revolution that is erring—its *you*!" he said.

Our beds were just inches apart, but every day we seemed to move further away from one another. When we were children, Frank had regularly taken the blame for things I did so as to keep me from getting a beating. He had stuck up for me whatever the fray. Frank had always loved and protected me. I had always loved and looked up to him. It hurt to acknowledge that the Revolution had come between us; the strength of our beliefs was stifling our love for one another. And yet, we were committed to the same ideals.

Frank fell asleep and began snoring. I smiled at the familiar sound. As my own restless mind drifted toward sleep, I kept hearing his words: "*You have made a serious mistake, a serious mistake, a ser-i-ous mistake . . .*"

Suppose it was I, not him, who believed the wrong things?

Frank had come to know the inner workings of the Revolution perhaps better than I did. He identified with the regime in an unconditional manner that I was unable to. Suppose I had unwittingly become an enemy of my own people? In six months I had clashed with Cuba's authorities twice. Why would I risk so much? What was driving me to challenge the regime?

I was unable to sleep.

Fragments of Fidel's speeches seeped into my perception:

"What the Revolution needs today, will need tomorrow, will always need is a monolithic unity of the people . . . so strong that anyone who rises against the Revolution will be crushed underfoot! . . . We will apply revolutionary terror against the terrorists, the counterrevolutionaries, the anti-social elements in our society . . ."

Suppose Frank was right?

A surge of panic visited me. I knew it would build, send my heartbeat rocketing, my lungs into top gear. The sudden tremors. The cold sweat. The knot in the stomach. I gulped in deep breaths, as the doctor had instructed. Slowly, the seizure receded. But something told me this was no ordinary anxiety attack.

22

SHATTERED MIRROR

I ROSE THE NEXT morning with a distinct sensation of danger, as if something dreadful was about to befall me. Yet I was satisfied with myself for having taken the protest letter to Fidel. At least now we would know what was what.

I went downstairs for breakfast and tried to put the previous night's anxiety behind me. As I was eating, a neatly uniformed man entered the breakfast room. Though he did not look at all threatening, I noticed everyone's eyes lowered to their plates in trepidation.

"Carlos Moore?"

"Yes."

"I am from the Ministry of National Security," he said, politely. "I have instructions to take you to meet with the minister."

I got up from the table and went with the officer to an unmarked car, where another uniformed man waited behind the steering wheel. I sat in the backseat of the car, content in the thought that I would have my say. At last I was getting the opportunity to denounce the injustices being perpetrated in the name of the Revolution. Our leadership would now hear the story Carbonell and Betancourt Bencomo had been thwarted in telling.

In the hierarchy of power, Comandante Ramiro Valdés Menéndez ranked third under Fidel and Raúl Castro. As minister of national security, he commanded Cuba's entire intelligence/counterintelligence apparatus. Immensely feared, he was rarely seen in public. What better proof was there that Fidel had taken my charges seriously?

At the Ministry of the Interior I was ushered into a huge meeting room where a number of officers stood. Seated at a long mahogany table were the two friends who had accompanied me the day before to the prime minister's office. Both avoided looking at me, faces grim. Instantly, I felt apprehensive.

In walked the red-bearded minister of interior, Ramiro Valdés Menéndez, the most feared man in Cuba, nicknamed the "Cuban Beria" after the notorious head of Soviet secret police under Stalin. The minister sat down, stroking his pointed beard, and fumbled through papers that were placed before him, not even glancing at us. Behind him entered the three government officials whom I had consistently singled out as racial bigots. Manuel Otero, a hateful, chubby red-faced man, was chief of cabinet of the Foreign Ministry. Ramón Calcines Gordillo was ICAP's president. Giraldo Mazola Collazo was that organization's director. All wore solemn faces. They sat on either side of Valdés, on the opposite side of the table.

That was a shock and an ominous sign.

The atmosphere was heavy and threatening. Seated three chairs away from me, my two friends were cowering. "Let's go," Valdés said drily, pointing to one of my erstwhile companions.

"Comrade Comandante, I knew nothing about this," said my fair-skinned friend, visibly shaken. "Moore led me to believe we would be meeting the commander-in-chief to discuss some of our personal problems." My friend said he had no idea that I was taking him along to level charges against the revolutionary government.

"How about you?" said the minister, pointing to the white girl.

She was shaking. "I knew nothing about it either. Moore said our beloved leader, Comandante Fidel, had told him to bring a letter."

They protested that they were revolutionaries. It was I who got them involved, they said. I had only told them about the meeting with the prime minister, but they had no knowledge of what was in the letter. They were innocent; I had deceived them.

"Just a minute!" I blurted out.

"Not you!" the minister hissed, now looking at me.

His eyes were as hard as steel, as cold as ice. Sweat poured down my spine. All energy left my body. I tried licking my lips but my dry tongue scraped them instead. I had fallen into a trap. I felt sweat trickling from my armpits down my sides.

He returned his attention to the other two, saying they had committed a serious offence against the Revolution. The girl began to sob, pleading to the minister. The fellow also begged for pardon. The minister said their cases would be reviewed in light of the situation. Both were escorted out.

I was left alone on my side of the huge conference table, facing the row of officials. For a moment there was total silence. I heard the crackling starchiness of an impeccably ironed uniform as the minister leaned over to listen to something being said to him. Things I had not noticed before caught my eye. I studied the big, polished mahogany table, the grain of its texture. I observed that the walls were pictureless and drab.

I quickly sized up the situation. Unlike my first encounter with internal security, when my case was treated as a police matter, my accusations were now being dealt with as an affair of state. My room for maneuvering, if any, was slim. My offense was being treated as a case of *treason.*

The room had now become like a war court.

In brief statements, Manuel Otero and Giraldo Mazola gave distorted versions of their first contact with me. Both spoke with authority, in a monotone, their eyes cold with contained hatred. The conclusion from their rendition was that I was undeniably a provocateur. These men had fought for the Revolution, yet they were *liars*. If that was the Revolution, I wanted no part of it. They would get nothing out of me.

It was Calcines's turn.

He handed the minister a slim black file. Of whom? Of what? Comandante Valdés flipped a few pages, slowly. He replaced the file on the table and leaned back to stroke his beard, looking straight at Calcines.

Accusations began to fly.

Calcines reported that on my return from the United States ICAP had given me every possible opportunity to be integrated into the Revolution. Instead, I had concentrated on spreading slander. The overall impression was that from day one I had engaged in a deliberate campaign to defame the leaders of the Revolution with the intent of sabotaging the national effort. The run-ins with Mazola at ICAP and Otero at Foreign Affairs were cited as examples of such provocations.

ICAP's boss paused dramatically, then opened another chapter. It concerned my relationship with Robert Williams.

My alarm grew.

Williams had been my shield; his personal connection to the top leaders of the Revolution had kept me one step ahead of G2. Because of those connections, he had rescued me from prison. Within a year of his arrival in Cuba, ICAP had turned on him in a big way, depicting him as a bigot who sowed hatred for whites. The civil rights leader was labeled a "reverse racist" who was introducing "racial division" into Cuba. If ICAP was out to get a man with such an international reputation and a large following in the United States as Williams, it would make short work of me.

Williams feud with ICAP had started over charges by the U.S. civil rights leader that his efforts at mobilizing U.S. blacks for militant action were being interfered with. He blamed Calcines and Mazola, personally, accusing them of sabotage and racism. ICAP responded to his charges with a rumor campaign. The black leader was labeled an opportunist and profiteer, a braggart who was using the struggle of the poor and victimized black masses in America to promote himself internationally. Williams was said to be using his prestige and elevated position in Cuba to discredit the comrades of the U.S. Communist Party. He was also said to be abusing the hospitality of the valiant Cuban people by criticizing the decisions of the party and disparaging Cuban leaders.

I had been acting as Williams's newscaster and personal interpreter for a year; during his free hours I spent much time with him also, mostly driving around Havana at night. We became quite close and I accompanied him practically everywhere. The civil rights leader loved the

ambiance of Old Havana, where the poor, black population was concentrated. He loved the clubs, the drumming, the Afro-Cuban dances, the thunderous music. It was Cuba's authentic music. Those were the hangouts in which he sought to relax and the music that he loved. However, the regime had singled out those clubs and that music as being incompatible with the Revolution.

Two years previous, in one fell swoop the government had banned the black social clubs known as *Sociedades de Color* (including the famous Buena Vista Social Club); dance halls that doubled as social and political town halls. In parallel, the regime had declared an all-out war to uproot the Afro-Cuban religions known as Santería; "primitive" and "corruptive" features of black Cuban society deemed to have come into conflict with the Revolution. The black dance halls and the Santería grounds were the only spaces prerevolutionary Cuba allowed for specifically black functions.

Williams had indeed sided with the Afro-Cuban religions under attack. If the government singled them out for attack, he surmised, it meant that it was interfering with a specifically black heritage. Although he was a fervent Protestant, he began to frequent some Afro-Cuban ceremonial grounds searching to know more about those religions imported from Africa. Stepping even further from the official line, he continued to feature jazz, rhythm and blues, and funk on his weekly *Radio Free Dixie* program even though the regime was unloading its guns on such "decadent American imperialist music."

Who had acted as go-between in all this?

I had taken Williams to the very places the regime had singled out as being incompatible with the Revolution. I was assisting him in his efforts to mobilize American blacks, though he was beginning to be regarded as a "black racist." I was facilitator in his attempts to better understand the nature of Afro-Cuban religions. If Williams was a reverse racist, it figured I was also one.

"*Compañero* Minister, there is something else," he said. "I did not mention it earlier because of the presence of the young woman among us, but I shall do so now. We have a serious medical problem connected

to this whole thing." Eyes fixed on me with intensity, as if everyone except me was aware of the bombshell that was about to be dropped.

"Compañero Minister, one of the persons with whom this fellow here associates, a Zanzibari guest of the government, has been admitted to hospital for an operation on his rectum," he shot out.

I knew all three members of the Zanzibari mission well: Ali Mahfoudh Mohammed, Mohammed Ali Foum, and Salim Ahmed Salim. They were my good friends. I often served as their interpreter and therefore visited their mission regularly. I had learned a great deal about Africa from them. As with Williams, I had taken them to witness the Afro-Cuban *plantes* and introduced them to many black Cuban families. I did not know then that any of them was in hospital for any reason.

The melodramatic way the revelation was made rattled me.

As it transpired, one of the Zanzibaris apparently had required surgical intervention for hemorrhoids. Of course that did not make him gay. But in a climate of declared governmental hostility toward homosexuals, that fact taken out of context was turned into some sort of incriminating evidence. The inference was that I must be gay, too, which was at the time a very serious charge that carried the threat of detention and banishment to a hard-labor camp.

The minister stared at me long and hard, with utter disgust.

Without a pause, Calcines now tore into the three Zanzibaris with venom. He went on to give a twisted, conspiratorial, and morally devastating account of the lifestyle of these Africans. He set about describing the mission as a den of debauchery akin to Sodom and Gomorrah. It was always full of near-prostitutes, he said, and accused me of supplying Cuban girls not only to these Zanzibaris, but to the African students on scholarship in Cuba as well. Clearly, I fit the perfect PPP profile: pederasty, pimping, and prostitution.

I was devastated.

The Zanzibaris, too, had locked horns with ICAP, which they knew to be a public branch of Cuba's Secret Service. That institution had osten-

sibly been set up to minister to the needs of high-profile revolutionary exiles such as they were, but they came to regard it as a bureaucratic den, and its bosses, Calcines and Mazola, as diehard racists. The latter, in turn, excoriated them as petit-bourgeois opportunists and profiteers who were living high off the hog at the expense of a generous Revolution.

The Zanzibaris lived in the middle-class Vedado district, in a residence that doubled as a mission. ICAP posted an armed guard in front of the mission, but the relationship had quickly gone sour. At one point, ICAP had summoned me to its headquarters and warned me to stay away from these Africans. Cubans, I was told, were not allowed to consort with foreigners, least of all diplomats. I disregarded that injunction and warned the Zanzibaris.

I recalled their insistence that they were being watched. "Our place is wired with listening devices," they said. The guards supposedly protecting them were actually working for the G2. I knew that ICAP was fishing for arguments against the Zanzibaris and that I was expected to falsely incriminate them to save my skin. But I would not do so. I was not about to be cowed into any statement that could discredit them.

My mind raced to appraise all of the angles of my predicament. Nothing made much sense except that my charges of racism were not mentioned at all. The emphasis was exclusively on portraying me as an inconsistent and shady character, an opportunist of loose morals, a provocateur. What was the purpose of having me brought before the third most powerful leader in Cuba? Why was someone as important and busy as Valdés devoting so much attention to me? Had he merely wanted to do away with me, he could have without going through the masquerade of trumped-up charges and outright lies that his cohorts had mounted. How far would they go?

A stony silence reigned for maybe a minute, during which Valdés kept his eyes riveted on a report that an officer had brought him. I used that moment of respite to muster all my residual courage, anticipating a new barrage of accusations. I would not cave in.

He handed back the report and addressed me directly.

"Now you may speak," he said leaning back in his chair. But his mind seemed to have gone onto something else.

"The letter was my idea," I said. "Nobody else was involved in drafting it."

I had thought it my revolutionary duty to bring to the attention of our leaders things I felt were harmful to the Revolution. Racial discrimination did exist, despite everything being done to eliminate it. I had been victimized for daring to alert Comandante Juán Almeida to that particular situation. I was imprisoned unjustly. That was what I sought to bring to the attention of the comander in chief of the Revolution, Fidel Castro. I had acted in what I felt were the best interests of our Revolution.

"The charges against me are false. I have never betrayed the Revolution or sought to discredit it," I said.

I was careful not to say anything the minister could construe as being an attack on the regime. It was obvious that Minister Valdés was not at all interested in my version, for he kept himself busy with matters that his aides kept bringing to his attention while I spoke in my defense. He was visibly disinterested in my version, for he had already heard that of his own men. The whole thing was a charade. But why had they gone through all of this?

"I have nothing more to say," I told the minister.

Comandante Ramiro Valdés conferred with his aides for a few seconds, then got up and walked out of the conference room with Calcines, Mazola, and Otero in tow. I was left in the huge room with two security men. I knew that the worst was to come, that I had to prepare for it. I imagined what would come next. I would be led away to *La Cabaña* prison, kept for some days or perhaps weeks, then abruptly extracted one night from my cell and led to face a firing squad. I had lived through that scenario at Villa Marista.

My chin was on my chest. All I heard spinning in my mind was: *You are going to be executed by firing squad . . . You are going to be executed . . . You are going to be executed . . .* Minutes that seemed like hours

elapsed before I was taken by one of the officers to a smaller room where I slumped into a chair. He walked out, leaving me alone.

After another long wait, an officer entered and sat down. He was a mean-looking, long-faced, pale-skinned man with piercing eyes. His nasal voice told me I was in for a rough ride.

I was being given my *last* chance, he said, and placed loose sheets of paper and a ballpoint pen in front of me. I looked at the paper and the pen. Everything was jumbled in my head. It was as if I had been thrown back into the interrogation room at Villa Marista. But I knew that I had to resist. Since I was going to die, what use was there saying anything? I would not confess to anything I had not done. Slowly, I raised my head until my eyes met those of the officer.

"I've done no wrong to the Revolution," I said. "Whatever I've done, I did alone."

I remained silent.

Sensing that he was getting nowhere with me, the officer got up abruptly and left the room, closing the door behind him. I had lost all sense of time by then; I waited, alone, for what seemed to be hours. Only one thought mobilized my mind, sending out commands to every part of my body: face the firing squad with dignity! I had heard of some men who came apart at the seams, cried for mercy, and wet their pants when faced with the firing squad. I was determined not to die as a coward. They would have to shoot me standing; I would not cave in.

I remained sitting in front of the table, preparing myself for the inevitable, when another white officer entered. He took a long look at me, sat down, took a packet of cigarettes from his pocket, and placed it on the table.

"You want a smoke?" He pushed the pack toward me.

I wanted to smoke badly, but I refused.

"Take one."

I nodded negatively. He drew back the cigarettes, lit up, and began to smoke, unhurriedly.

"Do you understand what is at stake?"

I nodded positively.

"We know everything you've been doing. We know everybody you've met." His voice was low and even. "We know *everything*."

I explained that I had never conspired against the Revolution. All of those who met with me were staunch revolutionaries, people who were ready to offer their lives for the Revolution. All I did was meet friends in my house to discuss the problems mentioned in the letter to the prime minister. All we wanted was for the leadership to examine those problems we had identified as being injurious to the Revolution. It was our revolutionary duty to point them out, not hide or deny them.

"What problems?"

I did not agree with confining people other than counterrevolutionaries to work camps. I disagreed with the harsh measures taken against the Afro-Cuban cults, the attacks on *babalawos*, *paleros*. I saw no danger posed by Jehovah's Witnesses that merited imprisonment. I disagreed with the campaign launched against lesbians and gays. I did not agree with prostitutes being locked up. Finally, I disagreed with the contention about the Revolution having eliminated racism in Cuba. But to bring those issues before that officer could bury whatever slim chances were left to save my skin.

"You don't agree with the Revolution?"

"I agree totally with the Revolution! I don't agree with some things that are going on which can *harm* the Revolution."

"Do you belong to any of the religious sects?"

"No."

"Are you homosexual?"

"No, I am not."

"But you have homosexual friends?"

"I don't investigate my friends' private lives."

Homosexuality, prostitution, and pimping, the officer said, were antirevolutionary activities. Was I denying that? I said that, as I saw it, sexual orientation was a private matter without political ramifications. To repress people for their sexual orientation, I believed, would end up

alienating many from the Revolution. And I had never in my life been associated with the commerce of prostitutes; I was not a pimp. Neither was I gay.

"Do you deny that homosexuals *sleep* at your home?"

I realized he was referring to the meetings I had held at my house until late hours of the night, after which some of my friends had slept over for fear of being detained in the streets at such late hours. I explained that friends occasionally stayed overnight at my place, after our meetings. That was all. Some of these may have been gay, but I did not discriminate on that basis to determine who would or not stay over in my place. "I haven't been sleeping *with* homosexuals, if that's what you mean," I answered.

"Why would anyone innocent of any crime fear the police? Are you saying the Revolution arrests innocent people?"

I was living proof that the regime *did* arrest innocent people, but I said nothing.

The officer mentioned some names. Rogelio Martínez Furé, Cuba's most outstanding specialist of Afro-Cuban religion, dances, and music. Calbert Casey, an iconoclastic, gifted poet. Nestor Almendros, a brilliant filmmaker. All three were intellectuals whom I had came to know through Walterio Carbonell; they were his close friends. All three were members of the Union of Artists and Writers of Cuba. I surmised that I was being questioned about them because G2 was after something to incriminate them or Carbonell. I was not about to hand them anything that could serve that purpose, or incriminate anyone else.

"I was alone to conceive and write the letter to the prime minister," I restated.

Then, out of the blue, he asked, "When last were you in touch with Richard Gibson?"

I shook my head negatively.

Slowly, he extracted one page from a file and placed it before me. A chill ran down my spine. It was the Fair Play for Cuba Committee recommendation letter on my behalf, addressed to the authorities of Cuba

and bearing Gibson's signature. I had delivered it to the ICAP director, Mazola, at our first interview. How could it be an incriminating document? I had never been in contact with Gibson. I explained that Berta Green, the FPCC general secretary, not Gibson, had given the letter to me.

"When last were you in contact with William Worthy?"

I felt cornered, as if guilty of some terrible misdeed.

I had been William Worthy's translator for the long weeks he had been in Cuba, but that was all. I had received letters from that journalist in recent months, all sent through visiting pro-Castro Americans with whom I had no previous or subsequent contact. The G2 must have raided my room, so those letters would be in the ministry's possession. There was nothing incriminating in them, only Worthy's insistent request that I contact the minister of education, Armando Hart, on his behalf to secure a meeting. Worthy wanted to interview Fidel Castro for a documentary to be shown on U.S. television. Why was I being questioned about him?

I had been brought to the ministry at about nine and it was now after noon. My mind was empty. My stomach was empty. My being was empty. I was thoroughly drained. I was tired and numb. Still, I was not going to cave in. I wasn't about to provide the names of anyone.

Picking up on my resolve, the officer changed his tone.

"Do you love the Revolution?"

"Yes."

"I believe you do." Now he spoke conversationally.

He said he knew what racial discrimination was, because black blood ran through his veins and some of his relatives were black. They experienced discrimination before the Revolution. But now, he said, we were in another Cuba—just one big family. Cubans belonged to no particular race. Imperialism and capitalism had in the past divided Cubans into white and black. That was something of the past; a horrible past that would never return. Was I living in that dreadful past, or in Cuba's promising future?

I remained silent.

Every now and then, as if leafing through my life, the officer flipped through a file on the table before him.

My anxiety lessened when he began to refer to my political activities abroad. I had had a clean record. In the very bowels of the imperialist monster I had stood up for the Revolution. The long experience he had dealing with counterrevolutionaries made him feel that I was not one of them. He said that he believed I was sincere when I spoke of my love for the Revolution. He was inclined to think that deep down I was a revolutionary who became misguided.

"How long were you in the United States?"

"Three years."

"You know that America is a racist country?"

"Yes, I do."

"And you have been back in Cuba for a year?"

"Yes."

"So, the reflexes you acquired living in a racist country would still be with you?"

"Yes."

"You returned to Cuba and become disgruntled when you ran into some difficulties searching for a job."

"Yes."

"So, you mistook the problems you met for discrimination?"

"Yes."

"You were confusing Cuba with the United States."

"Yes."

Those were pure lies, but a door had opened. I perceived the officer's eagerness for a compromise.

I understood what he wanted of me: a straightforward confession in which I admitted having falsely accused the regime of racism. The confession would be given to the minister, who, in turn, would hand it to the only person who could have requested such a high-profile inquiry into my charges. I was being offered a way out. My dilemma was clear: confess or possibly face a firing squad!

The officer pushed some blank sheets of paper toward me, placing the pen on top of them.

After almost eight straight hours at the ministry we had come full circle. I had to hand them something tangible.My mind raced in all directions, straining to find the suitable expressions of contrition that would satisfy the minister without destroying me politically. I knew that whatever I placed on paper would be used thereafter against me. There was a limit to what I was ready to concede; I knew where the boundaries lie.

The thoughts flowed in disorganized succession in my mind:

I had erred in thinking that there was racism in Cuba . . . What I took for racism was not racism . . . What I took for race prejudice was not race prejudice . . . I had erred because I had not lived through the revolutionary process from the start . . . My sojourn in the U.S. had exposed me to the ideological influence of American capitalism, which in turn had affected my social reasoning . . . I was sorry for leveling charges of racism against gallant leaders of the Revolution such as Ramón Calcines Gordillo, Gilberto Mazola, Manuel Otero, and others . . . I took full responsibility. No one else was involved . . . I was ready for any punishment the Revolution would decide against me, but I had faith in its magnanimity . . .

Borrowing from the scenario the officer had sketched out, I wrote mechanically as he watched in silence. I had not incriminated any of those who had trusted in me. I had consciously and deliberately lied to *them*; my confession had severed lastingly my spiritual and moral commitment to the regime.

The officer took the statement, read it, and went out, leaving me alone.

For the first time since the day I had accepted the overriding authority of the Revolution, I was on the opposite side of a great divide. I saw myself on the other bank of a great river. But I knew the divide was not between Revolution and counterrevolution.

I was standing alone, in the midst of a deserted island, overwhelmed and crushed by the certainties that Fidel Castro and the people around

him represented. I was confined to my own interpretations of realities that my senses perceived and translated as reflecting the truth. They were realities that Cuban blacks were facing daily. But before that reality stood the truth of a regime that had risen to power on the wings of a popular Revolution. What was my imperceptible word in the face of their towering authority? Before them I was less than a blade of grass.

My options were severely limited lest I decided to join the right-wing opposition, forsake my ideals, and betray myself. I would have either to submit or remain forever immured within my own unshakeable convictions. Only the latter option seemed honorable to me.

23

INTERNED

We were speeding due east of Havana. We had heard about the hard-labor camps and knew they were of several types. Outright counter-revolutionaries or anyone accused of political crimes went to camps for enemies of the Revolution. Those accused of being pimps, pederasts, or prostitutes were sent to PPP camps. But there were also camps for revolutionaries who had erred. Where were we headed?

Each day, the list of antisocial or counterrevolutionary crimes grew longer. Probably others squeezed in our truck were wondering, like me, how listening to jazz or R & B ("imperialist music") or wearing blue jeans ("imperialist decadence") justified long-term imprisonment. My crime was "racial subversion," a new category.

After fourteen hours I saw the familiar sight of sugarcane fields in the distance. We had arrived somewhere in my native province. We were marched off to various *barracones*, long, thatch-roofed barracks where slaves once were locked up for the night. The floor was earthen and hammocks were hung for sleeping.

Cautiously people began to talk, wary of informers among us. No one knew how many were confined here, but it seemed about a thousand. This was a special camp called a *granja*, a farm. We were to be rehabilitated through work. If we repented and behaved, we could one day return to society.

At 5:00 A.M. the guards opened the door. Half an hour later, we were at the cane fields, getting out of the trucks in our blue denim work clothes. We were each handed a machete and assigned a plot to cut, pro-

hibited from talking. Not until the high cane had been felled could we even see one another.

At noon the trucks took us for lunch before returning us to the fields for the hardest part of the day. It was brutal work. The white heat of the sun burned my head, sweat blurred the blade. As the day progressed, the sun seemed to expand, taking every drop of moisture from our bodies. The machetes felt heavy and useless. Every muscle ached. Later, from the truck, I saw women detainees; the genders were kept separate. I thought about the black women who cut cane during slavery.

Yet we felt relief to be at this farm. The guards called us comrade instead of prisoner: we were still in the fold. We retained our names. We were not outcasts; we were revolutionaries! If we cooperated, we would eventually get out.

When asked why I had been sent here, I said I had made errors. It would hardly have been prudent to say I accused our revolutionary leaders of being racists.

We were encouraged to talk about the mistakes that had sent us here. Thrice a week we had formal political classes with the comrades in charge of ideological orientation, an elite caste of detainees who lived in wooden houses. Dogmatic Communists to the core, some had committed homicide. Though murderers were usually sent to a camp for common criminals, if not executed, murder in defense of the Revolution was a mitigating circumstance. Killing a counterrevolutionary in a dispute could land you in a rehabilitation camp, and if you had the background to be an ideological trainer, that is what you became. My grasp of the field made me noticed in these sessions.

"Moore, come here. At what school for cadres did you learn all that?"

"I didn't go to a school for cadres. I was in the States."

"You learned Marxism in the States?"

"Yes."

"Why are you here?"

"Because I accused certain comrades of wrongdoing but had no proof."

Eventually they asked me to help teach Marxism-Leninism to the less advanced. Everyone in the camp seemed to be an exemplary prisoner who sincerely regretted his former mistake. Since the line between mistake and crime against the Revolution was elastic, we ostentatiously thanked the Revolution for its generosity toward us. Who was an informer and who was telling the truth? It was impossible to know.

Despite the risk, I made a friend. His nickname was Guajiro, "the peasant." We both were respected for having returned from the United States to participate in the Revolution. He was of mixed blood but, like most fair-skinned Cubans, considered himself white. People like him were proud of being "almost white." The diversity of ways to be almost white, the gradations of skin shades and variations in hair and features could give the illusion of a sea of tolerance if one never questioned why virtually no blacks held power of any kind. So when Guajiro asked me what I had done, I left out the racial angle.

Blacks (jet black, petroleum black, "black-that-is-not-white" black) were a Cuban subgroup. This was not something the others wanted to hear. If you dared point out a racial slur, you were oversensitive. If you mentioned the word *racism*, you were a troublemaker. The Revolution had eliminated racism, so why contend it still existed?

Guajiro and I hooked up with a powerfully built red-skinned black known as Bear, in the way that Cubans named people they admired after animals. Fidel was Horse, for example, and to my intimate friends I was Tiger.

Bear loved poking fun at me. He called me *despatriado*—a man without a country—playing on the word *repatriado*, a man who had come back to his country.

"With a name like Moore, for sure you aren't Cuban," he teased. "And you're not American, so you must be a *despatriado*."

When the rifle shots cracked *Silence!* at 10:00 P.M., Guajiro and I leaned close to Bear so he could continue recounting his guerrilla experiences in the Sierra Maestra under Raúl Castro's command. Bear had been a hero, but was said to have done mad things like running out with

only a rifle, shooting at random. He had many wounds. He was also virtually illiterate and definitely unstable, but I liked him. He wanted to know all about America. A trusting camaraderie grew between us and we whispered late into the night.

Work was difficult, but we would break into song going and coming from the fields. We sang the July 26 anthem, which a black poet had composed for Fidel. Someone would open with the first line, "March on toward our ideal," then all would join in. We also sang the "International," anthem of the Communist workers' movement.

Since there were no problems in the camp, some of us were granted permission to go to the Sunday cockfights in a nearby village. We had to be back by six or else the soldiers would hunt us down. One Sunday at noon, a bloodied Bear stumbled in.

"Those motherfuckin' rednecks, I'm going to kill them all!"

Provoked by his drunken mouth, the peasants had ganged up and given him a beating. He was convinced they had cheated him during a cockfight. When he got free, he jumped on a grazing horse and galloped bareback to camp to get a hidden gun. In two seconds, he was off again on the horse, waving his big gun.

