

ANA
MENÉNDEZ

*In Cuba I Was a
German Shepherd*



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Twenty years from now she will remember this moment and think of the right words and be sorry that she didn't say them. Only much later will she know it was best to say nothing at all.

Máximo walks to the middle of the restaurant and holds his hands up for silence. "The plane was late coming in," he says. "It won't be long now."

There is a sprinkling of applause and then silence. The door is locked against the night, Eighth Street not being what it was. The waiters are up again, straightening aprons, restacking the silverware. Their faces in the long mirror are smudged with fingerprints.

Ernesto moves to the door, watches the quiet street.

The old woman who follows him everywhere is at his ear again, pulling the edge of his sleeve as she whispers, "Tell me again why I'm here?"

The light up the block turns to red and a row of cars collects behind it. Maybe Joaquin is in one of them. Maybe he has moved the seat back because his big heavy legs are folded uncomfortably. Or maybe he has already walked through the door so thin and small that no one has recognized him and he is roaming the room even now, listening to familiar lies, remembering faces by the stories they tell.

Ernesto turns to the old woman.

"You see, Señora," he says. "We've been in this country for almost forty years."

Her Mother's House

The road to her mother's house crossed a wooden bridge into a field of sugarcane that bent green and wide to the horizon before it narrowed into a path flanked on both sides by proud stands of royal palms. It was a late afternoon in summer and the men were coming in from the fields, hauling their machetes behind them. They stepped aside with their backs against the palms to let her pass and then stood waiting for the dust to settle, their hats flopping softly in the breeze. Lisette watched the men in the mirror until they retook the road and then her eyes were on the green fields ahead of her, the blue hills that dipped over the edge of sky. The thick warm air curled through the open window and the uneven road bumped her along in a seamless and predictable rhythm. She hummed a tune she had heard last night in the hotel and then she was silent, listening to the palm wind, the road beneath the wheels. It was the first time she had been alone in years and the new quiet seemed something she could touch, an opening in her chest that was as real as her childhood faith.



She was born in Miami, two years after the revolution. Her parents had met waiting in line at the Freedom Tower and

married just two months later. He was a young student from Oriente, who'd come fleeing Batista. She was from a wealthy landowning family outside Varadero, who'd come fleeing Castro. For years, Lisette thought Batista Castro was one man, the all-powerful tyrant of the Caribbean, the bearded mulato who shot poor workers in the fields and stole her mother's house with all her photographs in it.

That house. Always in the air, behind every reproach. Her mother half mad with longing. And that winter morning when Lisette thought she began to know her mother. Twelve years old. Reading alone in her room, she heard the sobbing before she saw that her mother had crawled in on her knees, a long end of toilet paper in her hands.

"Look at this, feel how soft this is," she cried, holding out the paper to Lisette. "In Cuba today the little children have to use whatever scraps of paper they can find in the trash, bits of newspaper, cardboard. Oh, feel how soft this is."

Her mother had let her body drop to the floor and she lay there for a long time, shredding the paper into smaller and smaller pieces. Lisette sat at the edge of her bed, watching and waiting for her father to come in the room and gently lift her mother. She had turned to Lisette, her eyes open wide.

"When the soldiers came for the house, I walked straight, not turning once to look at the stained-glass windows," she cried softly now. "Not even the white columns that climbed to the second floor."

And the iron railing on the balcony where the rattan furniture was laid out for company, the clink of glasses. Lisette began to remember all of it too.

Lisette married a round-faced boy whose parents were from Varadero, a short drive from her mother's hometown. They each needed someone to agree with. After everything, she still kept the photo that made it into the society pages, Lisette smooth-faced and skinny in the billowy dress, Erminio's arm wrapped tight around her waist, as if already he worried she was a wisp of smoke, a thin memory of herself.

She was a new reporter, covering city hall and trying to find a world within the small concerns of small towns, the wider life in berms and set-asides. He was a young lawyer who hated the law and preferred to make poems out of her stories. Every Sunday, he recited his creations in a deep sleepy voice:

The
Sweetwater city council
today
approved pre-
liminary plans for a new
shopping center on
the
corner
of
Eighth Street and
107th Avenue.

