# NINTH LETTER

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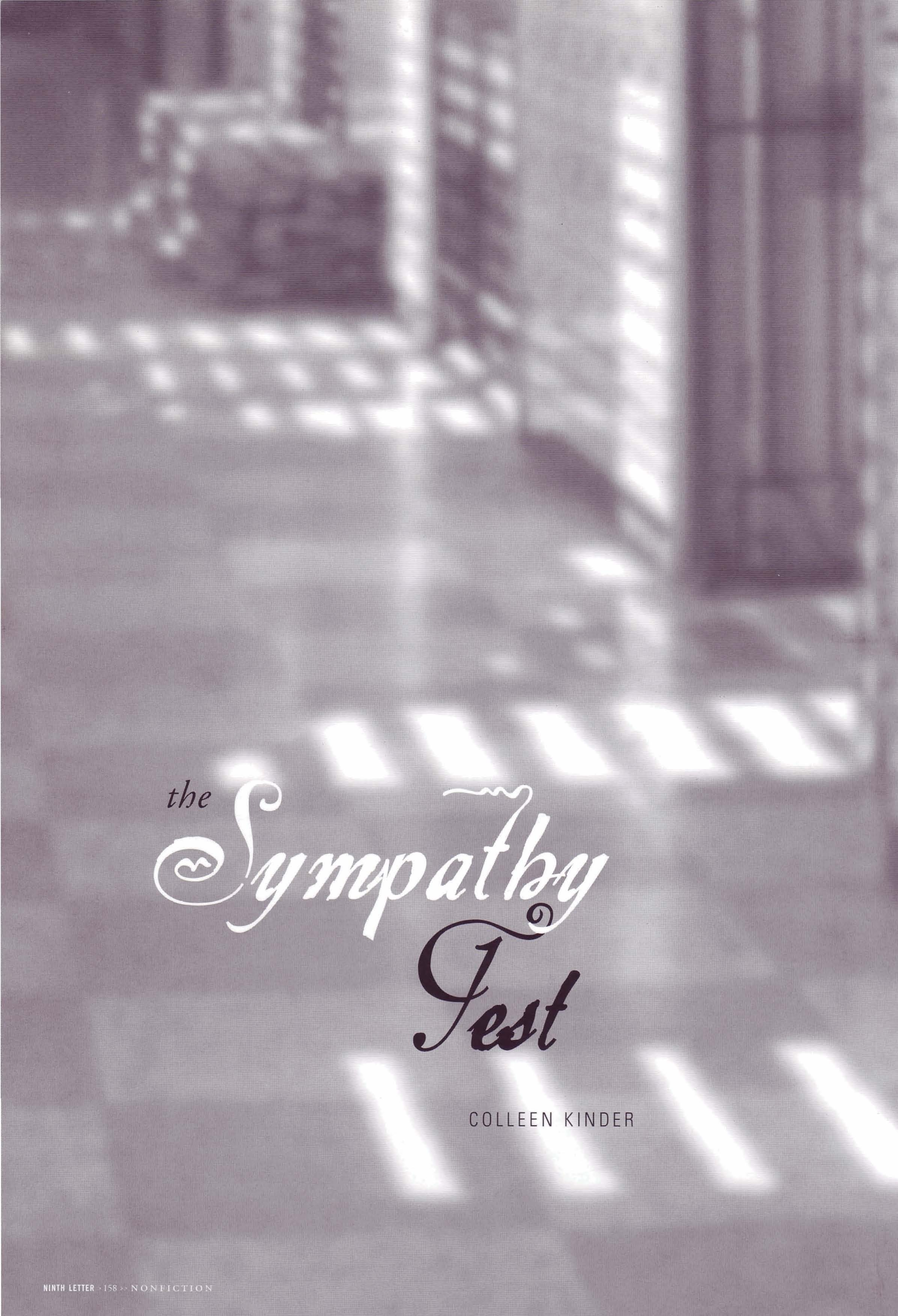


# the Sympathy Test

COLLEEN KINDER

The Havana skyline has a way of telling you where to sightsee. While the tall hotels and tobacco museums are lacquered with fresh pastel paint, the peripheral façades slouch, wearing no color. If you're in Cuba on a tourist visa, the itinerary seems pre-color-coded for your convenience. Following the paint's cues keeps you in the nucleus of *Habana Vieja,* where every noteworthy building is dressed like a birthday cake.

There is one mansion in the city's fringes that muddies the color-code, drawing the eye out of the tourism park. This mansion is painted yellow and trimmed in white. Marble lions recline on the front veranda, their paws lazily crossed. To reach the veranda, you must pass a field of lime-green produce. A gazebo. White chairs like wrought-iron doilies. And at least five other accents that are extinct in the rest of Cuba's capital.