Guajiro and I took off to the village as fast as we could, terrified we would arrive too late. Bear was a good person except when he drank. These particular peasants were dangerous. They hated blacks, whom they liked to accuse of messing with their daughters. By the time we arrived, Bear had already fired two shots. He was lurching and shouting abuse at the peasants behind locked doors. He was not happy to see us.

"Don't come any closer, you coward. While we were fighting in the mountains, you were hiding in America. You're faggots. Traitors! Get away or I'll shoot you."

We moved in slowly. Bear's face was caked with blood, his shirt torn. He was out of control, partly from the alcohol, partly from humiliation. Beads of sweat accumulated on his face, and his hands swung about jerkily.

"If you come one inch closer, I'll blow your heads off."

Then tears began rolling down his face. In that split second, I saw a chance. I threw myself at him hard, grabbing the gun. Guajiro leaped on him a second later. Miraculously, the gun did not discharge. We tried to hold him and calm him, but he was barely subdued. Fortunately, others had followed from the camp and with their help we managed to get him back. We tied him up and threw buckets of water on him until his normal composure reappeared. Guajiro had the task of making the gun vanish.

The incident with Bear made me hero of the moment, boosting my self-confidence. Still, at night, as snoring echoed off the rough walls, I lay awake, distressed, pondering my plight of being punished for believing too much in the Revolution. I went over events again and again, searching for an explanation. The dialogue in my head always ended in a cul-de-sac. I loved the Revolution, but I had lost faith in the regime.

Two weeks after the incident with Bear, heavy rains began. There was a pattern to my days: work, wash, eat, teach. The worst part was having to get up at four in the morning. The cane was set on fire around ten at night and had to be cut as early as possible to prevent it losing its sugar content. We hated the wet trucks, the long trip to ever more distant fields, the dark dawns.

By then I could expertly cut one, two, three canes in one blow because I knew how to angle the blade and with what strength. But one morning my foot slid in the mud just when I had thrown the machete. The next thing I knew, the blade had chipped a piece of bone out of my right leg. I screamed for help, but we were deep in wet cane, so no one heard right away. Some comrades finally arrived. They rushed to get one of the soldiers patrolling. The soldiers drove me to the infirmary at the command post.

"What happened?" the military doctor asked coldly.

"I slipped and fell," I explained.

He glared at me as if I were lying. "More likely you did it to get out of work."

He cleaned, stitched, and bandaged the wound so tightly that I could hardly walk. Then he told the soldier to take me back to the fields. No one could understand why I had been sent back to work. I was in excruciating pain. I hit one, two canes, then collapsed, blood spurting everywhere. Again I called for help.

The soldier who came said, "The doctor sent him back to work, so he has to work."

"Listen, comrade, something is wrong. Look at the blood," I said.

I was taken back to the infirmary, where the doctor cut the bandage and found that all the stitches had burst, exposing a dark cavity of bone and blood. The doctor restitched the wound, wrapped my leg, and would have sent me back to the fields, but in the end I was allowed back to barracks.

In the evening my leg was still bleeding. The next morning I could not stand. My foot was swollen and hot.

Three days later the same doctor opened the gauze bandage and declared, "It's turning gangrenous."

My blood curdled. "Nobody's going to cut off my leg!" I screamed.

Faced with my hysteria, they left me to a young white assistant doctor, who examined the wound carefully. I was surprised by how kindly he was.

"This is pretty bad," he said. "We have to get you to Havana."

"They won't let me leave," I answered.

"What in the world have you done?"

I told him everything. By the end, I was sobbing shamelessly. "I'm ready to die for the Revolution, but I'm not going to let anyone cut my leg off."

"I believe you acted in good faith," the doctor said. "I'll help you get out of here." Once I got back to Havana, he instructed, I must immediately write a letter to the minister of national security asking for a pardon. "Otherwise they'll send you back to a camp."

Before requesting the transfer, he consulted my file. The comrade commissars reported that I was cooperative, had given excellent classes

in Marxism-Leninism and history, and had taught Bear the alphabet and geography. It was noted that I had risked my life to save Bear so the Revolution would not have a bad name among the peasants. Within days I was in a military vehicle to Havana. I had spent four months at the camp.

I received full medical treatment in Havana and was allowed to reoccupy my little room in front of the headquarters of the Union of Artists and Writers in the Vedado. Taking the advice of the young doctor, I wrote to Comandante Ramiro Valdés Menéndez, minister of national security, to express my regret and ask for a pardon. I said the rehabilitation experience in the camp had changed me. I sincerely repented my mistakes. I was ready to serve the Revolution unflinchingly. Perhaps my linguistic abilities and knowledge of Marxism could be useful to the Revolution. Droves of middle-class white Cubans were fleeing every day and their English-speaking posts were opening up to *pichóns* like me, for whom English was a second mother tongue.

My letter received no reply, but since two weeks had passed without my being ordered back to the camp, I had hope. One day I was recalled to the Ministry of Communications and reinstated in my job.

24

THE COLDEST OF OCTOBERS

I SLIPPED INTO OCTOBER 1962 in a numbed coldness. Within a month I would be twenty. At nineteen I had already known prison, been interned in a work camp, and twice come close to being executed by firing squad. Yet I was not against the Revolution in whose name such outrages were committed. I had become an enigma even to myself.

I had only spent four months at the camp but I came out of it changed. I lost my smile but kept the beard I had grown. Overall, I was gloomy and inward looking. Day after day, I went to work at the Ministry of Communications and returned home with mechanical indifference. My sleep was restless. Someone mindful of every word had replaced the insouciant young man who said whatever came into his head. I had learned that speaking out could be fatal. I now lived a double life. There was the daytime, playing repentant revolutionary so as to return to normal life. At night, however, I was obsessed with replaying events, analyzing, examining where I went wrong, needing to refute the staggering conclusion that blacks were meant to remain the nannies of rich children, the cane cutters and stevedores.

One day at work my phone rang and my boss, Loynaz, told me to drop everything and rush to his office. I had never seen him so solemn.

"We're about to be invaded," he announced peremptorily. "There's a national state of emergency. Total mobilization has been declared."

Although we all lived in expectation of an American invasion it was unsettling to realize that the moment had arrived.

"Orders have gone out that employees must stay in their workplaces. Go home now, put on your militia uniform, and report right back. Weapons will be issued later."

Fidel had insistently warned us the American imperialists would invade. We were psychologically prepared. More than once the population was placed on alert, when U.S. warships entered Cuban waters on military exercises. We mobilized when shots were traded across Guantanamo and Cuban soldiers were killed. We mobilized when the U.S. Air Force violated Cuban air space. This time, however, the moment to surrender our lives was here.

I rushed into the street to find a cab. People were scurrying in all directions. No one stopped to talk. The air was filled with the groan of canopied Soviet military trucks speeding to various destinations.

At home, I changed clothes and gathered a few items. I dashed back to the ministry, where the deputy minister of communications, Luis Blanca, had summoned union delegates. I was in time to hear him confirm that Cuba was mobilized for war.

"Cuba is living its most dangerous hour. Cuba is about to be bombarded from the air and Americans troops will land," he said.

Every single person prepared for war. Water and gas were to be turned off inside buildings. The militia was deployed in every block; neighborhood Committees to Defend the Revolution were readied. Suspected counterrevolutionaries were rounded up. Ministry personnel were instructed to be on the lookout for "chameleons," those who would try to infiltrate their workplace. We were told the Americans had already planted agents in Cuba who might be in our midst, surreptitiously preparing sabotage. Everyone scrutinized everyone else. No one was exempt from suspicion. Fresh from the work camp, I felt particularly vulnerable.

Life inside the ministry became like that in a garrison, a sort of civilian barracks. Security surrounded the building, controlling who entered or left. Everyone's ID was checked and double-checked, as were their assigned posts. Food and water were rationed but someone would bring us a sandwich and coffee when we were on defense duty. Outside, trucks sped by, stopping just long enough to unload sandbags at various spots.

The ministry staff was put under the authority of military officers who assigned us to different posts. Mine was in an adjacent open field.

I was issued a Belgian-made rifle along with a number of clips, bullets that had to be accounted for after each change of duty. A makeshift sentry box was erected where one could eat and relieve oneself. Sandbags were piled around to form a rampart. In other spots around the ministry, similar piles of stacked sandbags served to support machine gun artillery, overseen by specialists in handling these heavy weapons.

My designated hours were the worst, midnight to eight. No one wanted that shift, the slot when the ministry was most vulnerable to infiltration and sabotage. Other than the FAL rifle, I had a small radio and a flashlight, but I was unafraid, prepared to defend my country's sovereignty.

After my eight-hour duty, I would go back into the ministry to listen to Fidel's radio broadcasts. When he was not speaking, military music played. The newspaper showed pictures of saboteurs, along with their confiscated radio transmitters and receivers. This heightened the credibility of the Cuban intelligence system; it was ruthlessly efficient.

There was no turning back. According to the rumors making the rounds, up to four hundred thousand American soldiers were to land at any time. Already a good number were massed in Florida, ninety miles from Cuba's shores. The role of every Cuban was to impede the American advance and cause as many casualties among enemy troops as possible. That might mean dying to defend our positions. Every city was to be transformed into a self-contained bastion of resistance whose occupation would be costly for the invading force. Bridges and other strategic places would be blown up, letting the Cuban armed forces retreat into inaccessible areas of the island. Fidel had thought of everything.

At night I welcomed the company of Raul, an employee of the ministry in his early forties. Armed with a machine gun, Raul was in charge of inspecting the posts at night, making the rounds to ensure everything was all right, as none of the posts communicated with each another. Sometimes he would bring me coffee at around 4 A.M. and stay chatting. He was from a poor black family and had lived through the period when blacks in Havana had to hustle the streets to put food on the table.

One night, Raul tearfully confided to me that in order to survive he had sex with the wives or girlfriends of white Americans who came to Cuba on their yachts. The men would film and photograph him as he made love to these women. He sobbed with shame recounting his story. He said that was why he was ready to die for the Revolution.

"*Compañero*," he said, rising to his feet and wiping away his tears, "I regret one thing: that I have only one life to give Fidel!"

Raul was typical of black Cubans who had placed their whole faith in the Revolution and in an ideology that predicated radical change for the better. I, too, once felt that way, but something fundamental had ruptured. To most, the Revolution was Fidel. But I had lost that unquestioning conviction in his politics and his ideology.

I had been too close to the top and it smelled rank. Racism, corruption, duplicity, all had soured the essential values that made the Revolution worth dying for. Yet I was about to face death along with all Cubans in defense of my country's right to pursue its own destiny. Was that a contradiction? As a fervent nationalist, I did not think so.

One night I asked Raul if he had heard the rumor that the Soviets had introduced atomic missiles into Cuba. He gave me a knowing look.

"Damn right we've got missiles. We're going to break the *cojones* of the *americanos*!"

We were jubilant. We finally had real power. The Caribbean midget of forty-three thousand square miles could fell the giant United States of more than three million square miles. At the peak of the crisis, Fidel himself hinted, on October 23, that Cuba did indeed have nuclear missiles.

"I want to warn American imperialism: be careful what you do, because this time aggression can lead to very fatal consequences for yourselves," he said.

That statement was confirmation for us that Cuba had become a nuclear power overnight. The collective joy of nine million Cubans was intense. We were confident we could now defend ourselves. Fidel had shown a high degree of statesmanship and sheer genius. There was not

a single Cuban revolutionary or nationalist who was not proud of how he was handling this crisis.

After years of living in fear of an American invasion, we Cubans were in a position to retaliate. The very imperialists who had built huge arsenals of apocalyptic weapons now faced those weapons head on. All of us who knew the sting of oppression were glad. For once we could hit back at our tormentors. The Americans were going to taste war on their own territory and with the same terrifying type of weapon they had dropped on the Japanese. I felt horror at the thought, but they, too, for the first time would know collective fear. Fear would become a democratic affair—something for everyone.

"I know what a nuclear war means. All of Europe, including the Soviet Union, would become ashes. But the United States would also disappear; that makes everything worthwhile," Raul said. America and Europe were responsible for oppression, for racism, for the hunger of billions of people. "Our ancestors will be avenged," he said.

I assented. Things were no longer unilateral, with just one side dying of disease, malnutrition, wars, while the other prospered. We would all die together this time.

None knew when the enemy attack would take place. The Americans had warned that if the missiles were not dismantled and withdrawn, Cuba would be destroyed, but such threats were not new. The U.S. government had threatened the Cuban Revolution since its inception. What the presence of nuclear missiles in Cuba did change was the foreseeable outcome of confrontation. It no longer would be one sided.

Taken to the brink, we had not flinched. We had stood firm and defended our principles and not backed down before a bully. We were proud of ourselves and of the leader who had taken us to such heights of self-respect. None of us was prepared for the thunderbolt that came on the morning of October 28. The Russians had backed down. Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev had responded to U.S. intimidation by promising to withdraw the nuclear missiles. Worse, the Kremlin had agreed to demands to inspect inside Cuba. Castro belligerently refused.

Within weeks, our nuclear arsenal vanished, leaving us once more vulnerable to American attack.

Cubans were angry. Tension mounted. I, for one, despised the Soviet turncoats. Then we were told that mobilization had been scaled down and we were all to go home. We were bewildered and bitter. The Russians, we felt, had left Cuba unprotected to save their own skin. The Americans were now free to do with us as they pleased.

Like everyone, I never thought I would come out of the October crisis alive. When it was over, I shared the disappointment that gripped all Cubans. *Those Russian sons-of-bitches are a pack of cowardly traitors*, I thought. Our pride wounded, we returned to feeling like rats in a hole.

When the crisis was firmly behind us, emptiness and sadness overtook me again. I had been ready to die for country and for principles, but I was disaffected from the regime. I knew that I would not solve that contradiction for as long as I remained in Cuba. For the first time the thought of leaving my country and the Revolution entered my mind. If I am to die, I told myself, let it be for a cause I believe in.

25

GIFT FROM THE ORISHAS

I GREW UP BELIEVING that the Afro-Cuban religious fellowships my parents decried as devilish were a form of witchcraft. But now that they were under attack by the government I felt a deep kinship with them. Although not a devotee I knew I must defend them, for they stood for something that was in me.

"These are not merely religions," Rogelio Martínez Furé warned. "They are part of the entire cultural patrimony handed down to us."

I spent hours listening to Rogelio, who was by far the most erudite authority on Afro-Cuban culture. Between Walterio and Rogelio I learned more about my Afro-Cuban identity than I had throughout my entire life.

My concern about the persecutions being unleashed against the Afro-Cuban religions and the callous abuse of power drew me closer to the African brotherhoods. Thereafter I began searching elsewhere for a deeper understanding of these religions people called *Santería*, or "cult of the orishas."

I was surprised to find there was nothing at all fanatical about orisha worship. These deities had human attributes that made them accessible. Unlike Christianity, the African pantheon did not have one almighty God who was all good or a Devil who was all bad. Nor was there the notion of heaven and hell. The orishas had good and bad qualities, and one could communicate with them directly. I was drawn to that. My first encounter with that world of drumming, chanting, and dancing stirred something within me.

The government was attacking these African religious groups, persecuting the spiritual leaders. Out of defiance, I made a point of going to the *plantes*, ritual ceremonies. I learned about Shango, god of lightning and of war; Yemanjá, goddess of the sea; Oshun, goddess of sweet river waters; Oya, goddess of wind, the rainbow and its many colors; Ogun, god of smelting iron; the feared Elegua-Eshu, god of the crossroads. Each deity had its own characteristics, its own colors, its specific days, its particular food.

At the ceremonies, people fell into trances and were possessed by the gods and goddesses, the orishas. It moved me to see this happen. I would stay at the back, close my eyes, and let the drumming lift my soul in communion with the spirits of my ancestors. I began taking African students to the Afro-Cuban *plantes*.

Walking down the street one day I made eye contact with an exquisite girl. Caroline Laure Éluard was copper-toned with a beautiful moon face and slanted eyes. I knew she was a foreigner as soon as I saw her. She smiled at me and said something in Spanish, which she spoke with a charming accent. But she looked Oriental.

"My father is of mixed African and Chinese descent. He's from Guadeloupe, but my mother is French. I was born in France," she explained.

Caroline had never lived with her father. Her stepfather, the French poet Paul Éluard, was a well-known intellectual in Europe. I began hanging out with Caroline, who was very interested in Cuba and wanted to be a filmmaker. She showed me some impressive photographs of enormous ancient stone heads with black features.

"Where did you take these?" I asked.

"In Mexico," she replied. "They date from over three thousand years ago. These are the Olmec people."

My friend Marc Balin had spoken to me about the black founders of the Olmec civilization in Mexico and Central America, but I had never seen any photos. She gave me one, and from that point on we became friends.

One day I picked Caroline up at her hotel to take her to a ritual ground in one of the poor black neighborhoods in Old Havana. She was excited at hearing the drums as we approached the site of the ceremony. She had her camera with her, and although she said she would not take any pictures she was told she must hand it over. She did and we stood at the back, unable to get any closer because about two hundred people were there.

It was a Palo Mayombe ceremony. The devotees were beating drums, chanting and clapping. I wanted to be near the drums and the pounding of metal. Caroline held on to my arm as I pushed through the throng.

"*Palo, palo Mayombe. Palo, palo Mayombe*."

Then something quite unexpected happened. I stopped hearing the sounds around me. I felt Caroline's excitement as she gripped my hand tightly, just before I lost myself. All I remember is closing my eyes to listen to the chants and the drums. I have no recollection of what transpired. Caroline told me afterward.

It was as if I had stepped out of myself. Different parts of my body began contracting and I was breathing heavily, she recounted. The people around opened a path for me straight to where the *palero* was leading the singing, where drums were beating furiously. I was not conscious of what was happening. I jumped into the middle of the area where people were dancing. They made room for me, took off my shoes and my shirt. The drumming became very intense. I leaped to the floor and began to dance on my knees.

When I came to, some fifteen minutes later, I was sweating profusely, as if a bucket of water had been poured over me. My shirt and shoes were gone. My trousers were soaking. I was breathing heavily. Little by little, I recognized people around me as they clapped and chanted, touching me. They were happy.

I was taken to a back room where the *palero* explained that a spirit had come down and taken over my body to express him/herself. I was the horse that spirit had ridden. The spirit had chosen me to bring them

a message. I was the intermediary between humans made of flesh and bone and an immaterial being that used the human body and voice to commune with the gathering. The *palero*, whom they called Tata Nganga, put some objects in my hand and shook the maracas. He told me to come back to see him, for he knew I needed to talk to him. I was given back my shirt, shoes, and everything I had had in my possession upon falling into the trance. The drumming continued unabated and I went looking for Caroline.

Her face was transfixed when I found her. She said that had she not been there with me she would not have believed what she witnessed.

"What did you feel?" she asked.

"I felt something delicious." I had been conscious only of dancing, of nothing else.

"What language were you speaking?" she asked.

I was not aware of having spoken in any language.

"You were talking and singing in an *African* language," Caroline insisted.

I later learned that I had danced Mayombe dances from the old kingdom of the Congo, and had spoken to the *palero* in Kikongo, a tongue of the old Congo. How could I have spoken a language I did not know?

We were both silent when I took her back to her hotel. She was soon to return to France, but I would never forget her. She had shared that first encounter I had had with my own gods, when I had stepped out of myself and into someone other.

My trance experience led me back to the Folkloric Dance Ensemble. I wanted to know more about those dances and the rituals associated with them. As luck had it, some of the female dancers were in the midst of the dance of Yemanjá, goddess of the sea. They wore billowy blue dresses, their movements imitating the waves. Then came the dance of another goddess.

One girl was executing some of the most sensuous gestures I had ever seen. Her feet were agile. Her hands were delicate. She threw her

arms about her, stroking her breasts, thighs, buttocks. I was transfixed. She was performing the dance of Oshun, goddess of love, goddess of sex, of female fecundity. Her colors were copper and gold. I was awed.

As the drumming died down, the dancers went to change. My heart collapsed at the sight of the young woman who had danced Oshun. She was the spitting image of Marpessa Dawn, the actress from the Brazilian movie *Black Orpheus*, which had enthralled me in New York. As they were leaving, I walked out behind her.

"Excuse me," I said.

She turned, startled, biting her lip and looking at me with shining eyes.

"I didn't mean to frighten you. I just wanted to tell you I've never seen anyone dance as beautifully as you," I said.

Many moods shone on her deep-brown face—surprise, satisfaction. She glowed. I kept talking as I walked her out of the center. She did not object. I asked if I could accompany her.

"No, thank you," she replied bashfully.

She was very slim. Her diaphanous dress clung to her small, firm breasts and tight buttocks. I envisioned her naked.

"Are you sure I can't walk you home?"

"No, thank you."

"Will I see you again? I'll be coming tomorrow to watch."

"*Por qué no*?" Why not, she replied.

I went back to the rehearsals the next day. And the next. I would wait outside for "Marpessa" and walk her to the bus. Each day we walked more slowly. But she would not let me get on the bus or go to her house.

Marpessa was eighteen and had the saddest eyes. Even when laughing she seemed on the verge of tears. I loved everything about her, but she was unnervingly naive. Talk about politics seemed to bore her. The one topic that excited her was dance. Whenever she spoke it was of dancing. She knew nothing beyond that world. She admitted that her father did not want her going out with anyone. Her parents were very strict.

"I couldn't take someone like you home," she said.

"What do you mean 'someone like me'?"

"If my parents knew I was dating you, they would forbid me coming to dance."

I could not contemplate not seeing her, so I never attempted to find out where she lived. I saw Marpessa nearly every day. She deceived her parents into believing her dance classes went on until late in the evening while in fact she was with me. We would walk the seawall, watching the waves as we talked.

"Come, let's jump down," I said to her.

She trusted me. We had been going out for some weeks. She followed me, fearlessly. We went on the other side of the seawall to the sandy area, and made love for the first time.

As we lay together I told her, "I want you to stay with me."

"I want that, too," she replied.

I said I wanted to tell her something she must repeat to no one.

"I'm going to leave Cuba," I said. My mind was long made up.

"I want to take you with me. You can be a wonderful dancer and show the world all the things you love to do," I said.

Her soft fingers tightened around my hands. She was frightened. Her nails dug into my skin. She said not a word. We stayed there a long time, silent, watching the stars in the sky.

My feelings for Marpessa were overpowering. I felt I was with a real woman when we made love, yet she was very naïve. Although I liked her innocence, her disinterest in things political was frustrating. Since I could not discuss politics with her, she did not know the turmoil raging inside me.

With thoughts of leaving Cuba increasingly occupying me, I went back to the *palero*. "I've come to see you so you can tell me about my future."

"Your future or your flight?"

I was shaken by his words. "Which flight?" I asked.

"Nothing is opaque to the gods. You are going to cross the waters and go to Guinea."

"Guinea?" In Cuba, we used "Guinea" to describe the whole of Africa. My heart was jumping.

"You will go to the land of our forefathers."

He told me to return with particular items. I did as instructed. His rituals performed, he declared the way clear. Once in Guinea, I must offer a sacrifice to thank the orishas.

"Go in peace, my son, until the time comes," he said.

"How will I know when the time has come?"

"You will know."

By then I was bringing Marpessa to my place, where she stayed with me for long periods. I still lived on 17 and H streets, opposite the headquarters of the National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba (UNEAC). My little room was our paradise.

In the midst of my honeymoon, my boss Loynaz, who had become a sort of godfather to me, called me into his office. He had been looking for ways to improve my lot. The broad smile on his slender, bony face told me that he had good news. "You are being posted to a more important job with immediate effect," he said, relishing my look of surprise. When he told me where I was going, I could not believe it: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Cuba, and with a salary that doubled the two hundred pesos I was then earning at the Ministry of Communications!

Foreign Affairs was the cream of the crop, ranking alongside the Ministry of Interior in strategic importance, topping it in prestige. Of all ministries, Foreign Affairs was the most self-consciously elitist. Blacks were conspicuously absent apart from Vice-Minister Dr. Carlos Olivares, a former Communist Party leader of prerevolutionary days and nemesis of Walterio Carbonell. The regime's desperate need for people who commanded the English language had worked to my advantage.

"Now you've really got a break," Loynaz told me. "Don't mess it up!"

Mixed with the excitement of my new job, my head swirled with one thought: Marpessa. The next day when I saw her, I told her it was time to collect whatever she needed to move in with me. She was elated.

Then I opened up to her about everything, from my arrest to the four months of internment in the rehabilitation camp.

That was the first night she slept in my bed and we awoke together. In the following week she began smiling and was less apprehensive.

In the beginning whenever she heard the key in the door she had been afraid. Now she was more relaxed, but I knew that being confined in my room was getting to her. "Let's go and walk by the seawall," I said one evening.

The next night we went out again. After over a week of having her practically sequestered, we became bolder. She was now my companion; we would not live like fugitives anymore. We decided to live our lives in broad daylight.

One Saturday morning we were walking down Linea Street when a car suddenly pulled alongside us. A man jumped out.

"My brother!" she gasped.

We froze. Everything happened in a split second. He grabbed her by the wrist, dragged her into the car like a paper doll, and sped off. I remained rooted to the pavement, speechless. She had been snatched away in broad daylight.

The few people who had witnessed the incident came up to me, asking, "*Que pasa*?"

In shock, I walked away.

I could not sleep that night. The next day I was sure she would show up. She didn't. Each passing day diminished my conviction that Marpessa would resurface as magically as she had entered my life. Despite the short time our affair had lasted, she was my only tangible reality, my only link with the future. Now that, too, had gone. I tried to handle the pain crushing my chest by doing more than my share of voluntary work at Foreign Affairs. This was early in 1963.

At Foreign Affairs I was placed in the Asia-Oceania division. My job was to collate data and translate documents. For months I did everything to be inconspicuous. I had now learned to do as everyone else did:

lay low, mind my own business, and go along with what everyone else said and did. I was a model bureaucrat.

The regime that had ushered in the Revolution had changed all our lives for the better, had created improved conditions that were incomparable with the rotten Cuba where I had grown up. It made no sense to continue along the road of confrontation.

"No one else could commit such outrages against the Revolution and be not only walking the streets but promoted to a job at the Foreign Ministry," Frank said.

It was true: others had paid with their lives for lesser offences. I had been spared. I had been taken personally to the man who commanded Cuba's intelligence system, rather than disposed of summarily. Even I could not understand why. Moreover, I had not been sent to a hard-labor camp, as happened to those whom the Revolution judged as enemies and pitilessly destroyed.

I vowed to shut my big, black mouth, which had twice taken me within scent of the firing squad. I was alive. I had a good job. The future was bright again. It was time for me to count my blessings and bide my time.

26

ADIÓS, CUBA!

I HAD BEEN AT the Foreign Ministry for eight months. I had worked hard, shut my mouth, and done as I was told. The ministry was a white preserve. This time I kept my thoughts to myself. I was a model citizen; all the same, one day disaster hit.

As I was crossing the ministry's internal garden I came face-to-face with my nemesis, Manuel Otero, the ministry's chief of staff. The encounter was particularly unsettling because he was one of the officials who had flanked the minister of the interior, Ramiro Valdés Menéndez, just a year before when I was detailed. Otero, whom I had denounced as a racial bigot, was one of those directly responsible for my serving time in the rehabilitation camp.

He clearly did not know I had been reassigned to his lily-white fiefdom, for it was as if he had seen an apparition.

"What the hell are you doing here, you?" he blurted out.

"I work here," I said.

"You what?"

I was polite but firm; I was not looking for trouble but would not buckle under intimidation either.

Otero summoned me to his office.

After slamming the door, he banged a clenched fist on the table. I remained calm throughout his tirade of abuse. I knew whom I was dealing with. Otero was the most senior intelligence official within the Cuban Foreign Ministry; Ramiro Valdes's eye over foreign affairs. The man was dangerous. But I stood my ground: it was my right to be employed wherever the Revolution needed me.

"Not in *this* ministry!" he roared.

"Why not?" I asked, fully knowing the answer.

He banged the table and looked at me in amazement.

"I'll take care of you this time," he hissed. "Go back to your office and stay there," he thundered.

The nightmare had begun again.

I returned to my paper-cluttered desk, living my last minutes as a free man. There could be no escape. I knew I was doomed. Then as I sat in my office, breathing heavily, an inner voice whispered, "What are you waiting for? Escape! *Now*!"

But escape to where?

I eased myself from behind my desk, walked down the long corridor, holding my body ramrod straight, and darted through the front door, looking neither left nor right. I headed to the ministry's main entrance. Fortunately the person on guard duty, Dulce, was a friend. She stopped me as I was about to go through the gate.

"Where are you going, *compañero*?"

"To get a cup of coffee."

"You can't just go out. You need a pass," she reminded me.

"I'm only going around the corner, I'll be right back," I said with a reassuring smile.

"Don't get me into trouble," she admonished.

With the gates of the Foreign Ministry behind me, I turned the corner and walked toward the first cab I saw cruising. It was a spur-of-the-moment decision, for I had no idea where to hide. I instructed the driver to take me to Miramar, Havana's plush section. Knowing that G2 operatives drove most cabs, I purposely misled the driver.

The embassy of West Africa's Republic of Guinea was housed in one of the hacienda-like mansions the regime had confiscated and converted into schools, office buildings, ministries, embassies, and prisons. Ever since my talk with Tata Nganga, that embassy kept cropping up in my mind.

I got out of the taxi on *Quinta Avenida*, a wide two-way thoroughfare that bisected Miramar. I deceptively crossed to the opposite side and

walked up the avenue. When I felt sure the taxi had left the vicinity, I retraced my steps to where the cab had left me. Then I headed in the direction of the embassy of the Republic of Guinea.