The first months, he waited for her to wake. He poured her the orange juice and the coffee and read her his newspaper poems. Some mornings, when the night's images had vanished, she would kiss him. And they would return to the bedroom and he would whisper her breath back to her.

Later, she began to linger in bed alone, waiting for him to go. Even after they stopped talking, he'd leave a poem by the toast. Paint a heart. Some mornings she could still smell him in the kitchen and her heart would turn.

At lunch she would take a sandwich and sit alone by the bay, imagining the stories in each ripple of water, each cloud that had the strength to push across the sky.

One Christmas Eve she sat apart from Erminio as she had for months and watched him with the women. He said something and they giggled, clapping their hands together like little girls playing at tea. How they loved him, his long frame and freckled skin. They sat in a circle around the pool, under the lights her father had strung from the second-floor balcony to the roof of the gazebo. It was one of those clear December nights that Lisette still loved about Miami, everything clean. One of her cousins produced a guitar and began to sing a bolero, a soft and sad contemplation behind the notes. The applause was slow. Her cousin's father took the guitar away. "Playing sad songs on Christmas, what kind of musician are you?" and he began to strum out an old *danzón*. Erminio stood and walked to where she was. He sat next to her, took her

hand. He squeezed it. She looked at the pool, at the ripples of light.

"It makes me afraid," he said. "How much I need you."

Lisette moved her head with the music.

"It's true," he said. He squeezed her hand. She looked at him and he squeezed harder.

"You're hurting me," she said. "What's the matter with you?" She stood. The music stopped and the others looked up. Erminio sat staring down at the ground, his shoulders bent a little toward his chest. His right hand shook. "Can't you leave me alone for one minute?" Lisette whispered at him. "One minute."

It was terrible the way he kept believing that history would reignite the now. He really thought they could be like they were. Not just them. Everything. Everybody. It made Lisette want to scream. The past wasn't something you could play again like an old song.

Erminio got up and walked to the far end of the yard, falling away from the gazebo lights. Fine, go, she said. And already Lisette was regretting the night.

There were moments that seemed, in their first rush of happiness, strong enough to outrun the inevitable. The night in Isla Mujeres, the wet breeze and the call of fishermen. They had lain skin to skin, remembering, Lisette watching the reflected water draw patterns on the wall. Later, when he went down to phone his parents in Miami, she had wrapped herself in the

blanket and slipped away to the terrace off the hallway to smoke a cigarette. She saw him return to their room. She watched him shut the door. She waited until the door flung open again and she saw Erminio pause in the hallway, his face gray. He turned toward the next room, as if listening. He passed his hand over his face and then made a sudden run for the stairs. She stepped out and called after him. He looked up and saw her. He ran back and swept her in the air. She cried. She wanted so badly to love him.

And then Lisette was in the back roads of Cuba thinking it had been so long since she'd been alone.



The green fields turned yellow and then brown. Lisette had set out from Havana in the early morning, but now the day was stiffening, the light falling in heavy sheets that made the loose gravel shimmer in the distance. She had been driving for more than five hours and the feeling began to creep on her that she had made a wrong turn somewhere.

But she drove on, the road desolate except for the royal palms that were so much like the stories she remembered. Her mother had shut her eyes when Lisette told her she was going to Cuba. It was a simple reporting trip, a stroke of luck. She wasn't going to explain to her mother things she could barely explain to herself. How every story needed a beginning. How her past had come to seem like a blank page, waiting for the truth to darken it.

Her mother had frowned. What kind of paper sends a young woman to Cuba alone, with the rafters churning more and more chaos. She had bent in closer and looked Lisette in the eyes. After a moment she had leaned back and put her hands in her lap. She wouldn't find the answers to her failures there, if that's what she thought. The remark had cut into Lisette. But she pretended not to understand. Maybe her mother could give her a map to the old house? Cuba's changed, it's not the Cuba I was born in, her mother had said. And then finally, It's a mistake for you to go now. The now was deliberate. And Lisette recognized it as part of the sentence her mother left unsaid: Now that you're divorced. Her mother had taken it hardest. Her family weren't failures. In the end, Lisette promised to go without the map or her mother's blessing. She knew the house was outside Varadero, near Cárdenas. She would find it on her own.

At the airport, her mother had parked and walked her to the terminal. Her face was puffy.

"So you're going."

Lisette nodded. Her mother hugged her and took her hand. She pressed a note.

In Havana, Lisette had worn her mother's map smooth, like tissue paper. The names had changed, but the streets remained. The Malecón still faced toward Miami even after all these years. On every old street, the billboards insisted on the revolution. "We defend the right to happiness" and "The revolution is eternal." Lisette thought back to her marriage. The reassurances

built upon their own disintegration. The more they said I Love You, the more they knew it was an empty incantation. Still, she thought she had been right to come. The people had been kind. The police hadn't followed. In the mornings, when everything was fresh and new, she had thought that they had something here that her parents' generation had lost in exile. The feeling evaporated by the end of the day, replaced by a watery feeling that she would never understand herself, much less this country that seemed intent on killing itself slowly. And before she fell asleep each night, despair took her again.

The road curved and the fields were green again and the blue hills were visible to the south. A man approached on horseback, growing in relation to the hills with every step. She pulled to the side of the road and examined her mother's map. On the lower right-hand side, her mother had painted a large box and labeled it simply, M. Lisette looked outside at the expanse of palms and orange trees. Her mother and her cryptics. She was probably afraid Lisette would be stopped with an incriminating document. Lisette got out of the car and sat on the bumper to wait for the man. The afternoon was hot, but the air smelled of oranges as if it were dawn. Now and then a weak breeze moved through and made a sound in the grass. The man got closer, filling up more and more of the sky, until he was upon her and Lisette sat waving her soft map like a small flag.

The man took off his hat and nodded, as if unsure he would be understood. It had happened to her in Havana and

Lisette had been vaguely hurt that no one recognized her as Cuban.

"Buenas tardes," Lisette said, exaggerating the contours of the words so the man would have no doubt she was one of them.

He smiled. "¿En qué la puedo ayudar?"

Lisette showed him the map and pointed at the road that was supposed to lead to her mother's house. She pointed to the block in the right-hand corner, where the road branched to the right. She looked up.

"Militar," the man said and shrugged as if something struck him as silly. The notion of a military base in the middle of the campo? Her mother's precautions?

He took the map and studied it. Then he turned it upside down and nodded, smiling, to point where she was. If she continued this way past the small cane refinery and turned right on the first main road, she would pass the military installation on her right. Then if she took the first left, she should get to where she wanted to go. No photos at the military installation. He handed the map back. They'll take your camera.

Thank you, she said. "Gracias."

The man put his hat back on and watched her for a moment before returning to the road.

The military base looked deserted, but as she got closer, Lisette noticed one soldier standing in the middle of the road. She slowed. He was very young and held his rifle carelessly. She gripped the wheel as she came up beside him. Suddenly,

he took a step out of the way. Lisette heard herself take a breath. The boy knocked his feet together and saluted. Lisette stared for a moment, then smiled. She thought of waving and decided instead to nod as she passed the boy. Surrounded now by the wet green of the countryside, Lisette doubted anyone had either the inclination or the money to follow anyone else. It was as if the whole country had agreed to stop caring. Only Miami still cared. And that made Lisette feel an unexpected pang for her parents. She took a left at the road the old man had told her to and began to rehearse what she would say to the people living there now. Apologies, of course: I can go away if you want. I only needed to see my mother's old room. Upstairs, near the back, the one with a balcony with an iron railing and a view of the rose garden.

If they let her, Lisette would take pictures for her father. Show him the lost space from where his wife had emerged, naked except for her stories. The first years of their marriage, all her mother did was talk about her lost plantation. Her father told Lisette how she used to lie in bed giving him imaginary tours of the house. The graceful stairway laced with gardenias in the summer, the marble fireplace her father had installed on a whim after visiting the States, the long white-shuttered windows that looked out over the gardens, the mar pacíficos, the royal palms. Your grandfather was the only one who could grow roses in Cuba. People came from as far as Oriente to see them.

Lisette turned onto the first opening in the field, a bumpy road of loose sand and stone. The men stepped aside to let her

pass. The landscape was green and flat but for the hills. She came to the end of the road where it disappeared into a field of sugarcane. And in the next minute, Lisette was pressing her tongue to the roof of her mouth, determined not to cry, not now, not over something so stupid as the colors of afternoon. She got out and stood for a moment wondering if it wasn't too late to drive to Varadero. Get a room on the beach, come back in the morning.