The embassy was a two-story, white, colonial-style building. There were about twenty-two Guineans then studying in Cuba, the first Africans Cubans had ever seen. Over time, I cemented a friendship with them. They often visited their embassy, so I could be mistaken for one of them. I boldly walked toward the entrance. African embassies, as those of Communist countries, were lightly guarded; those countries entertained excellent relations with the Cuban government. Luck was on my side. Only two sentries were on duty, both black. There was no turning back.

"*Buenos dias, compañeros*," I greeted, smiling and using the most broken Spanish I could muster.

"*Buenos dias*," the men answered, waving me through with their automatic rifles. I breezed through the gates of the Guinean embassy as naturally as if I had been doing it all my life. I was on quite friendly terms with the chargé d'affaires, Mami Kouyate, who had introduced me to his colleague from Ghana, Ebenezer Akwete. Both were attuned to the nuances of race in Cuba. Akwete, especially, was resentful of the way the white Cuban authorities flaunted their arrogance. He and Kouyate were two people I had talked to quite openly, so I could expect their sympathy. Still, the important thing was to be inside the embassy grounds. I sighed with relief.

Kouyate's office, unlike the ambassador's, was on the second floor. His bachelor status also gave him living quarters in the mansion-turned-embassy. He came down the spiral marble staircase with a grin lighting his handsome face.

"What's up, *compañero*?" he said.

I told him I had to see the ambassador urgently.

"If he's here you'll see him," he said, jokingly.

But I was deadly earnest.

Guinea's newly appointed ambassador, Seydou Diallo, had the reputation of being more a tough political negotiator than a career diplo-

mat. A former trade union leader, he was a personal friend of Sékou Touré, Guinea's Marxist head of state. Though Cuba and Guinea were allies, their relationship had hit some turbulence. At the Foreign Ministry I was occasionally privy to information about Cuba's dealings with other states, so I knew of the tension. The problems dated from the 1962 October crisis. The missile warheads that the Russians had sent to Cuba had, at one point, to be transported by plane via Guinea. The Russians had acted without the consent of President Sékou Touré, who already disagreed with Castro's decision to let the Soviets use Cuba as a military base. Touré felt he had been made to look a fool and turned his ire on both Castro and Moscow. Ambassador Nabi Soumah Issa, a timid career diplomat whom Cuban officials had humiliated at will, was therefore recalled from his post in Havana and replaced with the tougher-than-nails Seydou Diallo.

Ambassador Diallo arrived on the island intent on reestablishing Guinean pride, so Cuban officials found themselves confronted with a diplomat who acted like a head of state. He demanded to be received by the highest officials: Prime Minister Fidel Castro, President Osvaldo Dorticós Torrado, Foreign Minister Raúl Roa. The message he brought was unambiguous: if the Cuban government wanted to break ties, the government of Guinea was ready.

"What's wrong?" asked Kouyate.

I didn't reply. Turbulent thoughts were swirling through my mind.

"What is troubling you?" he asked.

"I need to talk to you in private," I said.

He could see I was keyed up. He took me upstairs to his office.

I had met Mami Kouyate soon after my return to Cuba and a friendship had developed. After the previous ambassador's withdrawal, he had taken charge as acting ambassador until Diallo's arrival. He was now back in his role as chargé d'affaires.

"I've come to ask for political asylum," I said.

"You must be joking!" He looked at me in shock.

"I'm serious. My life is in danger. I need help."

I explained everything. My first arrest. The detention camp. Otero's threat. Kouyate sat behind his desk, his chin resting on both hands, incredulous.

"You know me, I need you to explain to the ambassador that I am not an enemy of the Revolution." All I needed was for Ambassador Diallo to agree to speak to me.

Anxiously, I scrutinized Kouyate's every expression, not knowing what to expect. He was intent and reflective. I broke the silence.

"I've just walked out of the Foreign Ministry; for all I know, the G2 are at my place. I'm not a counterrevolutionary. I just want to leave to Africa. I must see the ambassador."

"We can't give you asylum," he said, worry etched on his face. "This is very grave."

"Just do one thing for me: have the ambassador receive me. I need to see him."

He left me in his office, went downstairs, and after five long minutes came back. He stood impassively at the door and beckoned me.

"Let's go," he said.

I followed him downstairs to a huge, closed wooden door, sculpted in the Spanish colonial tradition. He knocked and opened the door to reveal the huge office of the ambassador, who, in turn, beckoned me in, smiling. Evidently, he was still in the dark.

"So you are the fellow who has helped our students?" he asked.

I nodded.

"That's good. We are all Africans and must help one another. What can I do for you?"

Unlike Kouyate, who dressed in jacket and tie, Ambassador Diallo wore full African attire: a flowing white robe drawn up regally over his shoulders; pointed, slip-on Muslim mules; and an embroidered cap. He had a resonant voice and a personality to match.

Kouyate quietly left the office. I was alone with Ambassador Diallo, the only man with authority to help me. I knew everything would change once I stated my true motive for being there. If I failed, I was doomed.

"Your Excellency, I want to leave Cuba and go to Africa for good. I have come to ask for political asylum."

"*Qu'est-ce que vous dites là?*" What are you saying? A look of stupefaction came over his face. He leaned toward me over his carved mahogany desk, bewilderment in his eyes.

"Your Excellency, I am not leaving this embassy alive. I have a pistol."

He stared at me in astonishment but without a trace of fear. "*Vous êtes fou*?"

"No, your Excellency, I am not crazy," I answered.

"You have come into this embassy armed with a pistol?"

"Your Excellency, I have no intention of threatening anyone in your embassy. The pistol is to turn on myself if I am refused diplomatic refuge. I can't let you hand me over to the Cuban authorities. I will kill myself right here on African soil!"

Ambassador Diallo studied my face for a sign that this whole thing was but an unpleasant joke. He joined his hands under his chin, looking me up and down in disbelief.

"Please let me explain, sir," I said, realizing my life depended on every word. I said I knew perfectly well that while in the embassy I was on Guinean soil. I understood what I was doing. I was not crazy.

"You are indeed crazy," he said, moving his leather chair away from his desk. "Only someone deranged would do such a thing."

"No, Your Excellency, I've just had enough of being harassed because of the color of my skin, because my ancestors were Africans."

I rolled up my trousers and pointed to the large wound on my leg. I explained the conditions in which it was almost amputated in the detention camp. His eyes were riveted on me. The muscles in his face were taut and his jaw moved almost imperceptibly, up and down, as if he were grinding his teeth.

"Ask any of your students, sir. They all know me. I'm not against the Revolution. I'm just tired of being kicked around for refusing to condone the racism in this country. I prefer to die here. It's either that or you take me out of this country—"

"We can't help you," he interrupted, sternly.

"Your Excellency, I know Guinea and Cuba are allies; that's why I'm here."

"Guinea is a Socialist state like Cuba. Guinea and Cuba are sister countries. Do you realize what you are doing?"

I noted a subtle change in his tone. At last he was talking to me.

"Your Excellency, I speak to you as an African. I'm in trouble with the authorities of my country because I am an African. I am proud of my origins."

I said that in Cuba blacks were not regarded as equals even by white revolutionaries. The Guinean students experienced Cuba's racism all the time.

"Your students are insulted, harassed, and laughed at daily. People ask them where their tails are," I told him. It was not uncommon for white Cubans to ask if Africans lived in trees. I spoke at length, and he knew that I told the truth.

"Your request is preposterous," he interjected.

"Your Excellency, you are my only hope. My life is in your hands. I won't let my African brothers hand me over to the Cuban authorities. My life is in danger."

My blood coursed through me like a raging river. I was sweating profusely despite the air-conditioning.

After a terrible silence he said, "I am going to ask you to do something. Leave my office and wait in the reception room." Sensing my wariness, he added, "I must consult with Kouyate. This is no small matter; relations between Cuba and Guinea are at stake."

He had held the same posture for a while now, left hand supporting his chin. Neither his voice nor face betrayed any emotion. I did not know what to think. Maybe he was about to trick me. Maybe he was going to call Cuban security to subdue me.

"Ambassador," I said forthrightly, "don't betray me."

"Africans don't betray," he replied. "I ask you to leave my office for a few minutes so that I can discuss this with my chargé d'affaires."

Something in his voice reassured me. In any case, I had no choice but to clutch that straw of hope. He stood up, went to the door, and opened it, shouting something to the staff. Kouyate immediately descended the stairs, spoke briefly with him, then escorted me up to his office, where I stayed while he conferred with the ambassador.

In that room my life unfurled before me. Thoughts ricocheted randomly. Central Lugareño . . . Mother . . . New York . . . Georgia . . . Fidel . . . Frank . . . Marpessa . . .

After what seemed hours, the door opened and Kouyate stood there, still looking grave.

"Let's go," he said.

I followed him back to the ambassador's office.

"Sit down," said the ambassador.

Diallo proceeded to give me a long lecture on Cuban-Guinean relations. Kouyate's head was bowed, his eyes fixed on the white marble floor.

"If I announce that I am giving you asylum in this embassy, the Cubans will not let you leave Cuba," Diallo explained. "Do you know what happens when a government refuses to grant someone safe conduct?" he asked.

It had not occurred to me that I could remain holed up in the embassy for the next ten, twenty years, rotting away. But the way he had said "the Cubans" renewed my hope.

"Let me deal with this," he stated authoritatively. "If you want to leave Cuba and this embassy alive, then let me handle it my way."

"What way is that, Your Excellency?"

He said he would not file an asylum request with the Cuban authorities; that was not the thing to do. He would inform them that I was in the embassy and refused to leave.

"I will take you under my personal protection and tell the authorities I have decided to hire you as a translator. That's the only way to leave Cuba alive."

I could not believe what I was hearing.

"From now on, you must follow my instructions."

"Your Excellency, you are a true human being," I said, fighting back tears.

"Trust me! You have no alternative," he added.

"Your Excellency, I trust you," I replied.

"Now, put your pistol on my desk," he said softly.

Was this a trap to disarm me so that security could remove me from the embassy? My inner voice said *Trust him*. I had no choice.

"Your Excellency, I have no weapon," I confessed.

His eyes flashed with astonishment.

"Forgive me, sir, for having lied to you." I explained that my deception was to save my life. Would he have given me a chance to speak, had he thought I was unarmed?

"*Monsieur, monsieur*!" he exclaimed, shaking his head.

I knew then that I had won. The Guinean embassy became my home.

Within days of my arrival things changed. Security outside the embassy gate was reinforced. The ambassador had informed the Foreign Ministry of my presence there. Every day I looked out of my window, watching the Cuban sentries.

My old feelings of disconnectedness with the country of my birth had resurfaced. I found myself referring to my compatriots as "the Cubans" or "them." I could have been born on another planet, undefined in time or space. I had searched for an identity through the Revolution and failed. I was not even sorry. I was just exhausted.

Through Kouyate I sent a message to my brother Frank, asking him to call me at the embassy. He finally rang from a public phone.

"So you've done it," he began.

"Done what, Frank?"

"Betrayed the Revolution."

I explained what had happened at the Foreign Ministry with Otero. "I'm running for my life. Do you really think I am a traitor, an enemy of the Revolution?"

"If you stay in there, you'll certainly become one. The rumor is already out."

"Do you know any other way that would have saved my life?"

"Have you thought of the embarrassment you're causing? A black person holed up in an *African* embassy?"

At the time, many white Cubans were storming the Latin American embassies. Heavily guarded as the embassies were, nothing deterred the stream of people trying to scale the walls and break down the locked gates. Most were mowed down before they could climb the high walls that separated them from their relatives in Miami. I was not like them; neither the reasons nor the circumstances were comparable.

"I came to an African embassy because I am an African and a revolutionary," I said.

I needed him to contact Walterio Carbonell, Marc Balin, a few other friends. Suddenly, Frank switched to speaking in our childhood Jamaica talk. He made me understand he would call from another phone when he could. I knew the embassy's phone was tapped, as were other embassies.

The next day, the people I had asked Frank to reach began calling me. Word was circulating that someone black was holed up in the Guinean embassy. The ambassador called me to his office. The Cuban authorities were demanding I leave. I refused. I would never go back to the hell I had known for the past three years. He understood.

Ambassador Diallo tactfully brought up my situation during a meeting with the Cuban foreign minister, Raul Roa. I had explained everything in detail to him; he knew I had not simply deserted my post, which was insignificant in the context of that ministry. The ambassador was in my corner. He had his government's authorization to get me to Guinea. He would not process my case officially as a request for asylum since that would hurt the Cuban Revolution as well as Guinea. His line of argument with the Cuban authorities was impeccable. "All I ask is that we solve this in an intelligent manner," Diallo had told them.

Throughout September and October 1963, I was at ease living at the embassy, sometimes forgetting my circumstances for being there. In the evenings, Kouyate would entertain me by strumming his guitar and

singing melancholic songs in his country's many languages. I was confident something would work out, but I knew life could not continue like this indefinitely. I got along well with the embassy staff and became quite friendly with Ambassador Diallo, who kept me abreast of the situation. He urged me to have confidence in him. There was not much else I could do. At times, I was very tense and Ambassador Diallo would try to reassure me.

"The future is ahead," he would say.

Weeks passed, but I kept in touch with Walterio Carbonell, Marc Balin, and a few other friends, who called regularly.

"Don't leave that embassy. You wouldn't last long," one friend warned.

How well did I know that!

I asked my friends to go to the dance school to track down Marpessa. No one knew where she was. I ached from missing her. What was the purpose of leaving if I couldn't leave with her? At times, I felt like ending it all, walking out of the embassy and handing myself over to the authorities. But those depressed moments were fleeting. My confidence in the ambassador was unshakable; he would get me out of Cuba safely.

Diallo worked at a feverish pace on my case. He networked with Ebenezer Akwete, the Ghanaian chargé d'affaires. Ghana had a nonresident ambassador to Cuba, Jaja Wachukwo, who was also ambassador to the United States, Cuba, and Mexico, based in America. As Ghana's resident representative in Cuba, Akwete had considerable power. Diallo also networked with the ambassador from Egypt.

One morning, toward the end of October, Diallo sent for me. His face was unusually animated. By then, he was using my first name and I called him "Excellency," which was much more familiar than "Your Excellency." He was smiling broadly.

"You are going to leave Cuba and you are going directly to Africa."

I was floored. "Excellency, are you kidding?"

"Yesterday I talked with the Foreign Ministry people. They have agreed for you to leave for Guinea. You will be given an eight-month authorization in your passport."

Diallo had argued that I had been traumatized by a few bad experiences since returning to Cuba; they must take that into consideration. I needed to cool off. I was to go to Guinea for study purposes, gather data during eight months in Africa, then return to Cuba to write a book on the *Parti Démocratique de Guinée*, Guinea's ruling and only political party. It worked.

"I have convinced them this is what you really want to do: experience life in Guinea and write about it. I told them this is a good thing and will also give you time to cool off."

I was elated.

"There are some technicalities to take care of," he said. The Ministry of the Interior would deliver written authorization for my departure, so I had to go there to get it. The minute I heard that, I froze. Anything could happen at G2 headquarters. Diallo said he had instructed Kouyate to go with me so the papers could be processed without delay. I would be taken to the ministry in the embassy car. He coached me on what to say. I was to ask State Security for a document confirming that I was authorized to leave Cuba and return. I should speak of my work-study plans and intention to return to Cuba within eight months. That, he said, would show my good faith.

"You must be natural and not act as if you are on the run. I've been in difficult situations and I know how to handle this kind of matter politically," he said.

His instructions reassured me. I had rejected the option of leaving by plane and going to Spain or elsewhere in Europe via Czechoslovakia. The African diplomats had therefore arranged for me to travel directly to Egypt on a Yugoslav ship, the *Cetinje*, which carried sugar to Egypt from Cuba. It would leave toward the end of October from the port of Havana. The Egyptian ambassador had issued me a visa. From Cairo, Egypt, I would board a plane for Conakry, Guinea's capital.

One morning Mami Kouyate and I were driven in a diplomatic car from the embassy grounds to the Ministry of the Interior, where junior officials met us. They processed my passport, giving me an eight-month

authorization to leave for Guinea. Then I asked for an official letter, as the ambassador had advised. It was given without fuss. The letter bore the stamp of the Ministry of the Interior and stated that I was not leaving Cuba for political reasons. I could hardly believe it. That statement negated the reasons for my two arrests! It was proof that the authorities knew very well that I had never been a counterrevolutionary.

Things moved quickly after that. Frank packed my books and snapshots and delivered the suitcase to the embassy along with a few items of clothing. Having my books with me reinforced my conviction that I was going to leave Cuba. The photographs were special; among them was a beautiful picture of my mother to which I was much attached.

Frank was relieved that I was going to Guinea, a Marxist country and a Cuban ally. He did not want it said he had a brother who was counterrevolutionary.

The last time I spoke to Walterio his words left an indelible imprint. "My place is here. I must stay and face this situation. I will never leave this country," he said. I told him I understood. "When you get out, you'll have to make choices. Either to forget it all, because you'll be so glad to be out of this situation. Or to assume responsibility for letting people outside know what's really going on here." He asked me not to betray the Revolution, nor side with Cuba's enemies.

"*Maestro*, I will not forget anything you have taught me. And I will never betray my own people," I told him. He said that if I ever made it to France, I should contact three people to inform them of the situation in Cuba: Aimé Césaire, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Gisèle Halimi, a lawyer. "By all means you must talk to Aimé Césaire," he insisted.

The previous year, Walterio had made me read a pamphlet by Césaire. *Open Letter to Maurice Thorez* was Césaire's 1958 resignation letter from the French Communist Party, addressed to its all-powerful leader. The document stated that European Communists were as paternalistic and racist as capitalists, accusing them of talking about brotherhood but practicing a form of colonialism. Césaire would not accept that his race be treated as the junior brother of the white race; his under-

standing of communism was total equality between all races. That explosive letter greatly impressed me.

I assured Walterio, "I promise that I will seek out those people."

We both knew that our conversation was being monitored.

"Good luck, my brother. May our ancestors open a path for you!"

That was the last time I heard from Walterio Carbonell.

THE *CETINJE*'S SAILING DATE changed three times. When the day was finally set, I was told the ship would depart from the port of Cárdenas, in Matanzas province, some 150 kilometers from Havana. That was alarming news. It meant I would have to travel all that distance on my own. That was folly.

"Excellency, I am not going to Cárdenas to board that ship." I explained that Cárdenas was far from Havana, in another province. "Do me one last favor, please. You've come this far with me and I can never repay you. But please do one last thing for me. I want you to escort me to the ship personally."

He looked at me disapprovingly. "If I, the ambassador of Guinea, did such a thing it would be interpreted as mistrusting the word of the Cuban authorities."

He would not budge. An arrangement had been found to prevent the situation developing into a scandal. "None of us want that," he said.

"Excellency, I take your point, but I don't trust those people," I said. Could the chargé d'affaires go with me?

He sighed, placed his hands on his desk and pushed his chair back.

"*Vraiment*, what will satisfy you?" He shook his head, but agreed. "Kouyate will not leave your side until you have boarded ship. Is that good enough for you?"

I went to hug him. I knew he felt my gratitude, but he held his own feelings in check. The man responsible for saving my life waved me away and told me to go with the peace of God. He said he would send a confidential letter to the Guinean ambassador in Cairo, Egypt, who was his relative.

I traveled to Cárdenas in the diplomatic car with Mami Kouyate himself at the steering wheel. The ship's captain would be paid two hundred U.S. dollars for my transportation, which the ambassador had given to Kouyate. The boat would not leave until that evening, so I spent all day with Kouyate.

At one point he looked at me and laughed. "You see; everything is OK. There is no reason to be apprehensive."

At five o'clock, my three pieces of luggage were placed on the ship. Among my books, clothes, and personal papers, I slid in the negatives of the pictures taken of me with Fidel, Almeida, and other Cuban officials at the Hotel Theresa in Harlem in 1960. Those memories were all I had left of a beautiful dream. At last, one of the ship's officers told us it was time to go.

Mami Kouyate bid me farewell. We would see each other in Conakry, Guinea's capital. He planned to be there within months. I was deeply grateful for all he had done.

"One more thing. Don't go until the ship leaves," I said.

"OK," he replied, chuckling.

I walked up the gangway and boarded the ship. I went to my cabin and locked the door. I was about to leave Cuba, yet I felt fear. An hour passed and the ship had not moved. Was Kouyate still out there or had he left despite his promise? Toward six o'clock, there was an insistent knock on my door.

"Mr. Moore, please open," said one of the ship's officers in English.

I struggled to maintain control. I unbolted the lock. In the doorway, behind the officer, stood four uniformed members of the Ministry of the Interior, three of them as dark skinned as me. Not one of them cracked a smile. My worst fears had materialized. I knew why they had come.

"Your passport!" said the officer who seemed in command.

I gave it to him. I felt a churning in the pit of my stomach.

"You have no authorization to leave Cuba," he said, raising his voice.

"I am not leaving illegally," I retorted.

The ship's captain came over, looking worried. He told them everything was in order, but the officer ordered my luggage taken off. The captain firmly but calmly explained that I was leaving Cuba legally and my passport had an entry visa for Egypt, as well as an exit stamp from the Ministry of the Interior. The proper arrangements for my travel had been made by the ambassadors of Guinea and Egypt themselves.

The officer said I must go with them.

"Comrade Officer, I'm going to Guinea on a study mission. The trip was authorized by the Ministry of the Interior," I protested meekly.

The officer maintained the stony expression I associated with the security police. "You have no authorization to leave Cuba," he repeated in a metallic voice.

"I have a letter of authorization from the Ministry of the Interior," I said, regaining my composure.

"What letter?" he snarled.

I produced it. The officer glanced dismissively at it.

Luckily, the captain had instructed one of his officers to alert the Guinean diplomat and Mami Kouyate rushed aboard, furious. "What is happening? This man is going to my country to study," he said in flawless Spanish.

Realizing an African diplomat was addressing him, the officer changed his tone. He told the chargé d'affaires it was State Security's responsibility to flush out stowaways; I was the only person on board who was not a Yugoslav. Kouyate reiterated that my trip to Guinea had been officially cleared and was legitimate. A consensus was quickly reached; I was handed back my passport and the Ministry of Interior's letter. As the party readied to disembark, the officer in command took one last look at me, a mixture of condescension and contempt in his eyes.

"*Hasta la vista*, *compañero!*" he said. See you later, comrade!

The words sounded threatening to my ears.

"*Hasta la vista*," I replied.

The officers left; the Guinean chargé d'affaires stayed.

"*Ça va maintenant.* It was a misunderstanding," Mami said, smiling again.

He hugged me good-bye once more. As soon as he had left, I bolted my cabin door. My mind raced a mile a minute as I foresaw the worst. Security officials might yet seize me within Cuban waters, a few kilometers from the coast. Who would ever know?

I heard a loud whistle, followed by a hoarse bullhorn, and the ship pulled out. Feeling its motion, I closed my eyes. Again, anxiety overtook me. I opened one of my suitcases to find something to read. Some time ago I had bought a book from a peddler in Old Havana. It caught my eye because its cover depicted a black man and a white woman. Its title was *If He Hollers, Let Him Go*, by Chester Himes, the story of an interracial relationship during World War II. I had read it three times but I began rereading.

Half an hour later, I heard a knock on the door. I did not open.

"Mr. Moore, we are in international waters," announced one of the ship's officers.

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely sure. You are a free man now."

I rushed onto the deck.

An aircraft made a pass over the ship and flew back several times as if inspecting it. Across the plane's wide fuselage was written UNITED STATES AIR FORCE. That U.S. reconnaissance plane was confirmation I was in international waters. I watched it make a final dip before going on its way.

I stayed on deck for a long time.

As I tried to read into my future, something like fear crept into me. It was not so much a fear of the future, as the uneasy feeling of not knowing in which direction I was now headed. I was free to go wherever I willed, yet I felt utterly alone and vulnerable. I had gained my freedom, but lost my country. The Revolution was my sole compass in life. Without it I felt orphaned.

Before me, turquoise-blue waves swelled and rolled, breaking the smooth expanse of sea. My recollections ebbed and flowed as the shoreline of my brave island receded into a blood-red horizon. I crossed my arms over my chest and gave thanks to Elegua, master of the crossroads and pathways. I had regained my freedom to speak, to think, to act. But what lay ahead?

27

FROZEN FEAR

One month later, in December 1963, the Yugoslav freighter docked in Alexandria, Egypt. From there, I used up half of the twenty dollars I had to get to Cairo, Egypt's capital. I was not worried because I expected to leave immediately for Guinea.

But the Guinean ambassador shocked me with the news that if I ever set foot in Conakry, I would be sent back to Cuba. He explained that his cousin, Diallo Seydou, had used a stratagem to get me out of the country, letting the Cuban authorities believe I was welcome in Guinea. However, this was not the case. I was vigorously discouraged from proceeding there, both for his sake and mine. So I was stranded in Cairo with ten dollars in my pocket and a passport that would expire in eight months.

I began job hunting and eventually landed work as translator with an Angolan liberation movement headed by nationalist Marxist Jonas Malheiro Savimbi and supported by the Egyptian and Chinese governments. Savimbi, whose movement had broken off from a larger U.S.-backed faction based in the Congo, was readying a new guerrilla front against the Portuguese, so I signed up for the project. I was to train in China so the Angolans changed my name and issued me a legitimate Tunisian passport; at the time Tunisia also backed Savimbi. My nationality was declared Angolan and my name changed to "Carlos Silankango." I became just another Angolan refugee.

After eight months I was still in Cairo and my Cuban passport had expired. I was faced with a dilemma. Savimbi's plans were running into obstacles and I had been unable to secure a residency permit in Egypt.

I decided to move on to Europe. At the airport Egyptian Immigration declined my brand-new Tunisian passport since it bore no entry visa. I was forced to produce my Cuban passport. But the Tunisian consular authorities had stamped "Cancelled" on every page. The Tunisian passport was confiscated and I was arrested for "attempting to leave the country illegally."

Thrown into an overcrowded cell in a filthy, sinister prison, I shared quarters with Muslim Brotherhood activists and Communist Party cadres, many bound for execution. For three weeks, I was interrogated daily. Who was I? Charles Moore Wedderburn, Cuban? Or Carlos Silankango, Angolan? Why the false Tunisian passport?

I could well have rotted in those catacombs but for the intervention of Dr. Mohamed Abdul Aziz Iss-Hak, the senior Foreign Ministry official for whom I had served as interpreter in Cuba. Dr. Aziz Iss-Hak had been instrumental in helping me secure my visa to Egypt. It was through his recommendation that I landed a job with the Angolans. Finally satisfied that my year in Egypt had been spent in legitimate activities, the Egyptians released me, but I was ordered to sort out my passport problems with the Cuban embassy.

The Cuban chargé d'affaires, Valdés Valdés, was livid when he heard my story. Far from going to Guinea, I had spent nine months in Cairo without reporting to the embassy. I was also involved with the wrong African liberation movement, since at the time Che Guevara was the only Cuban leader backing the Maoist faction led by Jonas Savimbi. Havana supported the pro-Soviet rival Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA).

"You will have no help from us except an immediate return to Cuba," Valdés said, coldly.

Returning to the country I had just fled was out of the question. So I went to the Egyptian authorities, who gave me the option of leaving in whichever direction I pleased, on my Cuban passport. But how would any immigration official accept a passport stamped "Cancelled" on every page? Even so, I opted for that risky option.

The Egyptian immigration officers hurried me on my way to Italy. The Italians gave me fifteen days to move on to Switzerland. The Swiss gave me fifteen days to move on to France. French immigration authorities hesitated, then admitted me for three months on condition that I obtain a new passport from the Cuban embassy and move on. As it turned out, I was to remain on metropolitan French soil for thirteen years.

IT WAS COLD IN France. Luckily, I found shelter with an Angolan refugee, Pedro Felipe, to whom I had been referred. He had fled Angola the previous year and been granted asylum in France, where he was studying at the university. Pedro lived in a tiny, poorly heated student room in a working-class Parisian neighborhood. At night, I slept on a thin mattress on the floor. During the day I roamed the streets in search of a job.

Through Pedro I met a number of students from Africa, Martinique, and Guadeloupe. These generous people in turn introduced me to some French students who also served as benefactors. I stayed in a succession of student rooms, living off the kindness of others.

I conveyed my preoccupation—the race question under the Revolution in Cuba—to anyone who would listen. I was convinced the regime's policies would create a new type of inferior black citizen, who, however revolutionary, would still be without political power and relegated to cultural limbo. The Revolution's claim that racism had been eradicated was simply untrue. Everyone was shocked.

"I don't want to believe what you're saying, but my gut feeling is that you're not lying," philosopher and poet Aimé Césaire said to me.

In April 1964, I published my views in *Présence Africaine*, the internationally respected Paris-based review founded in the 1940s by the Senegalese Alioune Diop, with the help of Césaire from Martinque, father of the negritude movement, Léon Damas from French Guyana, and Léopold Sédar Senghor from Senegal. "Cuba: The Untold Story" was stylistically crude, but the facts it contained were solid enough to shock prevalent opinion. It propounded that communism in Cuba was

racially paternalistic and that the pattern of oppression of blacks, although masked, persisted under Castro.