She looked at the sky. It had cleared and the air seemed cooler by the cane. She got in the car and sat for a while. She was hungry and tired, not herself. She turned the car around and drove slowly back the way she'd come. When she came upon the field men, she drove beside them for a while until they got off the road to let her pass. But she stopped the car and rolled down the window. She didn't give them a chance to address her in English.

"Buenas tardes," she said.

The men looked at one another, then nodded.

She asked if they knew of the old Aruna house.

"Aruna?"

The men discussed it. The man she had addressed laid down his machete and came to her window. "Santo's granddaughter?"

Lisette thought for a moment and then motioned to him to get closer as she stepped out of the car. She nodded. "Mabella's daughter."

The man's eyes narrowed before he turned to face the others.

"Oye, la hija de Mabi."

When he turned back to her, he was smiling. He took her hands. "I knew it, I knew it when I saw you, the same eyes."

"Lisidro Padron," he said, holding out his hand. "El carpintero. Your mother has told you about me probably?"

The other men crowded around her before she could disappoint Lisidro. Questions. Where were they? How were they? Any sisters? Are the old Arunas still alive? Lisette shook her head to the last one. Died in Venezuela a few years after the revolution. The man bent his head. He motioned back to his friends. "I'll take you to the house."

He paused and looked at Lisette, deciding something. "El viejo Matún and his wife are living there." Lisette shook her head like a question. "You don't know Matún and Alicia? They worked for your grandparents all their lives, since they were children almost. Matún was the only man who could grow roses in Cuba." Lisette raised her head and looked at Lisidro. After a moment she said, "Yes, of course, the roses."

Twice in the walk to the house, she tried to ask Lisidro something, a question about the winds this time of year, where the road emptied. But he walked on without turning, as if he hadn't heard her or thought her poorly bred for disturbing the silence this way. Their footsteps loosened the top thin layer of dirt on the road and sent up clouds of red-brown dust behind them. The royal palms had thinned and in between them, by the edge of the road, pink flowers grew, their petals curled under where

they were beginning to brown. The air was still, the thin white clouds high in the sky, and Lisette thought again how much she often preferred the journey to the destination. Even when she was a girl and they made the long drives to visit her father's parents in Tampa, she had reveled in the passing trucks, the outposts of life, the burger joints and the dried-fruit stands, most of them gone now, the road long since widened. But those early mornings with the stars still out, she used to sit in the back and wish they would never get there, that their whole life could become this car trip. She felt it now, comfortable in her stride behind Lisidro, accustomed to the silence, not caring anymore where the road ended.

Lisidro stopped suddenly ahead of her. He turned back and waved his arm for her to hurry. He stood in front of a little iron gate painted white. He shouted into a tangle of trees and plants. Lisette came up beside him. A slender stone path led from the gate into the garden. Out of the foliage, as Lisette stood watching, came a short woman, bent over, her head covered in a black shawl. She came up to the gate, resting a brown hand on the latch, and looked into Lisette's eyes.

"La nieta de Aruna," Lisidro said. "Lisette, this is Alicia. She and Matún have been here. Have been taking care of things."

Alicia watched Lisette. Her eyes were dark brown, almost black. As Lisette watched, the woman's eyes filled with tears.

"Yes, I see the resemblance," she said.

Alicia's eyes shifted down and a tear fell slowly along her nose. Lisette put her hand over the woman's hand, like rough

paper and dry as the road. Alicia turned to Lisidro and back again. She removed her hand from under Lisette's abruptly and wiped the corners of her eyes with the shawl.

"You are here to take the house."

The hardness of the woman's words startled Lisette. She looked from Lisidro to Alicia and brought her arms to her chest.

"I swear to you it's not that at all," Lisette said. "Never."

Lisidro put a hand on her shoulder and motioned with the other to go through the gate.

"La Señorita Aruna has no such intentions. She only wants to see the house. And then she'll leave."

Lisette nodded and looked back to Alicia, whose hand had come to rest on the latch again.

"The resemblance. It's quite striking," Alicia said. "Igualita."

Lisidro had to give her a small shove to get them through the gate.

When they came to the garden, the first thing Lisette saw was a rooster and then the dry dusty ground that it pecked and then a speckle of sunlight like a pebble and beyond it, above it, in a weak shadow, the house.

The house, the idea of her mother's house there in the shadow, is a present thought in this retelling, the way she described it to herself much later. Back then, standing next to Lisidro and Alicia, Lisette saw that it was a house, but it could not be the house she had come all this way to see. This was a

house with small windows carved high on the uneven walls. A flat, pitted roof of red tile. A single front door, wooden and cracked. An iron latch that hung open. A house with small windows. Uneven walls. Red tiles. Iron latches. The house of someone else's imaginings, a different story. Beyond the house stood the blue hills and Cuba green and unknown, the way the first Spaniards must have seen it before they brought their straight rows of cane, tamed the wild green with double stands of palms.

Lisette saw the way Lisidro bent his head toward this house, this little dream. His lips moved, wordless. Alicia took her hand. And then Lisette was sitting at a wood table inside a small kitchen. A kerosene stove, a bucket of oil, a yellowed basin filled with water, a refrigerator covered in silver tape, black at the edges. Lisidro kept moving his lips at Lisette. She blinked. Was that her laughter? Inside it was dark; the contrast with the outdoors made her eyes hurt. She tried to look at Alicia, her polished coconut face.

Then a small door from the back of the kitchen opened and in it stood a man, naked to the waist. He carried a black bucket of dimpled fruit. When he saw the stranger at the table, he put the bucket down. Lisidro moved his lips. The man threw his arms in the air. He picked Lisette out of the chair and hugged her.

He went back to the fruit and put the bucket on the table. He picked out two pieces and laid them on a sheet of newspaper. Lisette stared at the fruit. The man finally took one in his

hand and split the skin with his fingernail. The fruit smelled like roses. Lisette hesitated. The others watched her. She bit, the taste gritty and sweet, nothing like the sticky red paste that was the only thing she had known of guava in Miami. She swallowed and looked up at the man. His lips moved. And the air came rushing back.

"Your mother tell you about the guava trees here?" he said, and Lisette hearing for the first time. "Biggest fruit in all of Cuba."

Matún sat down at the last chair and pulled it up close to Lisette.

"Oye, you okay?"

He turned to his wife.

"Oye, Alicia, tráele un baso de agua."

"No, no," Lisette said. "I don't need water. I'm okay."

"You're red. This heat."

"I'm okay. Thank you."

Lisette swallowed. Matún shook a guava at her slowly.

"Tu mamá," he began. Then shook his head. "I can't believe you're here. I always used to tell my wife, it's only a matter of time before Santo's people show up again. Ay. What a wonderful thing, eh?"

He stood and walked back to a small room. Alicia and Lisidro stayed behind at the table. Lisette closed her eyes to shut out the truth that sat with its arms crossed in front of her. And what of it! she wanted to shout. So she lied for years. So she lied! If only Lisette could get up now and return to the hotel in

Havana, the men dancing on the Malecón, back to the Cuba she could talk about later, the simple stories of the rafters, the plain facts of their sadness.

"Are you comfortable?" Alicia asked.

Lisette opened her eyes and nodded. "Sí, gracias."

Matún returned with a small wooden picture frame. He handed it to Lisette. A little girl in pigtails sitting in that very kitchen, all the furniture the same, a bucket of guava in front of her.

"Tu mamá," Matún said. He shook his head, smiling.

"Your grandparents loved this house," Alicia said.

"We've tried to keep it up for them," Matún said. "Of course"—he waved his hands—"old age gets us all!" He laughed.

"Speaking of viejos—"

Lisidro stopped him. "Los viejos murieron en Venezuela."

"Ah. So sorry about your grandparents." Matún wiped his hands over his chest. "Now, you see, that makes me very sad to hear. They loved this house." Matún folded his hands. He was lost for a few seconds in contemplation. Lisidro cleared his throat. Were they waiting for Lisette to speak? She was afraid she might shout if she tried.

Matún sighed. "Of course, we didn't live here then. We lived out back." He pointed toward the window, past the empty yard. "It was a small house, ours was, nothing like this. I finally had to tear it down to build the chicken coop. You saw the roosters? Prize-winning. Back when they gave out prizes." Matún laughed again.