Knowledge of my polemical essay leaked to the Cuban authorities in Paris months ahead of publication. Pro-Castro sympathizers led by the staunch leftist Léon Damas denounced me as an agent of the Americans. They warned the Cuban embassy about the article. Carlos Franqui, editor-in-chief of the regime's newspaper, *Revolución*, who was on a European tour, beseeched *Présence Africaine* to abort the publication—unsuccessfully, thanks to Diop's and Césaire's courageous decision.

In January 1965, I was summoned to the Cuban embassy in Paris and threatened with the loss of my citizenship. I knew the consequences of publicly criticizing Castro and his regime at the zenith of its glory, but morally there was no other recourse. I refused to budge. Cuba lost no time in proclaiming me a counterrevolutionary even before the piece in *Présence Africaine* appeared, and deprived me of my passport.

Castro's regime portrayed me at first as an opportunist and a liar in search of instant fame; someone who was bent on making a name for himself abroad by slandering a Revolution that had erradicated racism. My charges were groundless. The regime's counteraccusations escalated rapidly into a full-blown campaign to destroy my character. Soon my name would be routinely associated with the CIA.

I was trapped in a rumor campaign. People went out of their way to avoid me. I was ostracized everywhere. I was encircled by the Cuban regime and under the watch of its intelligence abroad. Passportless, I could go nowhere.

At the time "Cuba: The Untold Story" appeared, the Castro regime was playing host to two prominent black exiles: the American civil rights hero Robert Williams and the Marxist Haitian writer René Depestre. When the Cuban authorities attempted unsuccessfully to pressure Walterio Carbonell into writing a rebuttal, they approached Williams and Depestre. Williams refused; Depestre accepted.

René Depestre's "Letter from Cuba on the Imperialism of Bad Faith" was an all-out attack on my charges and my person. It circulated

in three languages, distributed by Cuba's embassies. Written by a black intellectual of international repute, it stung and ripped at my reputation. People such as Aimé Césaire, Alioune Diop, and Cheikh Anta Diop supported me; they had all experienced vilification by the left for defending controversial positions. I believe their prestige deterred the regime from going to greater extremes in dealing with me in that early period.

I remember the utter solitude of those cold, depressing times.

In the midst of that spiraling imbroglio, I was precipitated into the most serious crisis I would face in all my years of exile. It was connected with the assassination of Malcolm X on February 21, 1965.

He had freshly made a spectacular break from the Black Muslims and was embroiled in a bitter struggle with its leadership. Having lost his political base, he attempted to connect with the international revolutionary movement. I was under the gun by the Cuban regime and was willing to adopt any cause that would relegitimize me politically. When Malcolm stopped over in Paris in November 1964 after a tour of Africa, we were both boxed into a dangerous corner.

The Congolese national liberation drive was in full swing after the murder of Patrice Lumumba, with whom Malcolm identified viscerally, as did I. Lumumba's followers had set up with China's help a rebel People's Republic of the Congo in their Stanleyville (Kisangani) stronghold, and Malcolm X felt the African diaspora was duty bound to help them. We saw eye to eye. So when he requested my help in a wide-ranging plan to assist the Congolese rebels, I agreed.

I had been in France only a month and a half when I decided to involve myself with Malcolm's daring project. Despite my own fragile position there, I began recruiting volunteers with military and medical expertise to assist the Lumumbist insurrection, fully aware that I was opening myself to extreme danger. Malcolm was a marked man. Caution weighed on the side of neutrality. But how to remain neutral when Malcolm himself was courting such danger? As happened time and again in my life, I warded off my fear by putting my life on the line.

My world was shattered on February 21, 1965, when the terrible news of Malcolm's assassination in New York was broadcast internationally. I loved and respected Bother Malcolm. I would have readily given my life to protect his. He had been one of my most solid defenders against the Castro regime. The same unfathomable despair had engulfed me four years earlier when Lumumba's killing was announced. Yet before I could recover, I faced another shock: my name had cropped up in rumors insinuating that I might have been in league with Malcolm's murderers.

In a bundle of untrue statements paraded as fact, three journalists published incriminating reports stating that I was meant to have warned Malcolm about an assassination threat and failed to do so. It was heavily implied that I withheld the supposed warning and therefore might have been in league with his assassins. I should be investigated by an ad hoc international commission!

The first news of this kind appeared in Britain under the by-line of Richard Gibson, the black American journalist who cofounded the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC), whom I knew as a staunch defender of the Revolution. The article refuted the widely held opinion that French racism and American pressures were responsible for Malcolm X's ban and expulsion from France in mid-February 1965 when he was to have spoken at a rally in Paris. Gibson suggested that Malcolm had been felled by an international plot, obliquely implying it may have involved the very people he trusted in Paris:

> (I)t was neither racialism nor occult U.S. Government pressure that prompted the French refusal. They feared that Malcolm X would be shot down in Paris while addressing that meeting, just as he was later to be killed in New York . . . *If the French Security Police are now interrogating the Cuban exile Carlos Moore and members of the Afro-American community in Paris . . . it may well be that the French would like to know why Malcolm X never received any warning of the seriousness of the threat to his life in Paris that some of these people should have transmitted to him.* This

> is only one of the many mysteries surrounding the assassination . . . and it can rightly be wondered if the world will ever learn the truth about the murder of Malcolm X and those responsible for it.

I was stupefied. Gibson's report was pure fabrication.

Within weeks, similar charges appeared again in print, and in greater detail, on the other side of the globe, in Jakarta, Indonesia, where an Afro-Asian summit was about to be held. This second report seemed to have been inspired by the same sources as the first. In a lenghty news item signed by journalists William Worthy and Lionel Morrison, that country's chief newspaper, *Indonesian Herald*, reported the following:

> Since his death, a possibly significant detail about Malcolm's abortive trip to Paris has come to light, but it has not hitherto been published. Friends of Malcolm in France, *having grounds for fearing an attempt on his life, entrusted to a young Afro-Cuban living in Europe the task of contacting Malcolm in London and warning him not to take the plane to Paris. Intentionally or unintentionally, the message never reached Malcolm.* Some months earlier, this Afro-Cuban had left Cuba after having had an argument, he claimed, with Fidel Castro over what he said was still-lingering racial discrimination. Any international investigation should check into *the present associations of the Afro-Cuban to determine whether or not he has any connection with Cuban counterrevolutionaries.*

I did not know Lionel Morrison, a South African journalist. But I was well acquainted with the journalist William Worthy. Like Gibson, I knew him to be an outspoken defender of the Castro regime, linked to the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC) and to other Marxist causes. At the time, I had no cause to suspect their motives for writing such falsehoods.

I was in total disarray.

Being linked with machinations leading to the assassination of one of the most popular and beloved black leaders of the twentieth century was an experience beyond anything I can put into words. Shock, grief, anger, and desperation besieged me in those weeks and months after Malcolm's killing. Even today I cannot recount that page of my life without feeling pain. My name was circulating on several continents in the worst possible circumstances and I had no way to defend myself.

The allegations about me created great confusion among Malcolm supporters, especially among people who had befriended me in my Harlem days. On the strength of the rumors, many former friends denounced me as a counterrevolutionary who had betrayed Malcolm's trust. A host of courageous people, including Malcolm's widow, Betty Shabazz, and her friend Patricia Robinson Murphy, whose family owned the influential newspaper the *Baltimore Afro-American*, took up my defense. Still, the black left in America pronounced me an agent of the CIA.

Why were these journalists making allegations that placed me on an international hit list? Every line of their published reports was untrue as far as it related to me. Given my fresh entanglement with Cuba, my first reaction was to suspect the heavy hand of Cuban intelligence. My suspicion grew when Robert Williams, the black U.S. leader exiled in Cuba, was also caught up in the web of insinuations. He suspected both the FBI and Cuban intelligence of trying to ruin him politically.

At the time, Williams was openly sparring with the Cuban authorities over a number of issues, including racism under the Revolution. The conflict escalated, and in 1965 he fled to China, where he was welcomed with asylum. The Sino-Soviet conflict was raging and Cuba had sided with the Russians against the Maoists.

From China, Williams accused the Cuban regime of being deceptively manipulative. He affirmed that racism in Cuba not only existed but was worsening because of the regime's refusal to address it. He fur-

ther accused Cuban intelligence of faking documents to discredit him. One of these, a bitter attack on president Mao Tse-tung, placed him in direct conflict with his Chinese hosts. The document turned out to be a master forgery by Cuban intelligence.

In the midst of the chaos surrounding the assassination, A. Peter Bailey, editor-in-chief of Malcolm's newspaper, *The Black Lash*, arrived in Paris with the worst news. Peter, very depressed because of the assassination, decided to leave the United States for a while. The OAAU was being ripped to pieces, and the lives of many of those who had been close to Malcolm were being threatened; the federal government was cracking down on them. It was clear that the FBI had infiltrated the organization and its agents provocateurs were creating havoc. Everyone was paranoid.

With the rumors flying around me, my life was also in danger. I had no passport. I was a sitting duck. When Peter left a few days after telling me the news, I had already resigned myself to my fate.

The allegations about my supposed role in the events leading up to Malcolm's assassination played right into the hands of the French secret police. They had been monitoring my recruitment activities for Malcolm's movement among French nationals from Guadeloupe and Martinique. Moreover, they suspected me of collusion with the *Groupement des Organisations Nationalistes Guadeloupéennes* (GONG), a pro-independence movement, some of whose sympathizers I had approached for Malcolm's African project. They inquired about possible links with either Cuban or American intelligence. I had none. I was wholly ignorant of what could have motivated Gibson's, Morrison's, or Worthy's allegations.

The police notified me that I would be expelled within twenty-four hours. Statements I had made at a public rally to protest Malcolm's expulsion from France, on February 9, 1965, twelve days before his assassination in New York, were considered an insult to France's head of state, Charles de Gaulle. I had interfered in the internal affairs of France by attacking its foreign policy, they said, and had engaged in subversive

activities on French soil. Yet I had no travel documents; Cuba had revoked my passport. All the same, the French were adamant—I must leave. As it happened, France was to be stuck with me.

That year of 1965, I was in a real fix.

A decade later, reviewing these events with Malcolm's widow, Betty Shabazz, I understood the extent to which I had been in deep jeopardy. In the aftermath of Malcolm's killing, several people associated with him perished in unusual circumstances, she said. Many who were close to her husband were tainted by all sorts of rumours that tore through the movement he had created. Eventually she mistrusted almost everyone. She pointed out that not long after the murder, the FBI successfully implemented an operation known as COINTELPRO against the Black Power movement. Over the years, she said, she had come to believe the FBI engineered the confusion to start an internecine struggle among Malcolm's followers.

With the years has come a much more nuanced understanding of what those hellish days meant. Betty Shabazz's testimony did much to alter my perception of the events into which I was sucked after the assassination. Immediately after Malcolm's killing, Africa was swept by a wave of coups d'état and political assassinations that decapitated the nationalist leadership. In the United States, too, the chief black leaders were pitilessly eliminated and radical black movements crushed. The black world was being brutally deprived of its finest leaders. These blows betokened a highly organized and powerful enemy with global outreach.

I now incline toward fitting what happened into a wider, global picture in which the Castro regime loses a central role. The United States' hand was all too evident. Cuban intelligence, it appears, merely piggybacked on a much larger operation mounted concurrently against the African liberation movements and the Black Power movement in America. What Cuba did do was use the allegations against me for its own purposes, to blunt my charges against the regime. But it does not seem to have originated them.

The suspicions sown around my name had a lasting impact on my political and personal life. A pattern was being set for what was to come, as over and again I would have to bear up to the increasingly vindictive blows of the Cuban regime while attempting to escape entrapment by American and French intelligence. I was still untested in my own eyes; I had no guarantee that I could muster enough strength to prevent myself unraveling at the seams.

Had the French succeeded in expelling me I would not have met the soft-spoken, olive-skinned, American woman who would shortly marry me and bear my son. Shawna, a follower of Malcolm X, had made a stopover in Paris on her way to West Africa. The love that bloomed between us made her remain in France and share a life that would bring her nothing but hardship and danger.

I was viscerally in love with Shawna. Our marriage and the birth of our son a year later, in 1966, brought light and warmth into my life. But continual harassment from Cuba, compounded with that of the French secret police, placed a heavy strain on our lives from the start. For ten years we could not leave Paris. The first year, my temporary residency permit expired every fifteen days; the second year, every month; year three, every three months. For those six years I was not allowed to work. Now and then I did clandestine odd jobs, but those rare and insignificant moments only helped me uphold a semblance of dignity before my wife and myself. Shawna was the breadwinner; I felt crushed by that.

One late evening in August 1967, Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Ture) and two trusted colleagues knocked softly on my door. It was the heyday of the U.S. Black Power upheaval and his name was making headlines. Stokely, who had popularized the term "Black Power" and given it political definition, was returning from a well-publicized visit to Cuba, attending the summit of the Organization for Latin American Solidarity (OLAS). Fidel Castro praised him during an emotional mass rally in Havana as an exemplary revolutionary, and to the thun-

derous applause of one million Cubans, shouted, "Stokely, *esta es tu casa* [this is your home]."

Carmichael was making a visit to France on his way to war-torn Vietnam and China, where he intended to confer secretly with Robert Williams. His meeting with me was equally cloaked in secrecy, so we went into my son's tiny bedroom to talk, leaving his escort in the living room.

From Stokely I learned that I was even more of a bugbear to the Cuban regime than I knew. During his stay in Cuba, the authorities had raised the question of my and Williams's charges of racism against the Castro regime. The Cubans were very upset and had sought his opinion.

Cuban officials presented Carmichael with what they claimed was evidence that since leaving Cuba I had been recruited by U.S. intelligence for the purpose of infiltrating African and black revolutionary movements. My charges of racism against the regime were therefore in line with a well-defined U.S. plan to weaken the Cuban Revolution, blunt its impact on black struggles everywhere, and thwart Cuba's assistance to Africa. The Cuban allegations included information that I was an assistant to Roberto Holden, a right-wing Angolan politician that the United States supported.

Rightly, Stokely suspected the Cuban information was based on forgeries and feared for my life; he had come to warn me. Unknown to the Cuban government, Stokely and I were friends. We trusted each other, and he held me in great esteem. Despite his great admiration for Castro and the Revolution, he was convinced of the veracity of Williams's and my charges against the regime. He was revolted that Cuba would resort to outright forgeries and calumnies to taint an opponent.

The information gleaned from Carmichael rattled me, since the life I led in France was already precarious. The Cuban authorities had given him a pistol and a bulletproof jacket for his own protection. In a gesture of extreme solidarity, he had the weapon transferred to me.

"You need it more than I," he said.

When a state has decided to take your life, a pistol has limited value. But for years its presence under my pillow gave me a sort of comfort. I will never forget that gesture by Stokely.

Carmichael's encounters with both Robert Williams and me, and the views we expressed about Cuba, apparently helped shape a more critical view of Marxism on the race question, for soon after his tour of Cuba, China, and Vietnam, he denounced communism. He told a mass rally at Oakland Auditorium on February 17, 1968: "We are not just facing exploitation. We are facing something much more important: racism. We must therefore consciously strive for an ideology that deals with racism first. Communism is not an ideology suited for black people, period. Socialism is not an ideology fit for black people, period."

His statements shocked the Castro regime.

Within a year of his triumphant visit, Cuba began to lambast Carmichael as a traitor. Now Cuban intelligence spread rumors about the Black Power leader, saying he was an agent of the CIA. Those accusations by the most prestigious revolutionary regime in the world greatly affected Carmichael's political and personal life, though not as much as similar charges had undermined mine. After all, Stokely Carmichael was a revolutionary celebrity, loved by millions worldwide. Nevertheless, a number of African governments and national liberation movements changed from admiration to open hostility toward him overnight.

Around this time I received the news that my mentor Walterio Carbonell had been arrested and interned in a succession of forced-labor camps in Cuba. He was reportedly in a bad state. Carbonell had ceaselessly drafted documents and sent letters to Fidel Castro, beseeching him to reconsider his position, and requesting an audience. In my mind, perhaps also in his, he was somehow untouchable because of his former close friendship with the leader of the Revolution.

"I must get through to Fidel," he had said. Now Fidel had given his final response, and for me that was the straw that broke the camel's back.

My definitive break with communism in all its forms took place at the end of the 1960s when I drafted an essay on the Marxist position

on race, *Were Marx and Engels Racists?* It appeared in 1972 to general condemnation from the left. I was confirmed by many as an unrepentant stooge of American imperialism. However, severing my last tenuous links to world communism was an act of personal liberation. I would not regret it any more than I regretted my break with the Castro regime.

After six years in France, in 1970 I applied for a journalistic position with the state-run news agency, *Agence France-Presse* (AFP), and landed my first French job. AFP successfully petitioned the French authorities on my behalf, and soon afterward I was granted refugee status and a French travel document. I was still denied permanent residency, but I could travel for the first time since entering the country.

I had been trying for years to leave France, but Ghana, Mali, Tanzania, Senegal, Guyana, Jamaica, and Trinidad had turned down my asylum requests. No European country would admit me because of the standing French restrictions on me. However, a four-year stint as a journalist with AFP served to create other openings, and in 1974 I grabbed one that offered the possibility of forsaking Europe for Africa.

I was enthused by news of a World African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) scheduled to take place in Lagos, Nigeria. The Nigerian government was scouting for international staff to help in its preparation. It transpired that my old friend Alioune Diop, founder of *Présence Africaine*, was secretary-general for that Nigeria-sponsored and controlled mega-event. In February 1974, my wife, our eight-year-old son, and I left France for Lagos, vowing never to return.

Lagos at sunrise was a chorus of supplications for alms as the desperate thousands who had fled to the capital during a recent murderous civil war invaded its streets. Many of the multiethnic beggars were blind, limbless, or afflicted with deformities such as elephantiasis or leprosy. Desperate and hungry, women with babies and small children, eyes bulging from hunger, roamed the streets under a merciless sun, while swarms of flies buzzed around mountains of uncollected garbage. The air was foul.

From early morning to nightfall, horns blared into the gargantuan traffic jams, called "go-slows." Nigeria reeked of greed, corruption, and violence; for many, the only way out was armed banditry. In reprisal, General Yakubu Gowon, a fierce dictator, staged Sunday mass executions on a notorious Lagos beach in a picniclike atmosphere. His military regime tolerated no dissent, but Nigerians were clamoring unsuccessfully for elections.

Never before had I lived in a place so hopelessly out of control and frighteningly wild. Never before had I encountered such an unscrupulously uncaring elite. The heartrending kindness and dignity of the ordinary people were all the more striking in the near subhuman conditions. In spite of the dire surroundings, I fell in love with Nigeria.

In Africa I came to terms with class oppression at the hands of people whose skin was black. That reality was painful. The cold, arrogant, corrupt ruling class I found in Nigeria awakened me to the realities of the new Africa. In Nigeria, I was face-to-face with one of the most deadly and selfish African oligarchies, which took seriously its role as the local pawn of the international conglomerates plundering the country. These new auxiliaries of Western imperialism occupied their position with the greatest ease, unashamed of their inferior status in the world order. On the contrary: these impenitent black nouveaux riches seemed almost to lament the passing of the good old days of the triangular trade of spices, ivory, and human flesh.

I formed a circle of friends who were opposed to the direction Nigerian society had taken and the oppressive military regime. They also denounced FESTAC as a moneymaking venture for Nigeria's political, military, and business elites. One of them was Fela Kuti, the most outspoken and intransigent critic of the Gowon dictatorship. A nonconformist, iconoclastic musician-composer, Fela was a thorn in the side of the regime. He alerted me to the fact that FESTAC was a cobweb of intrigue and corruption. My relationship with him, and with other social rebels, would give the military dictatorship a pretext to move against me within six weeks of my arrival in Lagos.

Practically as soon as I set foot on African soil, Cuba reentered the picture. Castro was at the height of his power in Africa. Cuban forces protected a number of leftist governments and fought on the side of several liberation movements. Its intelligence agents roved aggressively and unrestrained in over a dozen Soviet-Cuban client states, including Ethiopia, Angola, Congo, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau. In Africa, the Cuban regime acted much as it pleased, so I was in more danger than I had ever been in Europe.

Two months after my arrival, Cuba demanded my dismissal from my job and expulsion from Nigeria. Thanks to the help of friends who had access to classified documents, I was forewarned. I was unsurprised when, in May, the Guyanese Frank Pilgrim, general coordinator of FESTAC, explained that the organization was in a thorny situation due to my presence. Cuba wanted my deportation. I already knew that Guyana's minister, Shirley Field-Ridley, had sided with Cuba's demand for my removal and was canvassing support from other Caribbean countries to satisfy the Castro regime. I had also learned that Jamaica's representative, a scholar named Rex Nettleford, had resisted the Cuban demand and defended my right to my political views. I stood my ground.

A week later, my direct boss, Chief Timothy Adebanjo, an arrogant, pompous character who embodied all the characteristics I detested in a human being, summoned me. He was the right-hand man of FESTAC's president, Chief Anthony Eronsele Enahoro, Minister of Information and Sports. The latter was then in line to succeed the incumbent dictator General Gowon, which made Adebanjo quite powerful and dangerous.

Our conversation started with a review of my performance at the secretariat. He bragged about his extensive connections and direct influence over FESTAC's president, Chief Enahoro. My presence at FESTAC was causing problems with certain governments, he said, and he had been instructed to find a negotiated solution to that problem. What would it require for me to quit my post at the secretariat and leave Nigeria quietly?

I was not about to allow the Cuban regime to run me out of a job, I said.

Within days, unknown assailants stormed my home in the middle of the night, threatening my eight-year-old son and ransacking the place. Inclined at first to view the attack as the work of common criminals I changed my mind when, a few days after, a runaway vehicle rammed my car into a ditch. Two weeks later, a gentleman identifying himself as a senior government official visited me. He was direct: I must leave Nigeria at once, for my own and my family's safety. I must simply pack up and go.

I refused.

On May 14, Alioune Diop, FESTAC's secretary-general, informed me of a confidential report, restricted to the top echelon of the organization, requesting my immediate removal. He was alarmed. With the complicity of my friends in the secretariat, I secured a copy of the ten-page *casus belli,* authored by my boss Adebanjo and addressed to FESTAC president Chief Enahoro. I was accused of engaging in subversive activities; of having insulted the Nigerian authorities and the head of state of Nigeria; of using Nigeria as a base for blackmailing the government of Cuba; of stealing official and confidential documents for the purpose of embarrassing Nigeria internationally.

The document portrayed me as a dangerous radical, bent on disrupting any organized system, who associated with hooligans (Fela Kuti) and took my family to nightclubs of ill-repute (Fela's Africa Shrine). That very week I was officially notified of my suspension without pay on orders of Minister Enahoro, pending an investigation. I was in hot water. Chief Enahoro, who was widely regarded as Nigeria's future leader, represented not only FESTAC but also the government of Nigeria.

For three weeks, I lived from day to day, expecting arrest for subversion. However, surprisingly, in mid-June Chief Enahoro summoned me to his office and told me he was giving me an important assignment. I was to represent FESTAC at the Sixth Pan-African Congress being held

in the Republic of Tanzania the following week and should prepare to depart within days.

I was frankly perturbed. Given that I was still suspended and being investigated, how could I validly represent FESTAC at an international gathering of that magnitude? I went straight to see Diop to vent my suspicions. He, too, smelled something foul, for although he was officially secretary-general he had not been informed of this high-profile mission I was assigned to. However, he overrode my objections. He said Cuban pressure had escalated to such heights that the Nigerian government was desperately seeking an excuse to fire me.

"Don't give them a pretext to charge you with insubordination," he said. "You must obey Chief Enahoro's instructions and go to Tanzania."

My flight arrived late in Dar es Salaam and I went straight to the Congress Palace, where the Sixth Pan-African Congress was in session. Afterward, I attended a reception for delegates given by the Tanzanian head of state, Julius Nyerere, in the gardens of State House, his official residence. There I met my old friend Abdias Nascimento, the Brazilian civil rights leader. Over the years we had become close in our respective campaigns to denounce the oppression of blacks in Latin America. He was beaming; he had good news. The Cuban delegation had asked him to arrange a meeting with me.

"They want to talk," he said. "They want to mend differences. That's positive!"

I told him how devious the Cuban regime was. Nascimento agreed but felt this was a chance to reverse my conflict with them. He insisted they were acting in good faith.

"If an enemy wants to talk and bury the hatchet, one shouldn't refuse," he declared.

I respected Nascimento and valued his opinion. He had been one of my closest political allies for years. Reluctantly, I agreed to meet the Cubans.

The Cubans were not at the spot where they should have been, so Nascimento went to look for them. As soon as he left, an attractive, freckle-faced African American woman appeared. I had met her in Paris and was surprised to see her in Tanzania. She said she was working for the Congress Steering Committee. Since the festive music was not conducive to conversation, she suggested a stroll. We walked away from the crowd into the immense presidential gardens, chatting.

She went to get us some drinks and I remained standing in the huge gardens. Suddenly, three black men approached me. They were Cuban. "We'd like to talk to you," the man seemingly in charge said, politely. They were relaxed; I wasn't.

He said he was the Cuban chargé d'affaires in Tanzania. I learned later that the wiry man beside him was Oscar Oramas Oliva, Cuba's ambassador to Guinea, leader of the Cuban delegation to the Sixth Pan-African Congress. They were on familiar ground; I was not.

The chargé d'affaires said he had heard I was attending the conference and wanted to speak with me. I indicated that the Cuban government had revoked my passport and declared me an enemy of the state.

"That's the past," he assured me.

Nascimento had believed in the Cubans' good intentions. Apparently, all I needed to do was go to the Cuban embassy to straighten things out; it was purely a bureaucratic matter. My life would take a turn for the better. But something was just not right; I did not share Nascimento's optimism.

"Gentlemen, we can talk right here," I said, uneasy.

The Cubans realized I was not about to go anywhere. Tension rose and their expressions changed. I decided to return to the reception, a short distance away. As I turned to leave, Ambassador Oramas Oliva grabbed me, spun me around, and struck me in the face. A chaotic struggle ensued as all three men tried to restrain me.

Were the Cuban diplomats attempting to take me forcibly to their vehicle, as I was told afterward? Or were they merely attempting to

intimidate me? Was their action being done in collusion with Tanzanian security or was it an independent move? None of that has ever been cleared up to my satisfaction. All I know is that that night I thought my life was in peril.

At one point a woman who had seen the agitation from a distance sounded the alarm. Nascimento had been looking for me everywhere and, concluding that I was missing, had also sounded the alarm. Soon some African American delegates came charging into the melee and plucked me from my assailants. In a flash, Tanzanian security officers materialized and whisked me away to a student compound at Dar es Salaam University, where I remained all night in the company of African American friends.

The incident caused a stir and was on its way to becoming an embarrassment for Tanzania when the popular Jamaican scholar Rex Nettleford, Nascimento, and a some of the prominent African American delegates asked the Tanzanians to guarantee my security.

That morning, Nyerere had me brought to him, together with Nascimento. He wanted to hear our version, since the Cuban chargé d'affaires had lodged a protest with the Foreign Ministry, accusing me of having attacked the Cuban delegation. As I learned later from another source, the Cubans had requested that I be turned over to their embassy as an enemy of the Cuban state. Nascimento related the whole story and testified to the fact that he had previously been set up by the Cubans to entrap me.

"They lied. They told me they wanted to patch up their differences with Moore and asked for my help setting up a meeting," he told Nyerere.

I sat in silence while Nascimento spoke. When it was my turn, I gave an hour-long description of my conflict with the regime. Cuba and Tanzania were allies, Nyerere finally said; his country depended on Cuba's help. But I had nothing to fear; there was no extradition agreement between Cuba and Tanzania. Still, my continued presence in his country could generate friction with the Cubans. In light of that,

I must leave Tanzania, though I would receive official protection while there.

I arrived back in Nigeria utterly shaken. The Dar es Salaam attack had confirmed my worst fears. I was convinced beyond any doubt that the Cuban regime was out to eliminate me. I realized that I had been set up. I braced myself for the worst.

Many years later, I wondered what was really behind that day's events. It cannot be ruled out that the Dar es Salaam attack was an independent action on the part of overzealous Cuban diplomats. Whatever the case, that incident triggered the general alarm that thereafter defined my life and actions. The vulnerability I felt during those days shaped the attitude with which I now regarded the Cuban regime. I turned from dissident to resolute political opponent.

I had returned to Nigeria convinced of the Nigerian government's collusion with the Cuban authorities. I decided to make a stand, whatever the cost. My suspicions received confirmation when, on August 31, my office at FESTAC was raided by a squad of Nigerian secret police searching for the official confidential files I had allegedly stolen. Twenty-four hours later, a six-man team of the Nigerian Central Intelligence Department crashed into my house in the middle of the night, collected practically every document there, and arrested me on charges of activities against the state.

Accused of waging a campaign against Cuba, thereby interfering with Nigerian–Cuban relations, and slandering the head of state, thereby interfering with internal affairs, I was charged with subversion and interrogated through the night. Alioune Diop and other friends came to my rescue, alerting the highest officials and demanding my release. My case was brought to the attention of the deputy inspector general of police, Muhammed D. Yusufu, popularly known as MD, an unusually humane nationalist. His decisive intervention kept me from rotting in a Nigerian jail perhaps for years.