They were silent.

"Yes, your grandparents were very good people. There was never any problem because of"—he paused and rubbed his skin—"you know. Not with them. They'd make coffee here and holler out the back for us to come and sit with them. They had no problems that way." Alicia looked at him and then at her hands, folded on the table.

Lisette handed Matún the photograph.

"Same with us," Matún said, taking back the frame. "We'd make coffee, we'd call them over, we'd all sit together. We had no problems either. In some ways, it was better then." He looked at Lisidro and stopped. "We're just here taking care of the house. If you ever wanted to return—"

Lisette shook her head. "First time," she began. "What I mean is, if this is my first time here, how could I return?"

She looked around the table and thought to smile. Finally, Alicia laughed and they all joined in. Alicia took Lisette by the hand.

"Come, I'll show you the rest."

Lisette paused. She could see from where she sat that the rest was another small room with a chair and beyond that a room that she guessed to be where Matún and Alicia slept.

"No, gracias." Lisette pulled her hand out of Alicia's and patted her shoulder. "Later—I'll see it for the next time."

"You can't come all this way and not see the house!" Matún shouted.

"It's okay," Alicia said, looking at Lisette. "She's tired."

"Yes, I'm enough tired from the trip."

"Nonsense!"

Matún took her by the hand.

"One minute only."

Lisette stood and nodded. She let her hand relax in Matún's.

The narrow hallway that ran from the kitchen connected a small sitting room to two back rooms, each painted green.

"Your mother slept here," Matún said with a flourish of his arm.

A lace curtain covered the top half of the window, darkening the room. A wooden dresser was pushed up against the corner, its knobs worn black and shiny. The narrow bed was straight and tidy under the window.

Matún followed her gaze and nodded.

"Everything here was hers."

The others walked out and Lisette stood for a moment at the door. She walked into the room, half hearing Matún, not seeing the small rug, the low double bed, the flowered curtain strung across one corner.

She turned and walked out, following a crack in the floorboards. Lisidro and Alicia sat in two rocking chairs. A broom leaned against the door.

"My mother—" Lisette began, then stopped. She turned toward the door. When she turned back, she could feel the heat in her cheeks.

"My husband would have been so pleased to see this," she said. "It's too bad." She folded her hands and said more to herself, "My husband, Erminio."

She let his name hang in the air. Alicia and Lisidro looked at one another, but no one spoke. Lisette breathed in and smiled. She took Matún's hands and kissed him on both cheeks.

"Gracias," she said. "I must go. I have much work."

Matún kissed her. Then he put his hands behind his back and turned his head to look out the small window as he spoke.

"You know. The government has been very helpful to us. Yes, very generous with us. They gave us this land when your grandparents left. Every Sunday, me and the wife drive the scooter to Havana and sell guavas and mangoes. We are not poor; we are doing very well," he said. "Thanks to our government and the grace of God."

Alicia pulled her shawl closer. The silence of the countryside was like a weight. Lisette looked from Alicia to Matún. He was nodding to himself. "Thanks to the grace of God."

Lisette reached into her purse as if she were looking for her map. Then she took Matún's hands. She pressed the bill.

"Un regalito," she whispered.

His eyes never changed expression until he closed them and bowed ever so slightly. Gratitude and reproach, the small space between knowing and forgetting.



Lisette walked through the hallways, dragging one piece of furniture after another. She didn't know what she was doing. She needed to do something. And so she moved the armchair into the family room, the bar stools out to the pool. She stood and remembered the lights her father had strung all those years ago, that Christmas when the women loved Erminio. The gazebo was shabby now, a vein of mold running down one column. The lawn had grown over the flowers. It was as if the house had declined in sympathy with her father. In the last days of his illness, the Coral Gables code-enforcement board had sent them a complaint about the tall grass. Lisette had run two red lights in her anger. At city hall, she had ranted about the rights of man until a security guard escorted her out. She had regretted it and written a letter of apology later, a very proper repentance. She was an editor at the paper now, had her own office overlooking the bay. She was a little in love with a German psychologist who loved her back. In the evenings they had long conversations about the will and happiness. On Sundays, they had some people from his practice for lunch and she put out her good crystal and the leather-bound Rilke.