M. D. Yusufu commanded all branches of Nigerian intelligence but was known as a man of principle and integrity with Pan-Africanist lean-

ings. Yusufu reviewed my case, ordered my immediate release, and had me brought before him. I explained what had transpired at FESTAC. He was concerned when I described the harrowing incidents I had suffered for refusing to step down from my job under Cuban pressure. That Cuba could so easily blackmail African governments was unacceptable, he said. I had a right to my political opinions; no government was entitled to contest that. Because of the threats against me and my family, Yusufu placed us under around-the-clock protection. With his help, we left Nigeria safely in early November 1975. (The following year Yusufu would be among the senior officers who pulled off a coup overthrowing the Gowon dictatorship to install the populist government led by General Murtala Mohammad.)

During the preceding ten months, I had asked various governments for asylum. Alioune Diop had apprised President Léopold Sédar Senghor of the Tanzania incident and concerns over my security. Senegal responded favorably to my asylum request this time. My family and I were granted lifelong residency. The six years we spent in Senegal were the most fulfilling period of my life since leaving Cuba. I loved Senegal, the people, the cultures. But wholesale damage had already been done. Now, even in the best of conditions, I was incapable of acting normally. My spirit was frazzled.

When I left Cuba, I thought I was free. However, my experiences made me realize the extent to which Cuban blacks were deprived of the right to express opinions. We were expected to praise the regime that had "saved" and "liberated" us. Dissent was an act of treason. Wherever I went, the itinerant charge that I was a counterrevolutionary followed. In Senegal, the debilitating rumors caught up with me again. During the six years that I lived there, I had to face the suspicion by many of being an agent of the CIA.

Since the Dar es Salaam incident, I had expected an attempt on my life. I was as suspicious of others as I felt they were of me. At night, I would wake screaming, bathed in sweat. I kept my pistol handy.

I began drafting a manuscript on Cuban race relations with the haste of someone counting each day as his last. I went to bed every night and awoke every morning with the single-minded fear that I would be stopped before I accomplished this work. As it was, *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa* would only be published fourteen years later. Meanwhile, my inner panic had started to affect my family life.

I became a different person from the jovial young man with whom Shawna had fallen in love fifteen years earlier. Since our coming together, she had kept me on track, buttressing my falls or pulling me back to my feet. Now the most trivial of things irritated me, so arguments erupted with increasing frequency, compromising our deep mutual affection. She took a severe psychological beating at my side and was emotionally exhausted; our relationship was clearly in trouble, slowly caving in under the danger and tension that hovered. I loved Shawna, and it was painful to see our marriage crumble.

I was already ill when I traveled to France in 1979 to defend the PhD in ethnology I had started at the University of Paris 7, seeking a better understanding of that which had challenged me most in life: the dynamics of race. I took to bed as soon as I returned. Doctors in Dakar diagnosed severe stress. In February 1980, at their urging, I left my family behind and sought treatment in France. I hoped to return to Senegal soon, but my treatment dragged on for months. I would never return to the country I loved nearly as much as my native Cuba. I would grieve that loss.

Contrary to our vow, my family had to move back to Europe. Eighteen years after first landing in France, I was back, still a refugee, still ineligible for permanent residence. Once again I walked the streets of Paris, penniless, unemployed, defeated. It took me two years to regain a foothold, thanks to a handful of faithful friends and Shawna's dedication. Despite our disintegrating life as a couple, she stood by me and helped nurse me back to health.

I landed a position as a journalist with the popular Paris-based African weekly *Jeune Afrique*, and my life seemed back on course. Then,

out of the blue, came Eduardo, a black Cuban writer I had met in 1961, at a time when I was seeking consensus for a petition to take to Fidel Castro. Friendly and nonconformist, he seemed even more committed to the ideas we had once shared in the early years of the Revolution. He had obtained a government dispensation allowing him to travel abroad as a journalist and had married a European. Since he could enter and leave Cuba at will, he could be an intermediary for contact with my friends inside the country.

Eduardo became a regular visitor to my Paris home, where we spent entire evenings sharing ideas about the situation in Cuba. I was glad to be once again connected with my people on the inside. My isolation had been broken. I was optimistic again. Coincidentally, another black Cuban intellectual, Reinaldo, had just arrived in Paris seeking asylum, and *Jeune Afrique* wanted me to interview him.

Reinaldo claimed he knew Eduardo well from the late 1960s when my mentor Carbonell set up an informal black organization to combat racism. The regime swiftly pounced on the group, disbanded it, and briefly incarcerated some members. Carbonell was interned for years in one of the dreaded UMAP work camps, then was committed to a mental asylum. Reinaldo stated point-blank that Eduardo was suspected of having betrayed everyone. His detailed account unsettled me.

No matter what I did, the Castro regime would not leave me in peace. Its relentless harassment had contributed to cracking the foundations of my marriage and was on its way to demolishing my sanity. I felt the urgent need to muster a new force. If I was to climb out of the deep hole into which I had fallen, I would have to redirect my energies in other ways. So that year I focused on two big projects that had previously seemed beyond my reach.

Although I had enrolled at the University of Paris 7 some years earlier and earned a PhD in ethnology in 1979, I decided to tackle another PhD, in the human sciences, which I successfully defended in 1983. Concurrently I wrote *Fela, Fela: This Bitch of a Life*, the biography of

my Nigerian friend Fela Kuti. I had sworn not to leave this world without paying tribute to that remarkable Pan-Africanist. Both projects would require a level of concentration and energy that had eluded me previously. They became part of a plan to regain control of my life, when my anchor—my marriage—had shaken loose.

Fela, Fela was published in France and Britain in 1982. My second PhD became a book that set my academic life on track while being my strongest denunciation of the racial situation in Cuba under the Revolution. My success at both projects restored my self-confidence; only then did Shawna decide to take a break from our situation. She left with our son to live in Martinique. Neither of us knew it, but this moment marked the end of our life together.

Meanwhile, important changes had taken place in France. The Socialist Party had come to power with the election of François Mitterand in 1981 and had modified immigration policy. I petitioned for a review of my case. Finding no valid cause to deny permanent residency, the new government abrogated all restrictions imposed on me.

Rehabilitated, with the backing of several influential people, I next petitioned the American government. It took two years, but the ban against me was lifted. Life seemed good once again and I could travel to the United States.

It was 1982. The first thing I did was go to Harlem with my friend Alex Haley, who by then had gained celebrity through his books *Roots* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Haley introduced me to the lecture circuit, where I could earn some needed money. Over lunch one day, I recounted to him my whole life in a three-hour chat. He listened raptly to the tales that had caused me to be banned from the United States for twenty years, to be banned from my native Cuba, to be exiled in France. Carried away, I talked nonstop, racing back and forth from my childhood days and teenage years to my turbulent adult life. Alex ate slowly, not missing a beat.

"It's one hell of a story," he said in his gentle baritone voice. "You must write a book."

I returned to Paris buoyant, but missing my family terribly. My son was about to turn seventeen, and I had not seen my estranged wife for two years. I yearned to be with them. I could not have chosen a worse moment to set foot in the Caribbean. America had just invaded the tiny island of Grenada to overthrow Maurice Bishop's Marxist government.

Grenada had close ties with Cuba, and its government had conducted an experiment with Marxist socialism under the nose of the Reagan administration. In a strange twist, Communist colleagues assassinated Bishop during a power struggle that gave the United States an opportunity to step in and squash the Grenadian revolution, dealing Cuba a humiliating political blow.

Bishop, Castro, and the Grenada revolution were extremely popular in the region. I had had enough contact with Martinican and Guadeloupean pro-independence militants in Paris to understand that the nationalist movements in those two "Overseas French Departments" were thoroughly dominated by the Marxist left. Because of the heavy French colonial presence, the French Antilles was staunchly pro-Castro. I was setting foot in a veritable hornets' nest, but I was tired of life in France and of Europe in general.

I had close friends in Guadeloupe from my Paris days and decided to go there first. One of them, Josy, I had not seen for ten years, but our friendship remained intact. For several days and nights, she listened to my unfolding tales. Although the names and places I mentioned were unfamiliar, she understood. The cool, breezy evenings at her tree-surrounded home, the laughter of her two small children, the sound of the crickets—everything reminded me of when Shawna, our son Kimathi, and I lived in the outskirts of Paris. There had been many moments of joy back then. I wondered if I would ever know the warmth of family life again.

I turned forty-one in Guadeloupe. I had no plans. Would it ever be possible to sleep with windows open? To be free of nightmares? To discard the pistol that accompanied me everywhere? Could I regain my health? Was a normal life possible?

"Why not stay and give yourself some time to rethink your future?" Josy suggested.

"I have no future," I replied.

"Suppose I need someone around to cut the grass here and help me raise my kids?" she asked, jokingly.

I remained in Guadeloupe, at Josy's side.

Cuba continued to hover over me in the twin islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique. In need of work, I applied to fill a vacancy at the University of the French Antilles. A Guadeloupean professor of Cuban studies sounded the alarm and gathered troops to keep the Cuban agent of imperialism out. Rumors flew again.

A group of principled professors defended my right to the job, but the balance was tipped against me when the heavy hand of Guadeloupe's Communist Party came into play. After my application was finally turned down, I was summoned to the headquarters of the French secret police in Guadeloupe and questioned for hours, suspected of working with subversive pro-independence movements in Guadeloupe. They threatened to prohibit my presence in the French islands and force me back to metropolitan France.

With all those charges flying from the left and right, my life became truly surreal. I decided to leave Guadeloupe of my own accord and seek employment in the United States.

My applications to a dozen American universities were turned down. Then in 1986 came an offer from Miami, of all places, stronghold of the rabidly right-wing white Cuban exiles. I wavered, despite having been jobless for two years, before accepting a teaching post at Florida International University. I had no choice.

From the word go, the local Spanish-speaking radio stations denounced my courses on Cuba as Communist propaganda. I could only be a Communist provocateur and a Castro undercover agent since I talked about the racial oppression and segregation that prevailed in Cuba well before Castro took power. Apparently I had come to Miami

to sow racial antagonism within the ranks of the exile community. Ironically, in the early 1960s the Castro regime had leveled the exact same charges.

The conflict with the anti-Castro Cubans became so fevered that the *Miami Herald* later devoted three pages to the controversy. Examining the content of my university courses, the newspaper concluded that the charges against me were baseless. Simply put, I clashed with a segment of the white Cuban community whose entrenched pre-Castro racism I had exposed. These people paraded as democratic freedom fighters and I had unmasked them as disgruntled racial oppressors in search of a comeback. My courses delegitimized them politically.

In the midst of this entanglement, I had to respond to yet another threat to my reputation, this time from the opposite side of the political spectrum. William LeoGrande, a respected American scholar of international relations and Cubanologist, published an article in the academic journal *Cuban Studies* reporting falsely that I had been traveling with the right-wing Angolan insurgent leader Jonas Savimbi. In the context of the times, that allegation was politically lethal.

I had known Savimbi twenty-three years earlier in Cairo. He was then a hard-core Marxist of Maoist-Trotskyist orientation, whom Che Guevara upheld as the prototypical revolutionary. We had had no contact since those days. Meanwhile, Jonas Malheiro Savimbi had switched from being a devout Marxist to an ally of the conservative Reagan administration, the white Cuban exiles, and apartheid South Africa. He was making waves battling Castro's troops who had been sent to Angola to destroy his UNITA forces. The white Cuban exiles welcomed him in Miami with open arms, showering him with funds. Conversely, in the black world he became a pariah, linked with the CIA, whose weapons, advisers, and funds he had accepted.

The report that I had traveled with Jonas Savimbi implied I was still in touch with him two decades later. In fact, it implied that I was closely working with him as a confidant. Such implications were terribly damaging: Savimbi was a world-known political leader of the right

who was openly being assisted by the Reagan administration with weapons, CIA advisers, and money. The allegation that I traveled with him spoke a million words. I took it as an attempt to cast doubt on my political integrity and immediately took steps to bring court action against the review that had published the falsehood and its author.

LeoGrande contacted me. First, he attributed his false report to John Marcum's book, *The Angolan Revolution*. But there was no reference to me whatsoever in that book, neither actual nor implied. Then he retracted. "After some investigation," he admitted, "I have discovered that the footnote in my *Cuban Studies* article referring to you is in error." If not Markum's book, what had been the source of his falsehood? The source, he recognized, was the book *African Liberation Movements*, authored by Richard Gibson.

Two decades earlier Richard Gibson had published a major allegation about me regarding the circumstances leading to Malcolm X's murder. Since then a high-profile scandal had come to the surface. Richard Gibson, during the McCarthy-plagued 1950s, had embedded false information in the media that compromised an exiled black American Communist militant living in France. His action, which resulted in his dismissal from *Agence France Presse*, remained to plague him thereafter. With this damaging history, as LeoGrande quickly acknowledged, Gibson had to be discounted as a reliable source.

LeoGrande claimed he had meant no harm. "I hope you will note that nowhere in the original article was there a charge, explicit or implicit, that you were involved with the CIA," he wrote. He offered a lame excuse: "My reference to you was simply intended to help explain the Castro government's hostility toward Savimbi's movement and its preference for the MPLA."

Professor LeoGrande retracted and *Cuban Studies* printed his apology. But the damage was done. For many black leftists, proof of my affiliation with the CIA had been given, notwithstanding accusations in Miami of my being an agent of Castro and communism. The black left would go a step further in its Cuba-sponsored attempts to disqualify me

politically, this time linking me as well to Holden Roberto, the CIA-supported leader of the Angolan FNLA. As late as 2008, the Internet-based pro-Castro outlet, AfroCubaWeb, would post the following allegations on its site:

> Carlos Moore's relationship to official U.S. groups has long been the subject of speculation. *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa* is alleged to have been published with CIA funds. What is known is that he was a translator for Angola's Holden Roberto whose FNLA was funded by CIA. And during Roberto's exile in the U.S., Moore *spent a lot of time* with Roberto as he *traveled back and forth* between Washington and Miami.

There was not a single word of truth in this report. I had never met, had any association with, or been anywhere in Holden Roberto's company. Yet without the least supporting evidence AfroCubaWeb authoritatively disseminated the falsehood that I was "a translator for Angola's Holden Roberto" and had "spent a lot of time with Roberto as he traveled back and forth between Washington and Miami." That was as much a fabrication as had been the information disseminated earlier regarding my alleged traveling with Jonas Savimbi, or my alleged failure to warn Malcolm X about a possible assassination plot in Paris.

Over and again, such false charges circulated as rumor or would appear in print in the most unlikely places, nourishing the outrageous allegations that my charges of racism were a product of collusion with the CIA. Calumnies, forgery, defamation, attempts at physical intimidation, threats against my life—that's how the Castro regime, and its international supporters, dealt with me for three running decades.

The anti-Castro establishment was no better. Miami was a no-win situation. It was the turf of the fanatical, crypto-racist white exiles. Their aggressiveness was blunted by the support I received from the African American community and a handful of principled white Cubans.

People such as Lucrecia Granda, a lawyer and friend, risked life and reputation for me. That there were such white Cubans in Miami was refreshing. But the cards were stacked heavily against me.

Two years of high-pitched tension surrounded by threats to my physical security wore me out. There seemed no end to my dilemma. I was being forced to deal with too many contending factors at once. The left and the right seemed to be playing ping-pong with my life. It seemed wise to return to the relative safety of Guadeloupe.

Guadeloupe confronted me with the same old problems: fierce opposition by the local Communist Party, hostility from the pro-Castro lobby at the university, chronic unemployment. I understood why I was regarded with suspicion and hatred. In December 1990, the official organ of the Cuban Communist Party and government, *Granma*, described me as a "counterrevolutionary émigré with strong links to the North American Secret Services." Who in their right mind would associate with any such character?

Being in Guadeloupe did not get the Miami exiles off my back. In June 1992, a powerful anti-Castro organization threatened my life, forcing me, ironically, to seek protection from the French secret service. I existed in a climate of constant harassment, unsure how long I could cope. Nevertheless, in mid-1992, I married Josy (who thereafter changed her name to Ayeola). The profound love that united us had to contend with the impossibility of a normal life—the same impossibility that had haunted my marriage to Shawna.

However, in the midst of that situation, world communism collapsed.

The breakup of the Soviet bloc left Cuba politically and economically adrift. Forced to reassess its policies, Cuba began cozying up to neighboring Caribbean states. A rapid Cuban thaw began, and I was unfrozen in the process.

However, sensing Cuba's vulnerability, the United States became aggressive again. In Miami, a chorus of strident voices rose to demand

the violent overthrow of the Castro regime, and I feared an American attack on Cuba. I wrote to Fidel Castro, urging the review of the racial situation on the island and enactment of wide political reforms.

Almost immediately, the regime ceased its attacks on me. Miraculously, most of the pressures that had been brought to bear on me vanished. For the first time in three decades, I received mail directly from my brother and his family in Cuba. My old mentor Walterio Carbonell, who had been released from prison, got in touch. The rumor campaign ceased.

It was unbelievable!

But I was unprepared for the phone call I received in summer 1995 from Michael Manley, former leftist prime minister of Jamaica. He intimated that my banishment from Cuba could be overturned. I had never had any direct dealings with Mr. Manley. In fact, twenty-one years earlier, in 1974, I had gone to Jamaica to ask for asylum and had been turned down. Jamaica would not risk its ties with Cuba to shelter my family and me, I was told, even though being of Jamaican descent I was entitled to citizenship.

Now Manley was showing a sudden interest in my case, advocating the restoration of my rights. He said he would personally take my case to the Cuban head of state. This was all the doing of the scholar Rex Nettleford, a personal friend and one-time Manley adviser. I was grateful to Nettleford and hopeful that I could perhaps alter the course my life had taken in the previous three decades. But I would not compromise my principles.

Within weeks of Manley's mediation came the first official assurance that I could return to my own country without ill effect. The Castro regime simply stopped considering me an agent of American imperialism and quietly reclassified me as merely a Cuban citizen residing abroad. My Cuban nationality was reactivated, the ban on my reentering the country was rescinded, and my Cuban passport was restored. I was free to return to my native island.

After thirty-two years of exile, surviving events that forced me to roam three continents, leaving scars that would never heal, it seemed inconceivable that anything would prompt me to deliver myself up to a regime that had done so much to wreck me. The very idea of returning to Cuba sent chills through me. I could not contemplate it.

Yet two years later, in July 1997, I was ready to face the fact that my life had gone full circle. I had already written the most turbulent and grueling page of my existence. What happened thereafter could be no worse than what I had been made to live through. I decided to go home.

Two days before my departure, I was anxious and unable to sleep.

"What's wrong?" Ayeola asked. In the long moment of silence, her eyes probed mine.

"I'm afraid to go back to Cuba," I told her.

"Anyone would be," she said.

I had feared for my life every single day for thirty-four straight years. From childhood to adulthood, fear had always hovered over me, constraining me into constant choices. As Ayeola cradled me in her arms, my mind drifted back to the fear-drenched days of the slave baracoons. I began to realize that what I felt now had been as much a part of my ancestors' existence as it had become of mine. But I was now ready to shake free of that, too. It was the last shackle that tied me to that regime.

28

RETURN TO A WOUNDED COUNTRY

My virgin Cuban passport was barely examined. Customs officials waved my luggage through and within minutes I was in the arms of friends. I was not duped by the ease of it all, however. The deceptive air of normalcy that greeted me did not lessen my conviction that I was in the hands of one of the most repressive Marxist regimes on the planet.

Setting foot in Cuba in 1997 was primarily an act of vindication, a way to proclaim: *OK, after nearly thirty-five years of attacks on my character and reputation, I'm back.* I would demonstrate that the regime had slandered me; but what of my own accusations against it? Were they unfounded? Whatever doubts I had were soon swept away.

Early the next morning I went out alone for a walk along La Rampa, the wide avenue bisecting downtown Havana. I strolled for six blocks, watching people set up their stands for the tourists. That preoccupation with foreign tourists told me that the Cuba I had left thirty years before had gone. What sort of country had taken its place?

Two blocks from my hotel I spotted a dark-skinned man dressed in a short-sleeved white shirt and brown trousers, strategically positioned on the sidewalk. His eyes were hidden behind dark glasses in the style of the secret police. *That guy is watching me,* I thought, *but he's so goddamn obvious.* Cuba was a beehive of such characters; they came in all colors, sexes, and shapes, but were usually inconspicuous. Not this one, however. When I came near, he spoke.

"Are you Carlos Moore?"

The last time I had heard that guttural voice, thirty-four years ago, I was holed up in the Guinean embassy, waiting to flee Cuba. It was my brother Frank!

"Carlos, son-of-a-gun!" he shouted.

He rushed into my arms and we wrestled each other in the middle of La Rampa, slapping each other in amazement. He had gone to look me up at the hotel.

"*Caramba*, this is like a film," I said, holding him by the shoulders.

Meeting my brother on one of the busiest avenues in Havana, after more than three decades, was like a fairytale. However, reality descended on us as soon as we reached the hotel. Frank was summarily stopped and prevented from entering the lift with me.

"*You*, where are you going?" A stern, bulldoglike character, dressed in suit and tie, had materialized from nowhere and positioned himself between us and the lift.

"You know very well that *you* are not allowed to go up," he said to Frank with venom.

Shock flashed across my brother's pockmarked face as he stared coldly at the fair-skinned man. Fire brimmed in his eyes; I could read his thoughts. He had spent ten of his fifty-seven years studying in the Soviet Union to be a naval engineer. He earned the equivalent of nine dollars per month, much less than the security man, and because he was Cuban he had no right to enter the hotels, night clubs, restaurants, and leisure resorts in his own country.

Ayeola had informed me of this situation, which Cubans dubbed double apartheid, after she returned from her first visit to the island in 1995. She had been mistaken for a Cuban woman as she was about to enter her hotel and was stopped at the door.

"Where are *you* going?" Two plainclothes security men closed in on her.

"It's obvious where I'm going," she had replied in her heavily accented Spanish, and exhibited her passport.

"This is not your passport. You are trying to play games with us. You're a *jinetera*."

Cuban women who picked up tourists were called *jineteras* by the police, horse-riders; the term came to apply almost exclusively to dark-skinned females, especially if they wore their hair in braids or an Afro. Ayeola's hair was braided.

"I am not Cuban. You can check with reception to see whether my name is on the guest list. I'm a black woman, yes, but I am not a *jinetera*."

"Your *raza* has nothing to do with it, we're just doing our job," barked one officer. "You stay here. If what you say isn't true, you'll see what will happen!"

He marched off angrily, leaving Ayeola with the second security officer at the hotel entrance. Within minutes he returned, a sheepish grin on his face.

"We're sorry, we thought you were Cuban," he apologized.

Ayeola snatched back her passport and marched into the hotel, knowing that had she been Cuban it would have been another story.

Frank had all those years turned his back to that ugly reality. Cubans, especially dark-skinned Cubans, contended with this on a daily basis. His real place in society had been brutally brought home. Notwithstanding his Communist Party membership card, he had been disrespected in his own country. The manner in which Frank had been stopped, the hateful look in the eyes of that secret policeman, left no doubt as to what we confronted. From early childhood we had both been socialized to recognize and deal with racism. I shared his hurt. That sharp stab at his dignity and self-respect instantly brought us closer. After decades of walking roads that were never meant to converge, we were on the same side again.

A week later, I invited Frank for lunch at one of the improvised living-room restaurants called *paladar*, where home cuisine was served and had to be paid for in U.S. dollars. As we ate, I unsuccessfully tried to steer our conversation away from politics, but he had remained the Marxist doctrinaire I knew in the 1960s. He was in denial about the demise of the Soviet bloc and the disintegration of world communism.

"We know the fall of the Soviet Union was engineered by the CIA. That bastard Gorbachev was in league with them," Frank claimed.

The government had offered an imperialist plot scenario to the population, just as it did with any situation it could not control. I was shocked that someone of Frank's intellect was taken in. It showed to what extent years of relentless propaganda had stultified the minds of many Cubans.

Unknowingly, Frank and I were the repositories of secrets that would modify part of our lives. After a while he broached a subject that had been gnawing at him.

"My only regret is not communicating with my parents before they died," he said. "I had no contact, not even by mail."

Our father had died in 1982, our mother a decade later. Being a member of the Communist Party, Frank had to cut off contact with relatives living abroad, particularly in the United States. The futility of that was all too evident now the regime had authorized its citizens to receive large monthly remittances from their affluent U.S.-based relatives, who were even encouraged to visit relatives in Cuba and bring in the coveted dollar. My brother was saddened by the unnecessary sacrifice he had made.

"Did you go to see our mother?" he asked.

I related to him the story our mother had told, and her confession that I was born of an extramarital affair. My father was a Barbadian named Percy Marshall.

The family had moved from Nuevitas to Central Lugareño and then to Camagüey, hoping that life would be easier in a big city. But they could never make ends meet. So when her husband Victor heard that hands were needed to pick coffee in the mountains of Oriente in eastern Cuba, he decided to go. He asked Marshall, a close friend, to look after the family while he was away. It was the sort of thing West Indians did for one another. That was in 1941. As months passed with no word from her husband, she began to wonder if he was still alive. Desperate to feed her four children, she turned to Percy Marshall, who

began helping with the bills, rent, and medicines. Little by little, a relationship developed. By the time Victor reappeared—still penniless, shaking with malaria, a ghost of himself—she was six months pregnant. She was ashamed; he was shocked and humiliated. They made the decision to return to Central Lugareño. They gathered up the children, their few belongings, and left Camagüey, where they had failed to reverse their fate. On November 4, 1942, she gave birth to her fifth child, christened Charles George in honor of two British monarchs—a scrawny, sickly, jet-black child who did not resemble Victor in any way.

My brother was amazed at the tale I recounted. We did not share the same biological father after all. He repeated the name "Marshall" a few times, as if trying to piece together a puzzle. Then he asked, "How soon can I see you again?"

We met for lunch two days later, and Frank slipped a piece of paper into my hand. I glanced at it and would have put it in my pocket but he held my arm.

"Read it!" he said.

The paper bore a name, Arturo Marshall, and an address in Camagüey, my home province, twenty-four hours away by bus. I looked at Frank, puzzled. He then explained the mystery that concerned our Jamaican aunt in Nuevitas—Clara, the wife of our uncle Ernest Moore. Clara's sister, Isolina Stewart, had married a man named Marshall. In all probability, that Marshall was my biological father. Therefore my cousins from the Moore standpoint were also my siblings from the Marshall vantage. Everything clicked.

"When you told me the story of your birth, I realized I knew who your other brothers and sisters were. You and Arturo Marshall could be twins," Frank said.

I was as excited as a little child about to open birthday gifts.

"Is my biological father alive?" I asked.

Frank did not know. My excitement was contagious and he encouraged me to head to Camagüey to look up my new siblings and also visit

our native town. The trip would enable me to crown my return to my native land with a visit to Lugareño, my birthplace.

The car swerved from left to right, avoiding potholes on a road that was like Swiss cheese. We came onto a long dusty road and I saw a high chimney in the distance. But Central Lugareño had *two* chimneys. Where was the other? Suddenly, out of nowhere, as if in a horror film, emerged a dark, old sugarmill that gave me the creeps. The joy I had anticipated was missing. I was disappointed.

In my years of exile, Lugareño was a fixed reference in my mind: the place against which I measured poverty wherever I went, but also the place that symbolized the freshness of youth. I had left in 1958 and my childhood memories lay captive there, yet I recognized nothing. How could anyone in their right mind live here, let alone call it home? I alighted from the taxi when I saw a man walking in the direction from which I had come.

"I'm trying to locate the home of the Moore family," I said to him.

"Victor Moore?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"*Muchacho*, who doesn't know him here? He left with his family forty years ago and no one heard from them since."

A whirlwind of joy swept over me, as if I had struck gold. "I am his son, Carlito."

Disbelief and amazement crossed his face. "*Caramba*, don't you remember me?" he said. "I grew up with you people. I am Ramón Morales, but people call me Blackaman."

He knew who I was, yet I did not remember him at all.

Blackaman was too excited to mind. He got into the taxi and took me back to a spot I had just passed. "That's your house, *muchacho.* Your father sold it to Cuca. She still lives there."

Defying time, the house of my childhood was still there: the little garden and patio, the rundown kitchen. Dilapidated, but still standing.

A white-haired white woman looked out. It was Mrs. Crùz Cordero, whom I knew as Cuca.

"Hello! I am Lito," I said.

"Lito. *Ay Dios mio!* The bad Carlito is back!" she shouted.

Word spread fast. People scurried from all over the neighborhood, as if a stone had hit an anthill. I was surrounded by half a dozen of my childhood neighbors. We hugged. Some were in tears. I, too, was moved.

I went into the yard where the ackee tree had been but it was no more: knocked down by a hurricane. I reacted to that news as if hearing about the loss of a relative.

"And the two coconut trees?" I asked.

"They were cut down a long time ago," Cuca said.

A white woman about my age, who had come running from around the back, rushed into my arms. She wept as she hugged me tight.

"I heard your voice, Lito," Milagros Chacón said. "I knew it was you!"

Forty years on, she knew my voice! Farther up the street I met the Bryant family.

"Where is Chulo?" I asked, anxious to hear of the ex-boxer who had taught me to defend myself.

I was told he had gone back to Nuevitas, the port city where the Marshall family lived. I planned to look him up on returning there later that day.

Our black social club survived only in the memory of the older generations. (Some years later, I would watch a film, *Buena Vista Social Club*, whose opening scene evoked that enforced erasure.) I was eager to visit the Morejón family, who had been the pillars of our club, *Amantes del Progreso*, and our stolid allies. I was told they still lived at the other end of town in the same home I knew as a child.

As we made our way there, walking through the heart of town, I became more depressed. There was not one asphalt road left and the houses were grimy and run-down. I was told that the old section of town, the black barrio, was in an even worse state; I did not want to verify.

The Morejóns, whom we considered cousins, welcomed me with tears. They were still the loving people I remembered. We drifted back to the old days as I enquired about everyone I had known. Where were the other famous *jorocóns* of my childhood? Roncona had died eight years ago of a heart attack. Tindito had moved to Camagüey. My boyhood pal Chequelo had been caught trying to flee to America after the Revolution and jailed. My childhood hero Emilio, what of him? A trail of rumors led nowhere. A Batista sympathizer, he was arrested and taken away as soon as Castro seized power. Had he been executed? Some thought so.

"I want to see somebody I knew as a kid," I said. "We used to call him Cheetah."

"Oh, you mean Orlando Pimentel. We're going to fetch him."

Fifteen minutes later, Orlando came.

"Cheetah!" I exclaimed. "Is it really you?"

He looked surprised, as if nobody had used that forgotten nickname for forty years. We hugged warmly and immediately began to reminisce.

"You almost stabbed me to death!" I said.

"Oh, those were the olden days, when we poor fought one another. The Revolution taught us that our enemy is capitalism," he said.

Everyone talked of economic difficulties: no food, no medicine, everything scarce. Yet all backed the regime. I felt an urge to share the money I had with them but I did not want to offend. Later, I regretted that decision. They were in need. I should have helped.

"Forgive us, we have nothing but water to offer you," the Morejón brother said, embarrassed, after I was in the house a good while. It was a painful moment for them. I had come back after forty years and they could offer me nothing but water. I was troubled by the living conditions of the people with whom I had grown up. However, the poverty I witnessed did not convince me that the situation in Cuba was dismal; I had seen much worse elsewhere. Yet, in what state would people have been without the Revolution?

"Before the Revolution we lived like pigs," said the Morejón brother, as if reading my mind. "Today, our children can be just about anything they want."

It was unquestionably true; the Revolution had favorably impacted the lives of the vast majority of Cubans. Cuba's social security system was among the best in the world. Access to quality health care and education was universal and free. Outright racial segregation had disappeared; social inequalities were sharply reduced. It struck me that everybody had one thing in common: their children had nearly all become professionals. The Revolution had made the difference between the generations; everyone was thankful for it.

Still, most Cubans endured great hardship. If you entered their homes, they hoped you would not need to use the toilet, for there was either no running water or no toilet paper. During Ayeola's first trip she wanted to read the daily newspaper *Granma*—voice of the government and Communist Party—but could find none in any of her friends' homes.

"We use *Granma* for toilet paper," her host informed her, burying shame in laughter.

The population had found a variety of ways to put old papers to use, especially when sanitary pads and toilet tissue became luxury items obtainable only with dollars. Menstruating women would crumple up two or three pages of *Granma* and wrap them ingeniously in an old piece of rag.

After an hour, I was suffocating in the heavy atmosphere of decay and gloom that hung over the town of my birth. Wherever I went, I was besieged by the chilling thought that I could easily have been among those buried alive here. It made me think of my stepmother, Gladys, who had plucked me out of this hole. I realized the sacrifice she had made from love. The earth had claimed her, my father Victor, my mother Rebecca, and my father Percy. But I felt Gladys's spirit most strongly at this precise moment, and my heart directed a special prayer of thanks to her.

I took off for Nuevitas to track down the Marshalls, my newly discovered family.

I HAD NOT SEEN my cousin Felix since we were both about fourteen. He and his two sisters lived in the same house I had known as a child. Physically, Nuevitas seemed to have hardly changed. My cousin introduced me to a white friend of his, Quintana, a doctor. Warm and humorous, Quintana had no sooner met me than he started cracking jokes. He had grown up with my cousins and knew all there was about the Moore family. When I revealed the object of my trip, he became agitated.

"Old man Marshall is *your* father?" Quintana exclaimed.

"Do you know him?" I asked.

"My God, Marshall was my second father!" he said.

Quintana, whose father died while he was very young, had been taken in by old man Marshall and raised alongside his children. It was then I learned of Marshall's passing, in 1981, at roughly the same time that my mother was revealing his existence to me. Felix, it transpired, was first cousin to the Marshalls, as was my brother Frank. So Frank was actually first cousin to my siblings on the Marshall side.

The Marshall family mostly lived in Havana or Camagüey, but two of them, Ricardo and Mercedes, still resided in Nuevitas. Ricardo, eldest of the brothers, was a Communist Party cadre and union leader, who was summoned to Felix's to meet "a friend from abroad." I found myself looking at my forty-eight-year-old brother; everyone in the room knew what was going on except him.

A devout party man, he spoke of the greatness of the Revolution and how the regime would triumph against imperialism, despite all the economic difficulties. My lukewarm responses made him realize I was not in the fold.

"You don't support the Revolution?" he asked.

"The Revolution, yes, but not the regime," I said.

"They're the same," he said.

"No, they're not. The regime is a dictatorship," I said.

"How can you say that?"

I told him of my experiences, explaining the reasons for my long exile. They listened in stony silence, surprise in their eyes.

"All governments make mistakes," Ricardo said, defensively.

"Those were *not* mistakes, and they almost cost me my life," I said.

Ricardo fell quiet. Then he said, "All the same, there's no comparison between the Cuba of today and before."

At that point, I decided to throw my knockout punch.

"Listen, I speak with an authority above the Communist Party you belong to, because I am your *elder brother*!" I said half-mockingly.

The bewilderment on his face told me I had hit the mark. "What?"

I ran through the story for him. His eyes were popping.

"*You* are my brother?"

"Yes, I'm your brother. I'm fifty-four and I'm Marshall's son."

He confessed that when he saw me he had been struck by my resemblance to his brother Arturo. "Now I understand why as children we weren't allowed to visit our aunt's house or meet our cousins. I wondered why there was bad blood between our families. But I never imagined this!" said Ricardo.

"Come on, guys, brothers must embrace one another!" Quintana said with glee. "Let's lift our glasses and celebrate. Someone should write a book about this and call it *Sin and Forgiveness*, because yesterday's sins have brought today's joy."

Ricardo and I hugged.

Quintana, his eyes watery, began to sing the praises of our father, old man Marshall, a bricklayer active in the labor movement. So admired was he that he became president of the city's black social club. He had raised his family of eight as revolutionaries, and they all had become professionals such as doctors.

"Our father taught us never to forsake the Revolution," Ricardo said.

He was anxious to take me to the home of one of my new sisters, Mercedes; we set off in the night. When we arrived, he introduced me casually, relishing her surprise.

Mercedes was flabbergasted, and was soon displaying albums of photographs of the entire Marshall family in the living room. She showed me pictures of my grandfather and other relatives, and of my other siblings: Medora; Leonel, an Olympic volleyball hero; Adelaida, a pediatrician; and my lookalike, Arturo.

I also saw, for the first time in my life, images of the man responsible for my entry into the world. One particular photograph of him in his twenties, around the time when my mother had met him, struck me. It showed him sitting on a chair. The resemblance between us was uncanny, like two drops of water.

"We have always wanted to visit our father's homeland, Trinidad," Mercedes said.

"He was from Barbados," I corrected, thinking her Caribbean geography was hazy.

"No, he was from Trinidad," she insisted. "It's our grandparents who were Barbadian. They migrated to Trinidad, where our father was born in an area where there's a pitch lake. He always spoke of it."

"Of course he was from Trinidad," Ricardo agreed. "Everyone called him Trinidad. They gave him that name when he came here at eighteen. Nobody called him Whitfield."

As coincidence would have it, I had lived in Trinidad for a year and a half and knew about the pitch lake at Point Fortin, in the south of the island. My sister produced an old passport and a yellowing birth certificate that cleared up any lingering doubts: Whitfield Dacosta Marshall—my mother's "Percy"—was born in Point Fortin, Trinidad, in 1907.

"This is real detective work," I quipped.

Now I was eager to meet my other brother whom everyone agreed resembled me so.

"He's in Havana. We're going to let him know you're on your way," Ricardo said.

First, I proceeded to Santiago de Cuba, farther east, to visit friends, intending to head back to Havana from there. Cuban reality again sank

in when I tried to buy my train fare; I was rebuffed and told there were no more tickets. I must wait until the next day. How could that be? I began to argue with the clerk, but she turned her back and acted as if she did not hear my protests. It was exasperating. Felix and Quintana, who had driven me to the train station in Camagüey, told me to calm down.

"Let me take care of this," said Felix. "You just keep quiet."

He went to the booth and spoke to the attendant. Something had changed, for she was now talking animatedly to my cousin and tearing two tickets from a stub. He had simply explained that I was a *foreigner* and would be paying in *dollars*. Suddenly, tickets materialized. Felix returned with a wide grin on his face and a ticket.

"Listen, until a few years ago Fidel was the only one who was always right. Today, it's *El Verde*. Dollars, *chico*, U.S. dollars!"

"So, I'm supposed to go around pretending to be a foreigner?"

"If you want to get on that train, yes, you'd better," he replied

"Foreigners own this country now; that's how things are," said Quintana, guffawing.

El Verde, Mr. Green, had indeed come to Cuba with a vengeance, pitting friend against friend, family against family, neighbor against neighbor. He fostered new divisions between white and black, encouraged widescale prostitution, decreed who was to be respected, who reviled. The police kowtowed to him, as did the government, bureaucrats, and civil servants; pimps and prostitutes plied their trade with the help of the police, thanks to him. In just a few years, he had become master of Cuba.

Back in Havana, I stayed in the home of a friend, Julia Mirabal, who had the distinction of being the only black TV presenter at the time and was a pro-regime stalwart. The phone rang one morning and Julia answered it.

"Your brother says he's on his way," she informed me.

"Oh, Frank is coming?" I said.

"No, I mean your brother Arturo Marshall."

I was truly looking forward to this moment. Julia explained that the Marshalls were well known in Cuba because Leonel, the former Olympic volleyball star, had become trainer of the national team and was now national commissioner for volleyball.

A little later, there was a knock on the door. Opening it, I found myself face-to-face with a younger version of myself.

"I'll be damned. You look like me," he said, laughing

"It's you who resemble me," I said.

My look-alike brother was very different from the other Marshalls, who were stern. He was jovial and, like me, loved listening to and recounting stories. We hugged warmly, as if we had always known one another.

Arturo had studied in Eastern Europe and was preparing a PhD thesis in some technical field. He was a rock-hard Communist with typically Cuban prejudices, and our ideas conflicted. Like Frank, he had blind faith in the regime and defended it uncritically, so our differences appeared sharply the more we opened up to each other. His wife, Yolanda, a doctor whose grandparents hailed from Guadeloupe, was a National Assembly representative; Karel, their son, was a final-year medical student. They were a typical middle-class family who, like most Cubans born after 1959, owed their professional status to the Revolution. They fervently adhered to the Communist ideology that had permitted their ascent in a land where a black skin had been a barrier to social mobility.

"Now you must meet your brother Leonel and your sisters, Regina, Dora, and Adys. Until you came, Regina was the family elder," he said, full of pride.

Regina had insisted on a big party attended by all the Marshalls. She was the rock of the family. She was fifty-two. I was two years older, so she symbolically transferred the eldership to me.

"Now we recognize our eldest brother," she said, as everyone applauded.

When it was my turn to speak, I said how glad I was to be with family and to realize how much we had in common, regardless of which political stance we supported. Though we had not grown up together, our parents had taught their children the same values. We were the offspring of migrant people who strove to spare their children the indignities they had undergone. I went on to say that, yes, biologically I was the oldest in the family but I was not the elder. This sister who had always been the elder, taking care of everyone, was also my elder. Everyone clapped. We were all moved.

"The main things in my life are family and the Revolution," Arturo later said.

For a long while, family life had been unimportant to me. I had to dispense with it because of the tensions that exile introduced me to, one of which was feeling my very existence under threat. My conviction that I might not last long, that nothing would last, made me avoid permanent relationships. When I did finally establish one, it frightened me; family meant constraints, obligations, becoming like everyone else. Politically, I distrusted family, compared to wider forms of human solidarity, for it compromised objectivity and seemed a deterrent to understanding society in general. It was also a breeding ground for nepotism.

I had never before let myself experience the unconditional acceptance that comes only from family. Now, with the Marshalls, it enabled us to override our political and ideological differences and forget that we were on opposing sides in our views of the regime. When we talked politics, it was through the filter of family, the sole tie that made us tolerant of one another. That was altogether new to me.

29

SHADOWS OF POWER

The Revolution infused a new sense of self-worth into the majority that composed society's lower rung. It allowed individual hopes to become lifelong careers. Collective dreams that could rarely have materialized in prerevolutionary days became tangible realities, such as universal, free education and quality health care. It made possible the betterment I had yearned for as a child.

I understood the feelings of gratitude binding most Cubans to the repressive regime that had nonetheless brought them a rainbow. For them, communism was not so much a doctrine but a reparatory justice for past evils. Though they might growl about the limitations to their freedom or be resentful on issues of race, Cubans still evinced enough attachment to the regime to make its ideology sustainable.

Understanding my brothers, Arturo, Frank, Ricardo, and their deep-seated faith in the regime was crucial to understanding the sentiments of most Cubans. I had to come to terms with their unswerving fidelity to communism; they, in turn, would have to listen to a harsh appraisal of their regime by someone they respected.

Arturo and I quickly established a relationship. At first, politics monopolized our conversations, but, progressively, they broached anything that arose as we sat down for long talks. One day, we finally had our first earnest discussion about our respective positions, facilitated by a growing sense of family solidarity.

"You know," he said, "our father was a revolutionary; he supported this Revolution to the hilt. Your opposition would have pained him. We love this system, this ideology, and Fidel. We would give our lives for the Revolution."

"I love the Revolution as much as you do," I said. "But I differentiate it from the regime; I support the former, not the latter."

Where did I draw the line? Revolution was a historical phenomenon, a continual quest for justice, nurtured generation after generation; it was an unending process that defied circumstance, time, or place. Revolution was about people's aspirations and dreams. Revolution was an ethical, moral, and philosophical proposition, whereas any regime was no more than a structure, elaborated by rulers to govern other men.

The Cuban Revolution had been the most powerful experience of my youth. It impacted me heavily, precisely because I grew up in and was forged by those realities it had intended to change. I had never reneged on the quest for justice that fueled it, and would not have made the mistake of colluding with its enemies. In three decades that regime had accomplished more on behalf of the poorest layers of the Cuban populace than had any other regime since independence. I detested the old Cuba in which I was raised. Still, I would not support a totalitarian dictatorship anywhere, in any form.

Even at the peak of my resolute opposition to the Cuban regime, I never let myself forget that I was facing one of the most extraordinary leaders in contemporary history. The architect of the Cuban Revolution was an authentic social reformer, a sincere nationalist, a man of courage, integrity, and political talent. I continued to have great respect for him, and to admire his best qualities; I never lost sight of this. My critique of Fidel Castro's governing style, my bitter opposition to his regime's despotic policies, had never made me overlook his political merits.

Although I had begun to fear that Castro would lead the nation down the path of paternalistic totalitarianism, I never fell into the trap of lumping him together with history's notorious dictators. He belonged to an altogether different strain from Mussolini, Caligula, Hitler, Franco, Salazar, or Duvalier. I was also aware that the Cuban mind-set was receptive to dictatorship. The repressive regime that was established as soon as Castro seized power in 1959 was perfectly compatible with what could be called the Cuban personality.

"Nations are like individual people; they have distinct personalities," I told Arturo.

If the revolutionary regime so readily embarked on repressive policies against targets such as the Afro-Cuban religious brotherhoods, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, or the black social clubs it was because the rampant prejudices of Cuban society let it do so. Entangled in their quest for social justice and political representation, Cubans could not escape collective responsibility for the growth and maintenance of a popular dictatorship. Various idiosyncratic traits, deep in the Cuban psyche, favored and legitimized an intolerant regime.

Machismo, sexism, racism, homophobia, religious intolerance, and chauvinism were intrinsic vices that the regime had allowed to flourish because it shared them or found them politically expedient. In those areas, the leaders of the Revolution had conducted themselves more as conservatives and reactionaries than revolutionaries. Consequently, a great opportunity had been lost.

Thanks to people such as Walterio Carbonell, early in the 1960s I came to understand that the regime's approach to the question of race and racism was inimical to a lasting democratic solution. The racial pact being offered to Cuban blacks was a minimalist patchwork of half-hearted compromises. In the long run, it would allow the construction of a new edifice of white supremacy with the bricks of the old building.

I agreed with Carbonell and others that the solution offered and initially accepted by Cuban blacks would sooner or later end up in a cul-de-sac. I came to the conclusion that the revolutionary government that assumed power in 1959 was not prepared to concede anything resembling racial power sharing. On the issues of race, gender, and sexual orientation that became dominant in the latter part of the twentieth century, the opinions of Fidel Castro and his colleagues—shaped essentially by the universalistic and republican ideas of the French Revolution—were crude, prejudiced, and frankly reactionary.

Those who did not share the regime's perspective were accused of taking orders and being in the pay of America's CIA, or being in collu-

sion with the pro-U.S. white exiles in Miami. However, the regime knew well that it lied in concocting those charges, and my discovery of that fact created a crisis of confidence.

It was when I realized the impossibility of any rational discussion on these issues, the regime preferring to maintain the status quo, that I resolved to go out on a limb and oppose it. To this day I do not regret my decision.

"Castro had the moral mandate and political capacity to radically change the racial map of Cuba, but he voluntarily didn't," I told Arturo.

In Cuba, the possibilities for a breakthrough in the cruel race relations drama that afflicted the planet had coalesced, perhaps for the first time in history. The Cuban Revolution had opened a virgin page for us to write, together, a new beginning. We loved Fidel Castro as we did because, among other things, we felt he represented what was most noble in each of us. He had demonstrated a profound sensibility to the plight of those who had been historically crushed underfoot, even though he was from the upper class. We trusted that on our behalf he would go the full length, to end forever racial tyranny in all its shapes and expressions in Cuba.

Had Castro thrown his enormous powers behind vigorous and bold policy initiatives specifically oriented at eliminating racism, I am convinced that it would have made a big difference. In that sense, Castro and his colleagues indeed missed a unique opportunity to make a significant breakthrough in one of the most crucial areas in human relations.

All this is to say that the quirks, prejudices, and phobias that affect common mortals also affect the best of social reformers. History is basically made by real people who go about transforming society, but always within parameters that are defined, to a great extent, by their individual makeup and limitations. It is to Castro's credit that he broke out of the class prejudices and privileges into which he was born. But he was less successful in shedding the racial vision he inherited. Castro remained trapped in the infinitesimal lines of the cobweb that racism weaves

around the lives of the whites who practice it, to their exclusive advantage. Since the other white revolutionaries who accompanied him to power were no more enlightened on that question than he, the situation became dangerously deadlocked.

But the other side of the equation concerned the collective psyche of black Cubans. Imprisoned within their walls of racial inferiority, Cuban blacks remained uncritical of the regime's simplistic racial policies for a long while, not wanting to rock the boat.

I agreed that the Cuban Revolution represented the opening of a door to the noblest corners of humankind. Cubans had unquestionably derived many social and political benefits from communism. But, as elsewhere, communism in Cuba had proved to be a farcical deception, I felt.

Arturo's face was a grim mask of contained dissatisfaction; nevertheless he listened without interruption, any upset disguised under an expression of academiclike detachment. I knew that inwardly he was in turmoil; I was attacking his regime, his ideology, his beliefs. When he spoke, he affected an air of scholarly objectivity.

"Your criticisms are unfounded," he said.

My views on the situation in Cuba were biased; I had been away too long to have a true picture of the Revolution. Cuba's wretched state, prior to 1959, required a strong hand. The execution of enemies of the state, the suppression of counterrevolutionary dissent, had been necessary to defend and consolidate the Revolution in the face of American aggression. Still, Cuba was not a dictatorship but a popular democracy; no place was freer than Cuba. There was indeed a growing race problem; however, it was a recent phenomenon attributable to social conditions arising from the Soviet bloc collapse. Cuban women were among the freest in the world; there was as much equality between the genders in Cuba as anywhere else. The regime's repression of gays and lesbians in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s was justified; society had to be protected against such vices.

"Homosexuals aren't normal," he said. "I can't come around to accepting them as comrades."

Like most Cubans, Arturo continued blissfully unaware of the extent of the regime's repression, abuses, and excesses during the first three decades of the Revolution. I too had once spouted many of his arguments. Walterio Carbonell had alerted me to being on the wrong side of many social issues. I upheld him as a great revolutionary to whom I was forever grateful for broadening my ethical horizons. I shared this experience with Arturo.

Carbonell had taught me that a revolutionary must be courageous in exposing his ideas, especially when going against the grain, but must also be coherent. That meant taking up the defense of anyone whose rights were trampled. So he had stood up against the regime's repression of Afro-Cuban religions and of gays when it was most dangerous to do so. I told Arturo that because of my own stand against such outrages, I had narrowly avoided a PPP camp myself, accused of being a friend of gays.

Like most Cubans, Arturo had not read *Critica: Cómo surgio la cultura nacional*, and did not know who Carbonell was. The regime had carefully erased the names and works of such people from the consciousness of Cubans, who had access only to a relentless rehashing of the leadership's heroic deeds. The Revolution's history was a seamless swathe of noble achievements, wise leadership, and consummate justice. Arturo could not bring himself to believe that the government had imprisoned a brilliant revolutionary, or purposefully demolished his sanity in psychiatric institutions.

"Destroying innocent people, persecuting revolutionaries, assassinating adversaries, lies, disinformation, have never been our policy," he said. "During Stalin the Soviets may have done such things, but we don't use those methods."

I got up, went into my bedroom, and returned with a back issue of *Granma*, which I handed him. That most official organ of the state, party, and government of Cuba had published in 1990 an editorial in which I was described as a counterrevolutionary émigré with strong links to the North American Secret Services. None other than Felix Pita Artudillo, *Granma*'s political commentator, signed it.

Arturo folded the page, a somber look on his dark face, and handed it back; he was visibly troubled.

I had had no intention of getting personal, but faced with his skepticism I had to. I explained to him that such charges in the Cuban press had been the least of my worries; I had had to confront much more serious situations. I told him of the ever-present threat of physical termination that for three decades the regime dangled over my head. I spoke of the campaign of lies and defamation the Cuban regime orchestrated during that period to destroy me. Cuban intelligence had resorted to every possible stratagem, including forgery, to buttress its allegations about me being an agent of U.S. intelligence. It had spread allegations that linked me to shady, CIA-supported African politicians, like Jonas Savimbi and Roberto Holden, and to the apartheid regime in South Africa. At least in one case, the so-called Cubela Affair, I suspected Cuba's secret service to have attempted to set me up for entrapment. The intangible morality of Cuba's regime was a myth!

Arturo recognized me as a man of ideas and principles, since I took a strong stand on social issues. He knew that my charges were not baseless. It was the first time anyone was authoritatively questioning his views or challenging the morality of a regime that was dear to his heart.

After a while, he said, "I'll tell you something that has been on my conscience for years."

He related an incident in Havana during the Mariel Crisis of the early 1980s, when tens of thousands of Cubans, hoping to get away in a massive boatlift the government had suddenly authorized, besieged embassies and ports. Arturo was among those who surrounded the embassies, armed with baseball bats, iron bars, and stones, bludgeoning the escapees in an operation denominated *repudio*, a regime-inspired demonstration against its fleeing enemies. In the mêlée, he sighted a man he recognized as being gay who was trying to escape into the Peruvian embassy. Arturo felt an uncontrollable rush of hatred; he pursued him, knocked him down, and began to stomp him viciously. The terrified cries for mercy of the fallen man, his face blood-

ied by the beating, made Arturo stop as he was about to crash his boot on his skull.

"Every time I remember that scene I shudder," he said, his head hanging in shame. "I almost killed an innocent man."

"Fascist regimes always incite mob action," I said pointedly.

"We don't have a fascist regime here," he said, defensively but calmly. "I admit it was wrong to do such a thing, and I'm now sorry. In that sense, yes, we made mistakes."

"*Repudio* operations, repression of gays, attempts to destroy Afro-Cuban religions—those weren't mistakes," I said. "They were crimes."

"We are revolutionaries, not criminals," Arturo said lamely.

"Suppose that gay man you nearly killed had been your own son? Had he been killed in those circumstances, what would you have called his murderer?"

Arturo was pensive.

That conversation could have led to a break with my newly found brother or compromised my standing with my siblings on my father's side. Surprisingly, it did not. My exchanges with Arturo became more frequent, and eventually matters dealing with our respective families moved to the center. Once I departed Cuba, Arturo acted as a go-between for the rest of the Marshalls and me. It was good to feel their warmth and become object of their care. Each one of them was now part of my life.

The Revolution psychologically empowered the have-nots, creating a new middle class from the former disenfranchised. It had opened to these supporters the doors to midlevel positions in the armed forces, the Communist Party, the secret services, and the police. Now, many of those former underdogs used their new power to terrorize and intimidate fellow citizens in the name of the Revolution. I was to meet one such representative.

One night I found myself speaking with Assata Shakur, a beautiful, tall, late-thirtyish, and soft-spoken woman, a former Black Panther mil-

itant. I had met her on a social occasion at the home of a female black Cuban scholar and we had remained in touch. Like Robert Williams in the early 1960s, she was well connected with Cuban officialdom and a beneficiary of its largesse. Assata was wanted in the United States on charges of killing a policeman, but Cuba had refused to hand her back. She had been granted asylum to live in Cuba more than fifteen years earlier.

Assata and I were exiles at opposite ends—she, a convinced Marxist, I, a resolute anti-Marxist—but I liked her spirit and admired her courage. As an exile, I applauded the regime's stance and understood Assata's gratitude toward it.

One day she phoned. Someone she trusted in the government wanted to meet me before my departure, she said. The person in question, "Comrade Aleida," a black woman, headed a sensitive unit of the Cuban Institute for Friendship with the Peoples (ICAP). "She could be of great help to you in the future," Assata explained, countering my reluctance. Moreover, the official may have something very important to speak to me about.

On principle, it was out of the question that I set foot on ICAP premises. So Comrade Aleida turned up at the apartment where I was staying, in the guise of a shapely, thirty-something, attractive, brown-skinned woman with a tantalizing smile. Her foreign perfume, expensive clothes, and elegant leather shoes spoke of easy access to the dollars-only stores and diplomatic outlets. The high living reserved for cadres of the regime was written all over her.

She had read *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa*, she said, and wanted to discuss it. In fact, other ICAP comrades also wanted to meet for a chat about that and "other issues."

I had not come to Cuba to meet with government officials, I told her, nor was I interested in discussing my book. "Suppose we speak instead about the situation in Cuba and where all this may be leading?" I suggested.

"What do you mean exactly?" she asked.

I said I was appalled at the conditions in which Cubans lived. I did not buy the argument that it was a consequence of the disappearance of the Soviet bloc. The country was actually reverting to capitalism and the regime was deceitfully claiming the opposite. What was her own position on this?

As if she had not heard a word I said, Comrade Aleida continued her cross-examination: "Our government let you return, you've traveled freely and had a chance to see what the Revolution has accomplished. Have you changed your mind?"

"Changed my mind about what?"

"The charges of racism you've leveled around the world against the Revolution."

"Is that what you came to see me about?"

"I came for a friendly conversation," she replied.

"Then you should know I stand by everything I've ever said or written about this government. And since you want to know my current views, I'll tell you: there's as much racism and discrimination today as when I left three decades ago—"

She cut me off. The fake smile vanished, the syrupy voice deepened: "I won't let you say such a thing. You know nothing about Cuba! You haven't been living here. You're like a foreigner in this country. You have no right to speak about Cuba," she said.

"So only mouthpieces of this regime may comment on what's going on?"

"I am not a mouthpiece, as you put it, but an official representative of the Cuban government, and I live here, not abroad," she answered.

"Since you do live here and are a government official, what do you intend to do about the disproportionate number of black men and women in Cuban prisons? Why are 85 percent of prisoners black? Why do so many blacks live in ghettos?"

"There are no ghettoes in Cuba! Who gave you such false statistics?"

"Since you claim they are false, can you arrange for me to visit some prisons?"

"I'm beginning to doubt your motives for coming to our country," she said pointedly.

"The constitution says I am a Cuban; it's my country, too! I have the right to be here, even if a dictatorial government disregards that right."

"Are you calling our head of state a dictator?"

But I would not be sucked into an unprofitable debate about the Cuban leader. "Right now I'm more interested in Cuba's future, not its past," I said.

"Are you saying Cuba's leader is the past?" she asked indignantly.

Our conversation was going nowhere and I told her so. She rose from her seat and extended a stiff arm. We shook hands and politely exchanged the customary niceties that etiquette demanded. But within twenty-four hours, Comrade Aleida began a rumor campaign against me. I had insulted the head of state. I was a hypocrite who feigned to have changed while remaining an agent of imperialism. I was a counterrevolutionary, intent on sabotaging national unity for the benefit of Yankee imperialism.

There was a time when no Cuban would have survived a single one of those accusations; he would have been arrested on the spot and consigned to oblivion. But winds of change were sweeping over Cuba; people like Comrade Aleida, with her fossilized jargon and mentality, were at best museum pieces, walking dinosaurs. But what about emergent Cuba? What sort of denizens were sprouting from the wreckage of communism and the triumphant rise of a consumer-oriented, individualistic society?