When, alone with him, the people gone home, she would complain of despair, her sick parents, he would hold her face and tenderly ask, "Why do you not kill yourself?"

It was an old joke with them. And Lisette always laughed. Logotherapy, he called it the first time. And she'd understood loco therapy. There is meaning in this, he insisted. And he waved his arms, meaning everything. Yes, she'd said, it's all loco.

Lisette stopped at the door to her old room. She walked to the closet. From the top shelf she pulled down a box and sat on the bed. It was the kind of box young women keep and she hadn't opened it since her last weeks in college. A graduation program sat on the top, yellowed and brittle and almost twenty years old. Bits of the foil that condoms came wrapped in. A dried corsage from her junior prom. A translucent pink cocktail stirrer whose origins had long ago disappeared into her memory. Below, near the bottom, a pink diary with a lock and a stack of photographs tight in a rubber band. Lisette winced. Had this been her life?

She sifted through the letters, names she'd forgotten, dates and places. She stopped, reached to her chest for her glasses. Love letters. Letters from friends. One note on linen paper which she opened, the paper crackling back into the present.

L.:

So happy you've finally decided to write that novel. I think the Cuban experience is a great idea for a book. You have to promise me one thing: You have to make fun of them. There's no other way to write this. Send me what you have.

Love you. Miss you. Can't wait to see you.

A.

The letter was typed, as if the sender wanted to remove the last trace of himself. She couldn't remember receiving it. Who

was A.? Had she ever thought of writing a novel? She remembered writers she'd known in college, students, a man who had followed her for days. Was it the editor who had told her she had Great Potential? A lover? A prankster? Her ex-husband?

Had she written the note herself? She sat at her old bed and tried to reach back into the years. She met herself going the other way. Promising she would never write, never publish, never be a special section in the bookstore. Better to write about berms and set-asides, last night's vote in a small room of microphones and lights.

She took a pencil from the box. She read the letter again and folded it in half. She stared for a moment at her hand. And then she began to write:

Beautiful Coral Gables home, five bedrooms, three baths, vaulted ceilings in the dining room. Balcony with wrought-iron railings overlooking large pool. Entrance flanked by royal palms.

She paused and added, The house of your dreams.

Outside by the gazebo, she slipped the letter into her pocket. She stood still to hear a peacock send its melancholy wail through the yard. A car passed the house slowly, its engine low and hungry. Tomorrow she would air the house out and the next day she would call the realtor, tell her she was in a hurry. She walked up the creaking wood steps and sat on the railing, looking out over the fraying yard. Her parents had thrown a party here

after she'd returned from Cuba, all of them healthy and young, the orange trees in blossom, her cousin's daughters splashing in the pool. She'd looked up at the house, the palms framed against the sky.

What was it like? What was the house like? The children's laughter like punctuation marks.

Only her mother was silent. She sat across from her, her hands in her lap. Lisette followed her gaze. The day was bright, shimmering above the water. Lisette spoke slowly. It was too bad, she began, that the soldier had taken her camera. There was so much to see. The road to the house that crossed a wooden bridge into a field of sugarcane. The narrow path flanked on both sides by royal palms. It was a late afternoon in summer and the men were coming in from the fields, their hats flopping softly in the breeze.

But the house. What about the house?

Lisette paused, making a circle with her arms. She looked at her mother. Watched her hands turn in her lap.

"Everything was the same," Lisette said after a moment. "The stairway, the balconies. Even the marble fireplace. Somehow, it all made it through the revolution."

She faced her mother. Held her chin in her hands.

"And the long white-shuttered windows that looked over the rose garden still let in the very brightest sunshine."

The children had stopped by the edge of the pool to listen. One by one they moved away to resume their game. Her father let his gaze fall. Lisette's mother looked up. She stood

and Lisette watched her go. Her cousin came out with the guitar. The chatter of the afternoon resumed. Someone passed by and patted her on the head.

Lisette closed her eyes. The guitar played a slow bolero and Lisette remembered Erminio, his Sunday poems; she saw him again against the light, pouring her morning coffee. He had wrapped his arms around her tight, held her steady against the day.