The Soviet bloc's collapse dramatically affected the midlevel elite that had sprung up with the Revolution. These middle-class professionals suddenly found themselves stranded financially. Some, like my brother Frank, now socially marooned, still clung to a hopeless raft. Others, more realistic, changed tack in an attempt to preserve their flamboyant lifestyles. It was this breed that was prospering.

The dollarization of Cuba's economy, with tourism as the engine, created new situations whereby a pragmatic ex-Communist elite could reposition itself. The racially discriminatory practices of the tourist industry had created social tensions and heightened racial awareness among the black population. The tourist boom, in turn, produced a dollar-crazy folklorization of Afro-Cuban culture. Western European tourists evinced an inordinate interest in black Cuban religion, music, and dance; things black became exotic and were being officially commoditized as never before. The regime had discovered blackness as a profitable human raw material; at the same time, Cuba's race conundrum was an eyesore that visitors invariably pointed out. The credibility gap between government and populace widened.

This new situation offered a golden opportunity to elite blacks. A generation of government-sponsored specialists and consultants sprang up once discussion of that taboo question was allowed. Some even set up their own NGOs, repositioning themselves as intermediaries between the government and the restless black populace.

"Ever since the government opened up on the racial thing, all sorts of opportunists mushroomed who'd never risked their hides to denounce racism before," complained my friend Tomás. His bitterness about the wheeler-dealers who had turned ethnic studies into a thriving business to further their own interests was legitimate. A burgeoning crop of handpicked black academics and intellectuals now earned crisp American dollars attending gatherings abroad where the Cuban race question was up for discussion. Naturally these were safe blacks, fully grounded in Marxist ideology but who now talked black. Seeking insight into the thinking of this new breed, I accepted to meet with one of those who epitomized the trend.

Sophisticated and well groomed, "Pamela" came to see me at the apartment where I was staying in Havana's affluent Miramar section. She was well informed, as befitted a highly educated black Marxist cadre, and cunningly intelligent. She was definitely a survivor, one of those successful in promoting their self-interest under any system.

Coquettishly dressed in tailored jeans, silk blouse, and low-heeled Italian shoes, she exuded the poise of someone who knew her way around European capitals. She cultivated the air of a seasoned jet-setter, leaving a whiff of imported perfume wherever she took her lean frame. Everything about Pamela was calculated to inspire confidence. She wore her hair in a short afro and peppered her conversation with references to "our brothers."

Pamela's tale was typical of the emergent black middle class bred by Cuban communism: a flawlessly vertical ascent up the ladder within the myriad research institutions set up by the government and the Communist Party. Most of these units were affiliated in some way with Cuban intelligence. She had married a middle-rank black intellectual who headed an intelligence-sponsored research unit that acted as a government think tank. Clearly she had said and thought the right things throughout her life.

She bragged about having been an aide to former Communist Party ideologue Carlos Aldana, a light-skinned, self-described mulatto who was riding high during the 1980s as one of the regime's powerful figures. According to her, he had assigned her to rebut my book *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa,* and based on that research she had projected to write her own opus on race relations in Cuba. "At first I was completely against you," she said, "but I came to understand your point."

Having converted to negritude, she claimed, she set up an NGO dedicated to the uplift of poor blacks in Old Havana. She needed dollars to bankroll it and wanted to know what connections I had to international funding. I knew she had already received grants from UNESCO, had spent a year at an American university, and was canvassing support in Western Europe. Pamela was undoubtedly a skillful profiteer.

Her pro-black discourse was inconsistent and she seemed uncomfortable with her new ethnic persona. She was unusually enamored of her light cocoa-brown complexion. Black Cubans were culturally closer to southern Europeans than to West Africans, she said. She considered the terms black or Afro-Cuban inappropriate.

"We're actually *mestizos*, a new mulatto race. My surname is Basque, the area in Spain from which my ancestors came."

"Did any of your ancestors happen to have been born in Africa?'" I quipped.

Pamela reacted to my sarcasm with a well-groomed smile on her angular face. After all, she was a diplomat of sorts, someone who had wiggled her way to the top on the basis of who-knows-what sort of concessions to integrity.

"We need to reduce the gap between blacks and whites that has appeared since the disintegration of the Socialist camp," she said.

"That gap was there before," I said. "Why don't you ask the Cuban government to fund a national drive for affirmative action?" Her campaign to rescue the poor black population of Old Havana should start at home.

She was defensive. Cuba was broke, she said; the money to alleviate the plight of poor black Cubans had to come from international sources.

"Officials here live quite well for a country that's broke," I said. "Wouldn't it be appropriate to ask the ruling Communist elite to channel some of its luxury spending to help your NGO for poor blacks?"

She smiled coyly, knowing she was getting nowhere with me. Our conversation tapered off. Her attempt at co-optation floundered.

The encounter with Pamela left me pensive. Was her's the face of the post-Communist Cuba whose contours were now apparent everywhere? The idealism that had fired up my imagination during the early days of the Revolution was quickly becoming a relic of the past. Pamela's materialistic, opportunistic face was, indeed, the face of an encroaching future that had already caught up with the other ex-Socialist countries. In that sense, yes, Cuba seemed to be an island condemned to repeat itself, as one of its more intuitive writers has said.

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EXILES WITHIN

Walterio Carbonell fought the war single-handedly and paid the price: the regime crucified him. After languishing for years in hard-labor camps, he had been interned in psychiatric hospitals. It was rumored that his mind had been purposely damaged. He now suffered from acute paranoia and was given to moments of total disorientation. He had good and bad days.

Suspicious of everyone, he thought he was still under round-the-clock surveillance. Tomás, a longtime friend of our teacher, told him I was back in Cuba and eager to see him, but he did not believe it. So I braced myself for the reunion with the man who had shaped much of my political and ethical values during the early period of the Revolution.

Tomás, who would be the only witness, choreographed our meeting. My mentor of old sat patiently waiting on a bench at the National Library of Cuba. I approached him walking softly, restraining myself from any overtly demonstrative gesture that could make him wary. The sight of his hunched, emaciated figure, wearing wrinkled and soiled clothes, set off signals of panic in me. The elegant, debonair, handsome Carbonell of my youth was gone. His sunken cheeks and shaking hands spoke of the horrors he had endured. Thin as a skeleton, at times seeming lost, his penetrating eyes stared through me and beyond. I stood before a ghost.

Softly, I whispered my name into his ear. "*Maestro*, I am back," I said. His eyes widened in amazement. I wanted to hug him, but instead I sat beside him, struggling against an onrush of tears.

"Yes, I recognize the voice," he said. "Carlos Moore!"

"Yes, *maestro*, I am back."

A slight smile lit his face then dissipated quickly. The vague look in his eyes told me that this was one of his bad days.

"You know what? The secret police tried to trick me," he said. "They don't give up."

Carbonell began to whisper, throwing darting glances about the place, as though expecting someone to show up at any moment and disrupt our conversation. Tomás's head was bowed, as if at a funeral. I listened in silence.

"A woman came to see me a while ago, saying she was your wife," he recounted. "They tried to trick me."

I knew the whole story. Two years before, during her first trip to Cuba, Tomás had taken Ayeola to him, but Carbonell had feared she was from the secret police.

"*Maestro*, that woman was really my wife," I said softly.

He looked at me in disbelief, then changed the subject. "How is Aimé Césaire? Alioune Diop? How are Gisèle Halimi and Jean-Paul Sartre?"

His long-term memory was intact, but when speaking of the present he had difficulty coordinating his thoughts. I responded to his questions: Sartre, Alioune Diop, and Cheikh Anta Diop had all died during the 1980s. A veil of sadness covered his face.

"Is Aimé Césaire also dead?" he asked.

I shook my head negatively.

"That's good. I want you to tell Césaire I'm writing a poem that will be as great as his *Notebook of a Return to My Native Country*."

He opened his briefcase and pulled out a bunch of long sheets of handwritten paper. I wondered where he got it since paper was scarce in Cuba at the time.

"I'm writing the greatest poem ever, about the history of every black on this planet, from the beginning of time. I need pen and paper. Can you get some for me?"

"Yes, *maestro*."

"Here! I've started the poem. I've been writing it for years. I began it in the camp and now it's almost finished. Do you want to hear it?"

"Of course, *maestro*."

I listened for about five minutes. Then he stopped and looked at me quizzically.

"What do you think of my poem? You see why it will be greater than *Return to My Native Country*?"

"Yes, *maestro,*" I replied.

But there was no poem. He was reciting a litany of juxtaposed words, historical events, names of great people such as Toussaint L'Ouverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and others. Only he could fathom the meaning of that chaotic prose; nothing made sense, but I could not tell him so. My heart was filled with grief. One of the most brilliant Cuban minds had been annihilated, turned to rubble. Would my fate have been any different had I remained in Cuba?

After an hour, I indicated I was leaving. Walterio insisted on going out with me. We walked for a block or two until we reached the spot where he usually boarded his bus. Suddenly, he grabbed my arm.

"You know why I came out with you?"

"No, *maestro*. Why?"

"Because I need ten dollars to buy paper to write my poem."

I felt pangs of guilt as I sunk my hand into my pocket and extracted the amount he had requested, as if he were a beggar. I was very ashamed. I promised that next time I would bring him ballpoint pens and lots of paper.

His face lit up. "You will come back to see me?"

"Yes, *maestro*. I'll always come back to see you."

For several minutes I remained rooted to the spot, watching his bus disappear amid billowing black smoke. My heart was a knot of sorrow. Walterio Carbonell carried the cross of every Cuban at the most dan-

gerous stage of the Revolution. One day his countrymen would have to pay homage to him.

I NEEDED TO RECLASSIFY Cuba in my mind from a place of primary political obligations to, once again, simply my land. Deep down I craved for it to be like any other country, with virtues and defects, a place to which I would be free to come and go as I pleased.

My first visit had been too short to grasp the complexity of the environment in the making. The overwhelming sentimentality of my return robbed me of the objectivity to resituate myself. I was determined to see my country with neither the eyes of a political militant nor those of a tourist, although I knew I could never again regard it as my countrymen did. I would have the perspective of someone with other comparative realities. Still, I wanted to be attuned to the day-to-day context of Cubans living in Cuba.

In late 1997, I undertook a second visit, this time allowing myself to wander aimlessly in the streets of Havana, revisiting once-familiar places that I now strained to recognize. I let my memories guide me to those landmarks where a vanished world lay buried. I was hoping to recapture fragments of a wondrous moment in my life when everything I had yearned for seemed possible. I wanted one last dance with its lingering shadow; I preferred the company of that ghost to the emerging reality I met everywhere.

I was outside the two-story building that housed my old apartment, opposite the headquarters of the National Union of Writers and Artists, in the affluent Vedado section. The decrepit, unpainted building was a shadow of the place I had known in the early 1960s. Most of my former neighbors were still there. I walked up the long stairs and stopped before what had once been my minuscule second-floor room. A family of three was now cramped in that space.

I found the black poet Georgina on the ground floor, living in the same crowded room she had shared with her husband, the writer Manuel Granados. The walls were cracked and the concrete floor had

holes. Everything about her spoke of deprivation. Here was a talented writer living in the most deplorable condition, but without complaint.

As we exchanged tales, I entered further into the calamity of her life. Granados had left her and gone into exile in France, where he had recently died. Three years before, Georgina had lost her twenty-four-year-old daughter in a car accident. She conceded that life in Cuba had taken a turn for the worse and that racism was on the rise, but she continued to place faith in the regime.

"We were living such a beautiful dream. I don't know what went wrong or when. I will still dream, even if that's not practical," she said, with her soft eloquence.

Georgina kept herself going by adhering to her dream, but everywhere I traveled for the next few weeks, I saw people living a nightmare. The desperate condition of ordinary Cubans saddened me. What, indeed, had gone wrong?

Late one night I went with friends for a stroll along the Malecón. At that hour, Havana seemed to stand still. We enjoyed the cool breeze while downing cans of ice-cold beer and listening to the waves pound the seawall. Salsa music drifted our way from one of the open-air clubs that enliven the nights of Cuba's capital.

One of my friends had served in Cuba's expeditionary force to Angola. Over half a million Cubans like him had seen action on the battlefields of Africa and now lived with their haunting memories. Cuba had prospered and felt confident during those years of foreign intervention, he said. But the end of the wars in Africa in the 1980s had coincided with a turn for the worse when the Soviet Union collapsed.

My friends complained bitterly about conditions in the country. Large cities began to exhibit homeless people and beggars, mostly black skinned. Jobs were scarce and the majority of the unemployed were black, many of them veterans of the African wars. The police targeted black youth for harassment as criminals, dark-complexioned females as prostitutes. Blacks were excluded from all positions connected with

tourism, where income came in U.S. dollars. Even menial jobs once monopolized by blacks—bellhops, chambermaids—were being taken over by whites. Consequently, most of the Cuban women who resorted to prostitution to earn a living were dark skinned.

"The tourist now rules this country," my friend said. He went on, "Do you know what they're really after? Sex with black women! That's what we have to put up with."

Everywhere, I noticed the double apartheid that had taken hold. One could tell who was getting U.S. dollars simply by their clothes. Cuba was divided sharply between those wearing expensive new sneakers, shirts, dresses, or pants, and those in clothes that had been washed countlesss times over the past decade. Those with relatives in America bought cars, refrigerators, air conditioning, TVs, and stereo equipment, fitted out their homes with luxury items such as brand-new stoves, rugs, and silverware, while ordinary Cubans made do with hazardous stoves that worked on a mix of petrol and alcohol.

I was told there were four classes of nouveaux riches: people in government (naturally); those whose jobs related to the tourist industry; those with access to dollars through U.S.-based relatives; and those who, having access to land, grew produce to sell. All four categories were predominantly white.

An ordinary professional, a doctor or an engineer, earned the equivalent of ten to twelve U.S. dollars per month. That could not even buy a meal in a *paladar*, the private home-cuisine restaurants. Most blacks could not enter such places anyway or patronize the exclusive *tiendas Pan-Americanas*, Pan-American stores.

"Welcome to the new realities of Cuba," one of my friends said somberly.

The problem with these new realities, I mused, was that they were so strikingly reminiscent of the pre-Castro days I had known. When you conflated the regime's encouragement of huge remittances from the mostly white U.S.-based exile community and a de facto discriminatory hiring practice whereby jobs that gave access to hard currency were auto-

matically reserved for whites, the writing on the wall seemed clear. The opening up of the economy that lay ahead, while providing for wider access to consumer goods and a more Western lifestyle, would at the same time guarantee that the traditional patterns aligning power with pigmentation continued into the future. Once again, race was asserting itself with a vengeance.

There was no question that Cubans were increasingly being socially disenfranchised and losing the sense of belonging that the Revolution had initially inspired. A new generation of internal exiles was on the rise. Many sought to escape, either through marriage to a foreigner, being claimed by a U.S.-based relative, or through illegal flight.

However, there were people such as the historian/ethnologist Rogelio Martínez Furé, who had never contemplated leaving the country or surrendering his ideals. Martinez Furé was, in my book, one of black Cuba's most imposing intellectuals. His attachment to his negritude had not led him to prison, work camps, or psychiatric hospitals, as was the case with Carbonell. Marginalized for three decades, he had settled for a quiet life, producing works that would never see the light, in the hope of better days.

I first met Martinez Furé in 1961, a few months after my arrival from the United States, while he was instructor for the Folkloric Dance Ensemble. He was about five years my senior. He patiently revealed to me the magical world of the Afro-Cuban cults, leading to a discovery of those African cultural traditions from which I was estranged. Rogelio loomed large in my youth. Three decades had slipped by since we had last seen each other. Now that I was fifty-four, my mind flashed back to those days when, aged nineteen, my passion for the Revolution ran parallel to a growing interest in black Cuban culture. I wanted to express gratitude and pay my respects.

Tall, with a bushy Afro, lively eyes, and a perpetual smile, the man was essentially the same generous human being I had known in the

1960s. UNESCO's interest in his work was instrumental in his preservation. Over the years, he had traveled frequently to conferences and seminars sponsored by that organization.

"Have you seen Walterio?" he asked, stroking his long, angular face.

I nodded affirmatively.

"He paid for all of us," Rogelio said wistfully.

His small apartment was cluttered with books, plants, paintings. As always, he spoke passionately about Africa, poetry, drama, religion, and music. His mind sharp as ever, he quoted effortlessly from Aimé Césaire, Toni Morrison, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Langston Hughes. As in the past, I sat mesmerized, in awe and admiration of his erudition. He began asking questions about my experiences abroad.

"I'm curious about how you now see the world, after traversing so much of it," he said with genuine interest.

I said I was glad to have left Cuba, since living abroad had made me come to terms with the real, rather than fictional or idealized, world. People wherever I went organized themselves into tight groups that defined the essence of who they were, based on religion, ethnicity, culture, nationality, language, race, gender, or sexual orientation. Anyone outside the in-group was viewed with a degree of suspicion, fear, prejudice, or intolerance.

"Chauvinism and bigotry seem to be natural ingredients of society," I said. Of all the forms of in-group convergence, I found race by far the most dangerous and perverse. As I traveled around the world, I discovered that the racism I had confronted from the moment of my birth was a planetary phenomenon with long historical antecedents.

Rogelio remarked that biologists had proved that race was not a biological reality.

I did not see how that altered the basic issues. Races *did* exist in people's minds, conditioning the lives of hundreds of millions. Race was a most dangerous and perverse reality, elaborated historically on the basis of physical otherness. Racism was a powerful and quintessential form of barbarism, the ultimate frontier of hatred.

Nothing I said ruffled Rogelio. It was as if he had always known those things that had taken me much time and travel to discover. My discoveries had changed much about the way I inserted myself into the world. Cuba was the only country I might call home without fear of contradiction, but sheer patriotism held no sway over me. I had looked forward to my return, but having returned I realized how much Cuba had ceased being my only reference point. Returning was no longer a necessity; I carried within me, recreating wherever I went, the Cuba of my heart—the one of my childhood, despite its horrors, and the one of my idealistic youth. Cuba was every country that I loved.

I had lived with other cultures, other peoples, shared their realities, entered their lives, and they mine, felt solidarity with their aspirations. I no longer bonded on the basis of an anthem, a flag, a coat of arms. A greater family existed above nation; exile had led me to that awareness. I could not settle for anything less.

"Identification with humanity is exactly what Revolution is about," Rogelio said.

He showed me a shelf laden with his unpublished manuscripts on Afro-Cuban culture, religion, and traditions, a treasure of documents written during his thirty-five-year silence. He autographed two volumes of his latest work, a UNESCO-sponsored anthology of African writing.

I could not help reflecting on how society had been robbed of the contributions of people such as Carbonell and Martinez Furé.

By the end of the last year of the twentieth century, I had made three successive visits to Cuba, each time discovering subtle facets of the cruel reality that Cubans were enduring. I was saddened to bear witness to the death of a revolution. My third visit was in the wake of the greatest calamity in my brother Frank's life: six months earlier, his only son, twenty-eight-year-old Victor Franklynovitch, was killed when his motorcycle ran into a truck.

Throughout the burial ceremony, Frank stood expressionless, showing none of the grief that ravaged him. Months after the tragedy, he con-

tinued to blame himself; the motorcycle had been his reward for Victor's success at earning a master's in economics. "I should have known better; he would be alive today," he said. However, the real source of his remorse ran deeper. There had been much conflict between them, their relationship deteriorating almost to the point of rupture because of opposing political stances.

"He had everything we didn't as children," Frank said, gazing into the distance. "Still, he was not satisfied."

My nephew and I had never really clicked. However, because of long conversations I had had with him, I understood Victor's feelings in a way that Frank could not. Like many young black Cubans, he was opposed to the regime. He was bitter and disabused, moved by a single obsession: to leave Cuba for good. My attempts to paint a realistic picture of life in Europe and the United States were suspect to him. If things were so bad in those countries, then why did I live abroad? My chemistry did not mix well with Victor's. I could not fathom him. His unrealistic expectations of a better life abroad were based on access to consumer habits that in Cuba were restricted to the elite. Could he be blamed for wanting so badly those things the ruling class did not deny itself, the same freedom to speak his mind that I myself had fled Cuba to obtain?

One day, visiting their home in the minuscule government-built apartment they shared in East Havana, I witnessed the young man's frustration. I had been invited to a fried plantain, rice, and black-eyed beans lunch—a typical meal few Cubans could afford. Frank, a Soviet-trained engineer and party member, lived better than average, yet even professionals like him were not completely shielded from the rigors of life in Cuba.

The argument Frank and his son had that day began over something quite trivial but quickly mushroomed into a political shouting match.

"This regime is rotten and you refuse to see that. It treats us all like children. I want no part of it!" Victor shouted.

"It's you who is ungrateful!" Frank shouted back.

Victor had studied economics in the Soviet Union but had to start again when the Communist bloc collapsed. As Cuba set about transforming to a capitalist system, only market economics were of value.

"I wasted half my life studying rubbish that no intelligent person believes anymore. Marxist economics just doesn't work; that's why the government is backtracking to capitalism but fooling everyone by saying it's not," Victor said.

"That's a lie! We will *never* return to capitalism!" Frank said, desperation in his voice.

The tension between them mirrored the confusion looming in society at large. As the government changed its tune and economic tactics, nobody knew on which foot to dance.

I had not expected to find myself embroiled in such an uncomfortable situation. It almost seemed that Victor had waited for my presence before venting his anger at his father. He complained that the regime was wasting Cubans' lives. He accused his father of having left him and his Soviet mother alone while studying endlessly in the Soviet Union. After becoming a naval engineer, Frank had returned to Russia for several more years of specialization. Meanwhile, his family disintegrated.

"This goddamned regime robbed me of a father and stole a husband from my mother," the young man shouted, barely containing his tears.

Frank's marriage to Zenaida, a Soviet woman, was indeed a disaster. When the Soviet Union disintegrated into several different new countries, she was marooned in Cuba without a country, passport, or marriage. She suffered a nervous breakdown and, on the heels of it, contracted cancer. She died without seeing her native Georgia again.

Frank's new live-in partner, Magaly, a plump white peasant girl with whom he seemed infatuated, merely aggravated the situation with his son. Her presence in the house, a mere year after Zenaida's passing, was another bone of contention. Victor scarcely spoke to the woman, whom he called a usurper. He suggested to me that Magaly was a user, taking advantage of the fact that they owned an apartment in Havana. Cubans

from other provinces were not legally allowed to reside in the capital, and clandestine immigrants were subject to arrest and deportation to their native regions. Magaly, from the predominantly white province of Villa Clara, was one such migrant. She was nice enough but simplistic in her judgments, exhibiting the racial prejudices typical of Cuba's countryside *guajiros*.

"You're so blind with the Communist ideology that you can't see you're all being *used*. This regime is made up of a bunch of corrupt liars."

Frank's pleas for restraint only exacerbated his son's anger.

"Look at you! What do you have to show for thirty years of sacrifice—sacrificing your own family, sacrificing a relationship with your parents and your brothers and sisters?"

"That's enough!" Frank shouted.

"No, what is enough is the repression we're all experiencing under this damned regime," Victor shouted back.

I was embarrassed by the spiraling feud, in fact fearful it might get out of control. My mind flashed back thirty-four years to when Frank and I would square off over similar issues and the question of racism. Now the struggle was with his son. Dialogue between them was as impossible as it once was between us brothers. It was a sad moment.

"I'll leave this country at the first opportunity," Victor snarled.

"You are free to do so," Frank responded coldly.

"No, that's a lie, like everything in this country. No one's free to do anything, not even to leave. You know that."

I had heard Victor's uncompromising criticism from the lips of other disaffected young Cubans, white and black. To Frank, however, young blacks were plain ungrateful.

"You know better than anyone the hell we blacks went through before the Revolution," he said, turning to me.

But the problem was precisely that Cuba's youth no longer directed attention to what their parents lacked. They focused on what *they* wanted. Topping the list was something they called *freedom:* to dress and wear their hair as they wished (dreadlocks, for instance, were to the police

an indicator of criminality); to travel outside Cuba; to change jobs; to have access to newspapers other than the official organ of the Communist Party; to live wherever they wished. In short, freedom to be!

The country teemed with youth such as Victor who did not give a hoot about Marxism and communism, and who just wanted out. Despite laudable social gains, Cuban society was a Dantesque conundrum of economic inefficiency, political repression, and racial stasis. That situation generated a sense of hopelessness, and even though open dissent was still rare, there were signs everywhere that a quiet, generalized dissatisfaction was gaining ground. The regime could no longer hush the brimming anger of those who had sacrificed all in the name of social change but now found themselves empty-handed.

However, attempting to leave Cuba was still held to be a crime. The year of what would be my penultimate visit, the regime executed three young Cuban men within forty-eight hours of their having attempted to hijack a boat to flee the island. The irony was that all three were black, two being veterans of the Angola war.

On the eve of a new millennium, Cubans continued to pay with prison or their life for wanting out of a country whose regime treated its citizenry as hostages. I was forced to bear witness to that in a most cruel way during an earlier trip, in 1998.

I had arrived at Santiago de Cuba airport on a twin-propeller, eighteen-seater that I boarded in Kingston, Jamaica, as the sole passenger. Five minutes before takeoff, twelve somber white men, heads shaved to the scalp, dressed in old jeans and pullovers, were led aboard by the Jamaican police and handcuffed to their seats. Four all-too-obvious members of the Jamaican secret police, impeccably dressed in suits and ties, boarded and sat strategically behind them. It took no genius to figure out that these were Cubans who had escaped by sea, landed in Jamaica, been jailed, and were now being returned to Cuba. Were they pro-U.S. bigots whose dream was to make a dash for Miami, Jamaica merely being a convenient stopover? Or ordinary fishermen who had decided to run away? Either way, I was revolted. Those men had been

captured and were being taken back to be handed over to the Cuban authorities as mere objects. Of course, I knew the reason; the Cuban regime considers anyone who attempts to flee a traitor.

Throughout the flight, I followed their conversation in Spanish. "This is the end of us," one of them kept saying. The others mumbled remarks from time to time. They were crushed. As Cuba's coastline approached, I sensed their terror through the resigned looks veiling their faces. They bid each other good-bye when the plane came to a halt.

Armed, uniformed members of Cuba's National Security met the Jamaican secret policemen. All smiles, the Jamaicans wore obsequious, self-satisfied looks; they were doing their job. The Cubans slapped them on the shoulders, cracked jokes, and barked orders at the recaptured men, who meekly descended from the aircraft and were marched off single file, heads bowed. Neither the crew nor I was allowed to disembark until Cuban security took possession of its goods. I watched them disappear into waiting vehicles positioned on the tarmac, feeling a strange sensation in my stomach. Three decades earlier, I could easily have been among them.

31

A RETURN TO SELF

It was the year 2000 and I had made four trips to Cuba since 1997. I was leaving the next day, with no idea of when I would return. The passport in my pocket entitled me to come and go as freely as I wished, but I had lost that driving sense of urgency about Cuba. In fact, I no longer felt a need to focus my energies on any one country.

My brother Frank dropped by to bid me farewell.

"I need to talk to you," he said in his deep, inflexibly regular voice. "But not about politics."

From him, whose every action had a political motive, this was a surprise. We decided to stroll along the Malecón.

Walking along Havana's seawall brought back memories of the 1960s, when I was desperate to leave Cuba and it was the only place where I could talk with minimal safety. Then a prisoner of the island, I would gaze at the immense ocean knowing that beyond the seawall lay my freedom. It rekindled my hope, recharged my spirit.

"I gave my entire youth to the Revolution and would do it again if I had to," Frank said, as we strolled. "But I regret the sacrifice of my family it entailed."

That was the strongest statement I had ever heard from my brother.

Frank rarely displayed his emotions. Secretive by nature, he was the ideal candidate for party militancy, military rigor, or intelligence work. But now a veil of sadness covered his tight, dark, pockmarked face; newer, deeper furrows had appeared between his brows. The many strands of gray hair that had sprouted were the only sign of his grief over the loss of his son. Otherwise he remained the same unshakable,

dutiful, work-oriented party cadre who discharged his mission with steely determination.

I listened as he ruminated about his ruined family life and the effects his political commitment had brought. He would have liked nothing better than a conversation with his parents before they departed, he said. Because of his affiliation to the party, however, he had sealed himself away from his U.S.-based family for three decades.

"I was not the best father or husband. I had to dedicate myself to the Revolution."

After severing all ties with his natural family for political reasons, Frank was also forced to live in solitude abroad. He, Zenaida, and young Victor endured the deep racial prejudices of Zenaida's parents and Russian society at large. Communism had not resolved the race question in the USSR either.

Frank suffered a heart attack in the Soviet Union, spent some time convalescing, but still refused to abandon his studies and return to Cuba. Doggedly, he held on until he completed his degree. After twelve years in the USSR, he returned to face another range of problems as Cuba entered a period of economic crisis and political uncertainty.

Defying her family's logic, Zenaida followed him to Cuba, where she lived for over a decade totally isolated in a grim, Soviet-style suburb. Their marriage progressively disintegrated under the weight of the political choices he was making. Now, two years after Zenaida's death from breast cancer, Victor was also dead.

"You are not responsible for your son's death," I told him.

"He was my only child; I wish we could have worked things out before he went."

With a quick motion, Frank wiped away a tear; the steel-and-concrete edifice he had built for himself showed signs of cracking. I was immersed in my own thoughts, involuntarily drawing parallels between us. Like him, I had devoted myself to political ends that I could morally justify. My commitment had led to a life of exile marked by relentless tension that profoundly modified my character, compromising health

and family. My first marriage unraveled before my helpless eyes and was over before I could begin to understand why. My time had been consumed by involvement with the Black Power struggle in the United States, the Caribbean, and the Pacific, and the national liberation movement in Africa. Today, when I consider what failures those national liberation movements became once in power, degenerating into corrupt dictatorships or staging senseless civil wars and genocides, I am overcome by a sense of waste. Moreover, I can only reflect, sadly, on how close I came to losing my life, and on those who did lose theirs, to uphold many causes that now appear so futile and unworthy.

I had fled Cuba seeking freedom, but exile landed me in another prison: that of fear, the fear of being killed. Personal security ordained everything: the countries in which I lived, the neighborhoods where I chose to reside, the places I frequented or avoided, the friends I cultivated, the pleasures I shunned or let myself enjoy.

Persecuted people end up leading uncommon lives. The very idea of a settled life is synonymous with being an easy target, so one feels safest only in the midst of chaos.

Exile easily incubates paranoia or delusions of grandeur. The exile must be on guard to stay ahead of the enemy: maneuvering to stay alive entails concealing actions and intentions. Fake documents and false identities are part of the protective foliage to thwart detection. The dividing line between caution and craftiness can be imperceptible. The exile has to muster, and master, some dubious skills to survive.

Although to my best knowledge the assassination of political adversaries was not a method favored by the Castro government, I am convinced that in my case the regime kept that option open. People whose opinion I could not disregard warned me on several occasions of that eventuality and so I prepared for what I thought inevitable. That in itself was unsettling in terms of building a family. Today, it may seem far-fetched to imagine that a regime would contemplate assassinating an opponent merely because of an accusation of racism. However, the Cuban regime came to nourish an intense hatred of me during a period

when it was militarily engaged on several continents, sending troops all over Africa to support the liberation movements and pursue its own political ends. I was not only an international political pain in the neck but its literal bête noire.

For three decades, I was forced to respond, simultaneously, to the three-pronged pressure of the intelligence systems of Cuba (DGI), France (SDEC), and the United States of America (FBI and CIA). My openness was the first casualty. One cannot be transparent when dealing with secret police; concealment becomes an instrument of survival.

During my first year in France, I had to appear before the French police every fifteen days, pending deportation. I availed myself of every possible stratagem to avoid expulsion. For three decades, I lived with the knowledge that there were people in my entourage who dutifully reported on my actions and beliefs to governments that were hostile to me. Not knowing who was who, I questioned the intentions of anyone who entered my life. The borderline between justified suspicion and outright paranoia was too fine for comfort.

In the 1990s I gained legal access to some declassified FBI documents from that period; they made me aware of the extent to which the secret services of various countries had been interested in my activities and that many women and men who gained my confidence were actually professional intelligence agents or common informers.

For three decades, I came into contact with many whom I accepted as dedicated cadres of African and Caribbean liberation movements or militants of the black movement in the United States. As I would discover from the FBI records, many of them were plants. The bureau's meticulous erasure of names and compromising locations notwithstanding, I was able to reconstruct the identity of some of those who betrayed my confidence.

Cuba's was by far the most exacting intelligence system I had to contend with, for character assassination was its main weapon. It possibly went as far as attempting to entrap me in at least one real plot involving its own agents: the Rolando Cubela Affair. This murky affair, which

dealt with a CIA-fostered assassination plot against Cuba's leader, could have compromised my credibility beyond repair had I not been on my guard around the clock, as I was at the time. Cuban diplomats in Paris had attempted to lure me into a meeting with the plotters, involving Major Rolando Cubela himself.

Throughout the sixties and seventies, Cuba's secret service produced and disseminated information that portrayed me as a stooge of U.S. intelligence; at least in one case, its diplomats posted in Africa dutifully used fake documents to abort my reiterated attempts to seek asylum with my family in African countries.

The Cuban regime tore my reputation to shreds and demolished my character internationally. Being branded a CIA agent was the most damaging charge. Wherever I went, people shunned me. I wonder that I retained my sanity before the relentless thrashing I was subject to wherever I showed my face.

Fighting against such an accusation, I lived with only one goal: vindication of my truth. I became uncomfortable with anyone who did not see things as I did. I lost much of the ability to allow differing points of view and developed a one-track mind that impeded fruitful exchange with others. Friendships were unnecessarily sacrificed over trivial discrepancies. A deep anger, bitterness, and belligerence consumed me, making me indifferent to the minutiae of everyday life and alert exclusively to things political.

Generally, "exile" conjures sympathetic visions of high-minded people struggling for a better world and persecuted for their beliefs. But exile can turn an accomplished idealist into a hardened cynic. The conditions imposed by a life in exile may lead to an incapacity to deal with any dimension outside the realm of politics. Ultimately, one may end up responding only politically to every situation. In my case, the perceived threat to my life initiated a cascade of changes that over the years turned me into a quite different being.

My retrenchment was a source of tension in my family; my wife had to live each day with the prospect of my physical termination; my son

grew up sensing the danger that encircled my head, the all-devouring fear. The fixed idea that I would not live long reduced my plans to short-spanned operations; year by year, I rescheduled my time of existence. Those who shared my daily life were forced to interact more with my theories than my affection. Simply, I put politics ahead of friendship, family, or household.

Fate decreed that thirty-odd years later I would still be alive, though at the price of the possibility of a stable family life during that eighteen-year marriage, and having sacrificed many friendships.

Events have led me to believe that the more efficient one's resistance to oppression, the greater the blurring of the lines between one's own methods of defiance and those of one's opponent. Was my personal experience transferable to a larger scale? I believe so; the corroding process that overpowered the Cuban Revolution is a case in point.

The Cuban Revolution was posited on generous social and political ideals that progressively transformed into a tyrannical regime. Revolutionary Cuba was in danger of extinction from the start because of the United States' intent to destroy it by any means, including assassination. To thwart that imperialist determination, the regime built an efficient military and intelligence system. Living in perpetual fear of attack provoked a siege mentality in Cuba's leadership and policies that closed off all spaces of freedom in society.

The more the Revolution's original ideals were sacrificed in the name of national security, the more self-righteous, authoritarian, devious, and despotic became the regime, impervious to anything but its own repressive logic and deceptive propaganda.

Experience has convinced me that revolutions always succumb to the political expediency that guarantees their survival and success before powerful and implacable foes. But despite everything I now knew, I would forever remain on the side of Revolution. Forced to choose, I would side with a flawed or even failed Revolution rather than the sort of nightmarish society in which I was born and raised, and which I would wish on no one. I would always share a foxhole with those who

revolt against oppression. To me, they were kindred souls, even when I would have to mobilize every atom of my body to oppose their revolutionary despotism.

My brother and I lapsed into silence, as if we had exhausted all we had to say to one another. It was near three o'clock in the morning and this was actually our last meeting, the day before I left.

"I must go now," he said wearily, pushing himself off the seawall onto the ageless concrete pavement. "I must get to work on time."

Like most Cubans, he would continue a life of hardship, earning a salary that barely covered living costs; unlike many others, however, he was employed. I, by contrast, would resume a life of relative ease abroad. I could claim no moral advantage. We had both erected barriers around ourselves to protect our elected political lives. Exile had changed me to the point where I was almost as tough as he was; I missed the joviality that once was an overriding feature of my personality. Frank perhaps yearned for the spontaneity he never let himself express. Whatever bitterness we felt about our lives, we would embark again on the same roads we had each chosen. Neither could indict the other for the direction taken.

He held my shoulders, took a long look at me, and we hugged. Then he turned and walked swiftly away down the Malecón until he reached the nearest red light. Few cars cruised the streets at that ungodly hour, but he stopped and waited for the green pedestrian light before crossing the wide avenue. I smiled at that sign of attachment to order, perhaps the most basic difference between us. Frank's character made him walk along straight, well-established, neatly delineated highways. I seemed more suited to the untrodden pathways that lay hidden beneath life's underbrush.

I watched his silhouette become one with the darkness, content at our reconciliation though feeling a degree of sorrow, too. "The Indian"—as we fondly called Frank because of his wavy black hair—had been my childhood protector, the sibling to whom I felt closest. My back to the

seawall, I remained a long while listening to the sound of the waves, seeking to soak up as much as possible of a land that I love.

The society unveiled to me since my return voyage in 1997 was assuredly better than the one into which I was born. Perhaps that in itself is enough for many Cubans, be it woefully short of my heart's desire. I wanted social justice and racial equity *with* freedom; not the straitjacketed order my compatriots seemed compelled to tolerate. However, it will be for another, younger generation to help Cuba chart its way through the challenging and unknown rapids of the twenty-first century.

My journey from *pichón* to Cuban citizen residing abroad had been an uncommon one; exile was a tough and harsh sojourn. To have been forced to lead a life of banishment could so easily have destroyed me, yet instead it has enriched me. I do not care for the role of victim.

Certainly I have led my life in unusual historical and political circumstances. For all that chance and circumstance are factors determining the paths that any of us take, I was faced with a limited set of choices whose poles were betrayal or fidelity to the ideals that others, including my parents, had inculcated in me. Yet that I did not stray in political directions that would have fatally impaired my testimony was not solely on account of those ethics. Other decent people, also making principled judgments of their own, sided with me and shielded me, their belief in me prodding me into those conflict-ridden decisions that I made. These decent people placed themselves in the line of fire to help me—all of those whose names I mention at the beginning of this book, although such acknowledgment is hardly adequate.

I was indebted to all those who shaped my political thinking—Marxists, Anarchists, Pan-Africanists, black nationalists, and yes, family. Because of them, I was better able to make sense of this disquieting, contradictory world.

In the end, I was thankful to life for imparting the awareness that let me empathize with men and women everywhere who defied injus-

tice and oppression. That empathy has landed me in an awkward position: I support revolution but oppose the tyrannical regimes that enforce revolutionary change. I neither favor communism nor cherish capitalism. I am an internationalist who is against our present version of globalization. I abhor war and violence yet understand the conditions that may breed a revolutionary. Contradictory as all that may be, it nevertheless has allowed for my inner peace.

I was at peace with myself when I came to a sort of truce with my native land. However, the ease with the world that I found was not rooted in any one country but derived from commingling for decades with other exiles from various walks of life—people who for one reason or another were rejected.

I know now that it is with them that I will always feel most truly at home.

AFTERWORD

Since my last visit to Cuba in 2000, important changes have taken place in my personal life and in the country of my birth. I relocated with my family to Brazil to write my memoirs, and at this last stretch of my life I enjoy a modicum of peace. My town is Salvador da Bahia, a wonderful place by the ocean, cooled by breezes and filled with warm and generous people. I have lived in many places—from the Caribbean to the United States, Europe, and Africa—but nowhere is my heart as content as in Salvador.

While I have come to terms with my past and discovered peace within, the Cuban people are grappling with new anxieties and uncertainties. On February 19, 2008, when I was in the process of reviewing the proofs for this book, eighty-one-year-old Fidel Castro officially stepped down. His brother, Raúl Castro, always second in command, effortlessly took over as president. Raúl initiated a cascade of changes that underscored a resolve to integrate Cuba into the mainstream of the world's economy.

After decades under Fidel, the country is headed for inevitable changes that will ultimately separate the island's cosmetic reforms from truly profound social changes that favorably impact the people's quality of life and future. Many will discover that despite socialism and the rhetoric of revolution, black Cubans remain the country's underclass.

Until recently, Cuba officially maintained the fiction that the Revolution had eradicated racism, abolished discrimination, and established a racial democracy unique in the world. In Socialist Cuba, people supposedly were judged by the content of their character, not the color of

their skin. "*Cuban* is more than black or white," Fidel Castro repeated over the years, paraphrasing José Martí. The only color in Cuba under communism was *Color Cubano*.

Speaking in 1990 to a delegation of visiting U.S. blacks, some of whom wondered about persisting racism in Socialist Cuba, Castro retorted, "If there were racism here, then we would have to replace all of our athletes and musicians with whites. And then do you know what would happen? Without any blacks, we would lose all our games and have terrible music."

But the signs of racism were there for those who remained alert.

Many questions remain to be answered in the coming years, rooted mainly in three issues: economic reform and fierce competition for allocation of resources spurred by Cuba's new demographic composition; Cuba's relationship with the United States; and the political challenge from the exiled Cuban American elite.

For nonwhite Cubans, market-oriented economic changes forecast rough times, a cruel prediction for a population that spent decades enduring one sacrifice after another. How will Cuba's dark-skinned majority react to reforms that promote greater access to consumer goods and services that the ordinary Cuban cannot afford? Cubans have been groomed to depend on the state, and they regard the government as patron, provider, and ally. They are accustomed to free education, free health care, and free social services. Reform can lead to a situation in which most Cubans will have to pay for such essentials and will be increasingly taxed, as in any other capitalist country, including the nations of the former Soviet bloc. That metamorphosis signifies the death of the Socialist project to which Cuba's black majority overwhelmingly adhered.

For example, an early news story coming out of Cuba after Raúl's takeover was that the new government had removed the ban on cell phones for the general public and abolished restrictions that kept Cubans out of the luxury tourist resorts. The catch was that most Cubans could not afford the phones or the resorts. How will Cuba's rulers justify a

new method of distributing national resources that creates greater opportunities for a tiny white minority while continuing to impoverish the bulk of the population?

One of the unifying themes in Cuba over the decades has been anti-American sentiment, a passionate cause that rallied Cubans of all races and social levels. Revolutionary idealism has faded, and with it the cohesive value of histrionic anti-American nationalism. Since the crumbling of the Soviet empire in 1990, the divisive elements that plagued both countries have been fading. Demand from Cuba for national political sovereignty and the global economic interests of the United States can be reconciled with democratic institutions that respect civil rights and an efficient economy that provides the amenities the population craves.

Just as anti-American sentiment bonded those on the island against the United States over the past half-century, so anti-Fidel passion bonded the white Cubans who fled the Revolution and came to the United States. A potential Cuban American rapprochement poses another challenge for Cuba's rulers. This is a most formidable, organized opponent to the ruling elite on the island, not solely because of its wealth, political clout in United States, financial standing in Latin America, powerful international connections, and solid experience in handling a market-driven economy, but also because over the past two decades Cuban Americans have built a sizable base inside Cuba itself. Nearby Miami is Cuba's own Hong Kong—a prosperous, technologically savvy, politically well-connected, culturally sophisticated financial powerhouse whose remittances to the homeland play a growing role in Cuba's economy, alongside revenue derived from tourism. Now that the aging, viscerally anti-Fidel generation has lost its influence, a new, moderate, and more pragmatic Cuban American elite can be expected to wage a much more effective competition for power *inside* Cuba.

As the Cuban-Americans make a bid for power the post-Castro elites who remained on the island to support the Revolution—those who have been the ruling class—will be forced to confront the concrete grievances of the sizable nonwhite population. Continuing to disregard the black

majority is virtually handing over power to their rival elite class, the Cuban Americans, on a silver platter. Their only recourse is to consolidate support among the majority population, which implies broadening black participation in the political leadership, the economy, the media, and the cultural institutions and promote a controlled and well-manicured discourse on race.

But of great interest is this question: how will the majority of Cubans react when the lack of racism is exposed as myth? Cuba is now bereft of the charismatic figure who swept racism under the rug. Cuba's new demographic realities—a 37 percent white minority and a 62 percent black majority, according to the U.S. State Department—and the potential for domestic strife are bound to push that "nontopic" to the forefront of Cuban–American relations. In anticipation, the post-Fidel Castro leadership has begun to warn of the possibility of what it terms racial subversion waged by the United States. But Cuba's rulers may no longer be able to advantageously manipulate the race card as they have in the past. New subtle and wholly independent changes taking place in international as well as domestic environments may thrust race to the center of the debates on Cuba's future in ways that its ruling elites may not be able to control.

The experience of the past fifty years has underscored the fact that race is Cuba's most intractable problem and shown how inoperative it is to focus on discrimination without launching a comprehensive attack on racism. Racial discrimination is invariably a byproduct of racism, not its essence. I hold racism to be about monopoly ownership of the state by a racial group that uses its position to further its own collective interests and hinder those of other competing racial groups. A racist structure is one in which resources are managed, apportioned, or denied according to racial characteristics.

Ultimately racism rests on the power to deny or allocate a society's resources on the basis of race; it is a solid challenge for humans practically everywhere, not solely in Cuba. Many contend that Cuba's Communist experience laid the basis for a broad sense of equality and that

the island's mixed society affords a more congenial environment to transcend race. The bottom line is that whichever system predominates—Communist or capitalist or a combination of both—only an arrangement of effective power-sharing between whites and blacks can begin to disable the racial conundrum. This would call for an entirely new institutional framework that includes reinvigorating civil society, implementing robust racial affirmative action policies, reviving independent cultural and social institutions, an independent media and free press, and supporting autonomous political movements, associations, and parties.

None of this is possible without a revamping of society, the establishment of the rule of law by an impartial judiciary that enforces respect for internationally accepted norms of civil and human rights, the holding of a national referendum whereby Cubans may freely determine the sort of society in which they wish to live, and national multiparty elections.

Will Cubans seize the opportunity to push for the kind of bold reforms that may lay the basis for a more just society, or will they allow the state to tailor reforms that entrench the dominant elites?

Cuba is certainly at a crossroads; and crossroads imply options and opportunities. The capacity to choose is part of what make us human. So I take comfort in the feeling that, at this very moment, ordinary Cubans may be in the process of regaining the ability to redefine and reshape the future course of their nation. My heart is rooting that it be so.

NOTES

Chapter 5: Under Death's Shadow

p. 47 Millo Ochoa, speaking with the author. Miami, 1987.

Chapter 6: Big Mulatto Returns

p. 55 Manuel Ortela, former black officer of the Cuban Navy, speaking with the author. Miami, 1995.

p. 56 Facundo Pomar, former official of the Confederation of Cuban Workers, speaking with the author. New York, 1991.

p. 56 Facundo Pomar, speaking with the author. New York, 1991.

Chapter 13: What Is a Woman?

p. 111 *Miss Calypso*, Maya Angelou. Recorded at Liberty, Hollywood, November 1956. Producer: Warren Kerr. Sleeve notes: Hal Spector.

Chapter 15: Twin Stars in My Sky

p. 134 Gumane belonged to the first generation of Mozambican nationalists, and was a cofounder of the nationalist groups UDENAMO, COREMO, and FRELIMO. Mozambique was struggling for independence from Portugal. Gumane was reportedly executed as a counterrevolutionary in 1977 by his FRELIMO comrades.

p. 135 *Lumumba Speaks: The Speeches and Writings of Patrice Lumumba, 1958–1961.* New York: Little Brown, 1972.

Chapter 16: White Warrior

p. 142 Case Classification/File n 105–178699–11. Date: July 25, 1973. Content: "CARLOS MOORE. Also Known As: Charles George Wedderburn."

p. 142 AIRTEL Case Classification/File n 105–178699–6. LETTER Case Classification/File n 9–14a (Rev. 5–8-69). Date: 8/21/70. To: SAC, Los Angeles. Director, FBI. "Letter to Los Angeles. Re: [FBI censure]. This investigation was requested by the Civil Service Commission (CSC) based on information relating to [FBI censure] who uses the name Carlos More (Moore) . . ."

Chapter 18: Dancing with the Revolution

p. 165 Memorandum. Case Classification/File n 105–178699-X. Date: Jan 22 1962. To: Director, FBI (97–3243). From SAC, Miami (97–139) (P). Subject: July 26th Movement New York. IS-Cuba; RA—Cuba.

p. 166 Ramón Calcines Gordillos's star shone brightly until 1968. Involved in an intra-Communist intrigue known as the micro-faction plot, he was summarily expelled from the new Communist Party that year. He died in 2000, still in disgrace.

p. 166 Giraldo Mazola Collazo had a meteoric career: he was ambassador successively to Algeria and Nigeria before becoming deputy minister of foreign affairs from 1981 to 1993. In 2006 he was appointed ambassador to Chile.

Chapter 19: Neither White nor Black

p. 175 Cheikh Anta Diop. *Nations nègres et culture.* Paris: Présence Africaine, 1958.

p. 176 Walterio Carbonell. *Critica: Cómo surgió la cultura nacional?* La Habana: Ediciones Yaka, 1961.

p. 180 Juán Rene Betancourt Bencomo."Fidel Castro y la Integración Nacional," *Revista Bohemia*, Febrero 1959. In: *Recompilación de la revista Bohemia* 1, no. 2, p. 36 (Hialiah, Fla., Empresa Recuentos, 1959).

p. 181 Juán Rene Betancourt Bencomo."Fidel Castro y la Integración Nacional," *Revista Bohemia*, Febrero 1959. In: *Recompilación de la revista Bohemia* 1, no. 2, p. 36 (Hialiah, Fla., Empresa Recuentos, 1959).

p. 181 Juán Rene Betancourt Bencomo."Fidel Castro y la Integración Nacional," *Revista Bohemia*, Febrero 1959. In: *Recompilación de la revista Bohemia* 1, no. 2, p. 36 (Hialiah, Fla., Empresa Recuentos, 1959).

p. 181 Juán Rene Betancourt Bencomo."Fidel Castro y la Integración Nacional," *Revista Bohemia*, Febrero 1959. In: *Recompilación de la revista Bohemia* 1, no. 2, p. 36 (Hialiah, Fla., Empresa Recuentos, 1959).

p. 181 The film *Buena Vista Social Club* discreetly evokes this wholesale destruction of the black social clubs and the dance-hall music that they promoted. Tousands of Afro-Cuban musicians were proscribed and forced underground; others, like Celia Cruz, chose permanent exile.

p. 182 *Resolución #678 del Gobierno Provincial Revolucionario de La Habana. Resolución de cierre del Club Atenas. Expediente: 23270. Legajo: 1112. República de Cuba. Gobierno Provincial Revolucionario. Habana. 11 de Julio de 1961. In: Archivo Nacional de Cuba, La Habana.*

p. 182 For most of his career, Osmani Cienfuegos Gorriarán was linked to the General Directorate of Intelligence (DGI), as secretary-general of the Organization of Solidarity of the Peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (OSPAAAL). In the 1990s he was appointed minister of tourism until he

was ousted in 1998, and resurfaced as a vice-president of the Council of Ministers of Cuba in 2007.

p. 193 Manuel Piñeiro Losada was responsible for Cuba's covert intelligence operations in Latin America as chief of the Department of the Americas (DA). He was killed in a car accident in 1998.

Chapter 22: Shattered Mirror

p. 223 In later years, one of these Zanzibaris, Salim Ahmed Salim, went on to become Tanzania's most prestigious diplomat: president of the UN General Assembly, prime minister of Tanzania, and secretary-general of the Organization of African Unity (OAU).

p. 227 Calbert Casey fled Cuba and later, in 1969, committed suicide in Rome.

p. 227 Nestor Almendros, unanimously praised as one of the greatest contemporary cinematographers, fled Cuba in 1962 and died in New York in 1992.

p. 231 In subsequent years, as I traversed three decades of exile, the Cuban regime consistently denied that I had ever been detained, interrogated, obliged to sign a confession, or even interned in a work camp. I had merely been invited to see the minister of interior for a conversation intended to clear up a few misunderstandings, whereupon I had volunteered to assist the productive efforts in a voluntary labor brigade in the interior! That is the Cuban regime's version to this day.

Chapter 26: Adiós, Cuba!

p. 260 Formerly secretary-general of UGTAN, the West African trade union organization, Seydou Diallo served as ambassador to Cuba for two years before returning to Guinea to occupy a ministerial post. Although close to President Sékou Touré, he broke with him in 1970 and went into exile in neighboring Mali.

p. 260 Mami Kouyate eventually replaced Seydou Diallo as ambassador to Cuba.

Chapter 27: Frozen Fear

p. 275 Savimbi ultimately shifted his ideological position and became allied with the United States and apartheid South Africa to lead a fifteen-year guerrilla war against the incumbent Marxist MPLA. Abandoned by his erstwhile allies, he was ambushed and killed in 2002 by Angolan government troops.

p. 278 The government, however, only notified me officially of that fact in mid-December 1965, through its consul José Hernández Carballo.

p. 279 In the early 1980s, René Depestre left Cuba and took up residence in France. By then he had changed his attitude toward the Cuban regime.

p. 279 Che Guevara and 120 mostly black Cuban soldiers would eventually spend almost a year fighting alongside these Congolese forces. For Guevara's account, see: *The African Dream: The Diaries of the Revolutionary War in the Congo.* New York: Grove Press, 2000.

p. 281 Richard Gibson, in: *Magnet News,* London, March 26, 1965, p. 18.

p. 281 William Worthy and Lionel Morrison, "An Urgent Proposal for All Dasawarsa Delegations." *Indonesian Herald*, Jakarta, April 21, 1965.

p. 282 Worthy, in subsequent years, joined academia and held a number of low-profile posts at Howard University and other institutions. Morrison settled in Britain, where he went on to become the first ever black president of the British National Union of Journalists (NUJ) in 1973 and now chairs their black members' council.

p. 284 The Watergate hearings of the 1970s revealed the existence during the 1960s of Cointelpro, an occult government counterintelligence program established to destroy the civil

rights, Black Power, and anti-war movements. Under Cointelpro, various American intelligence branches—FBI, CIA, New York Police Bureau of Special Services (BOSSI)—used operatives, informers, and agents provocateurs to infiltrate the black movements, spread false rumors, disseminate forged documents to discredit or compromise black leaders, and sow chaos. The destruction of the Black Panther Party and other black radical organizations during that period is now partly credited to the effectiveness of Cointelpro.

p. 287 Stokely Carmichael, "A Declaration of War." February 17, 1968. Brochure, pp. 19–20.

p. 287 Carlos Moore, *Were Marx and Engels Racsist?* Chicago: Institute of Positive Education/Third World Press, 1972.

p. 293 Oscar Oramas Oliva served as Cuba's ambassador to Angola for much of the civil war there. In the 1980s he was Cuba's permanent ambassador to the United Nations in New York and thereafter a deputy foreign minister in Havana.

p. 297 See: *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa.* Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies (UCLA), 1988.

p. 302 *Miami Herald*, December 7, 1990.

p. 303 All quotes are from letters to the author by Prof. William LeoGrande, dated November 15 and 17, 1987; February 16, 2988; and May 10, 1988.

p. 303 A politically compromising letter was published by *Time* magazine on October 21, 1957 under the name of Ollie Harrington, but it had not been written by him. Richard Gibson later admitted to French police that he had forged Harrington's signature and was the author.

The details of this episode are given in: James Campbell. *Exiled in Paris.* New York: Scribner, 1955, p. 198–200, 201–204; Tyler Stovall. *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light.* Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996, p. 214–215, 253–254; Michel Fabre.*From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in*

France, 1840–1980. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991, p. 248–250.

p. 303 See *Cuban Studies*, vol. 18, 1988, p. 169.

p. 304 See: www.afrocubaweb.com/carlosmoore.htm (Acessed on February 5, 2008). For years this Web site has systematically posted highly disinformative material, such as quoted, geared to the U.S. black community. My book *Castro, the Blacks, and Africa* was published by the Center for Afro-American Studies at UCLA with a Ford Foundation grant. Yet AfroCubaWeb suggests it was published with CIA funds.

p. 305 *Granma*, Friday, December 7, 1990, page 5.

p. 306 The idea of the letter arose with U.S. Congressman Charles Rangel and Francisco Peña Gómez, the leading left politician of the Dominican Republic, and was hand-delivered to President Castro by Ambassador Wayne Smith, former chief of the U.S. Interests Section in Havana during the Carter administration.

Chapter 29: Shadows of Power

p. 331 This affair involved a real CIA-supported assassination plot against Cuban leader Fidel Castro, hatched in Europe by Comandante Rolando Cubela Secades, a high-profile military leader and official of the Revolution. As it turned out, the plot had been uncovered and infiltrated by Cuban double-agents who used it to discredit a number of people whom the regime had targeted.

Chapter 31: A Return to Self

p. 356 In February 1966 Cuba announced it had uncovered the assassination plot, and Cubela was arrested and sentenced to thirty years in prison. During Cubela's trial, it was revealed that Cuban intelligence had infiltrated the plotters and monitored their activities in Europe. Surprisingly, Cubela was released in 1979 and allowed to resettle in Spain.

p. 357 In December 1964, Luis Trasanco, a Cuban diplomat posted in France whom it subsequently appears was a double agent in the Cubela Affair, vainly attempted to convince me to attend a meeting with Comandante Cubela during the latter's visit to Paris. The pretext was that Cubela, a leading figure of the Revolution, was willing to intercede on my behalf to have my passport and civil rights restored. Had I met with Comadante Cubela and his cohorts, my name would have been inextricably linked to that CIA-supported assassination plot. That was, it seems, the intention behind diplomat Trasanco's overtures to me.

p. 357 One of those forgeries, brought to my attention while I was residing in Paris, was reportedly handed to the authorities of Ghana, where I sought to relocate, by then Cuban ambassador Armando Entralgo Gonzalez.

Afterword

p. 364 Roberto Santiago, "Unlike Utopia, Racial Realities in Cuba," *Emerge*, September 1990, p. 36. The occasion was a Cuba-sponsored symposium in Havana, "Malcolm X Speaks in the '90s," which brought together representatives of some seventeen Black American organizations.

p. 366 Esteban Morales Dominguez, "Anti-Cuban subversion: the race issue" ("El tema racial y la subversión anticubana"), *La Jiribilla*, September 8–14, 2007. Source: www.walterlippmann.com/docs1516. html and www.lajiribilla.co.cu/2007/n331_09/331_18.html. Accessed April 13, 2008.

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