Unlike landmarks highlighted on the Havana map, this building does not house Revolutionary mementos, nor manufacture cigars. It is not featured in vacation guidebooks. However, Havana's marginal mansion does have a tour guide: a Cuban eager to show the premises to strangers, any day of the week. His name is Carlos Ricardo, though the four hundred people who live inside call him "the Master." Age seventy-seven, Carlos Ricardo also resides here, at what may be Havana's most overdressed institution. *El Asilo de Santo Venia* reads the ceramic sign beside the door. The Santo Venia Nursing Home.

I have a hard time keeping up with Carlos Ricardo. His walk has more in common with a jog—as if he were the nursing home's most overworked staffer, not one of the aged wards. Carlos Ricardo draws me past the Santo Venia lobby, down the long corridors lined with identical Spanish tiles: yellow vines unfolding onto a crisp navy blue. All the home's passageways hit upon outdoor courtyards; all tiles find some splash of morning light. I watch the tiles chase Carlos Ricardo, while I do the same.

Carlos Ricardo is my official liaison at Santo Venia, the one who arranges my daily interviews with the *ancianos*—Spanish for "old people," sounding more like "ancient ones" in my ears. Every morning when I arrive, he feeds me a new lead like a newspaper editor briefing his reporter. Some mornings it's: "*We've got a 103-year-old woman for you*"; on others, Carlos Ricardo begins: "*How'd you like to talk to a sailor? Got a sailor. Docked on all seven continents...*"

The Santo Venia social worker asked Carlos Ricardo to introduce me to *ancianos* capable of telling their life stories. The idea was to acquaint me with Cuban history—the slow way, *anciano* by *anciano*, through lives dating as far back as 1900, when the famed 103-year-old was born.

But Carlos Ricardo developed his own criteria—a more rigorous one—for selecting *ancianos*. They not only had to be sharp representatives of *themselves,* but of old age, the Santo Venia nursing home, and the Republic of Cuba.

The following things could disqualify an *anciano* from the Master's master list:

> <u>Sanity</u>: No crazies; i.e., any *anciano* who talked about his dead wife in the present tense.
>
> <u>Attitude</u>: No moaners; i.e., any *anciano* who's default was complaining of hearing loss in a loud voice.
>
> <u>Memory</u>: Acute forgetfulness not permissible; i.e., any *anciano* who didn't know that the twenty-first century was upon us, three years in.
>
> <u>Political Vendettas</u>: No one with anti-communism on his breath. Well—not as blatant as halitosis.

However:

> <u>Life Content</u>: If an *anciano's* life was extraordinary (i.e., fought in a war, won a prize, docked in every continent), he might make the interview cut despite some severe geriatric flaws.

This was how the 103-year-old, Gloria de los Angeles, got her interview. Had Gloria not lived a century-plus, Carlos Ricardo would have tossed her in the loony pile. Gloria told me her life story in circles, looping back to her date of birth every few minutes, cooing her dead husband's name like the refrain of a lullaby.

I sat down with Gloria, as I did with every *anciano* Carlos Ricardo brought, and opened my notebook. Having lived in Havana for a month, I knew that the *ancianos* of Santo Venia could tell me things that people on the street wouldn't bother to. Most *Habaneros* were concerned with the present: today's heat, tomorrow's dinner, the ungodly line for the M-6 bus. Cubans in the thick of adult life seemed wholly engaged in what Cubans call the "*lucha,*" the fight to make a living, when state paychecks do little to help. So often, when I asked Cubans the informal question "*Como estás?*" I heard "*Aquí en la lucha.*" Here in the struggle.

But a woman born in 1900—sitting in a courtyard, in a palm frond's shadow—tells a different story. She doesn't know where her meals come from, nor does she wonder. Her vision of the present is foggy on the best days, but her take on the past is sound. Upon request, she'll circle back to the beginning, to her date of birth, a year that sounds make-believe.

The *ancianos* of Santo Venia do not speak of 1959 as a beginning, like most people in Cuba do. Their life stories were already churning, full throttle, when Revolution hit, when a national turning point was imposed—on their careers, everyone they loved, all appetites and aims.

"Everything changed," each *anciano* told me, echoing the previous interviewee. But when pressed to specify *what* had changed, the consensus of these twenty-five testimonies fell away.

Walking on the heels of Carlos Ricardo, I catch sight of breakfast. Breakfast is warm rolls like fistfuls of cloud, baked a shy brown. Breakfast is bananas tinier than I knew could be ripe, pushing their heads out from peels to prove it. The rest of breakfast fits in a plastic cup. A dented silver kettle travels table to table, doling out steam and sugary milk in practiced pours. Breakfast happens in a room that acts like a banquet hall, holding high portraits of men in suits.

Before Santo Venia was a nursing home for four hundred, it was a mansion for one. In 1959, while most of Cuba's wealthy fled to Miami, praying that Castro's communal designs on their property would be short-lived, one wealthy woman let faith guide her otherwise. She handed her estate over to a neutral party, the Catholic Church, designating it for *"ancianos desamparados"*: old people with nowhere to go. Orphans—in other words—at the other end of life. She couldn't have known what was in store for Cuba, what her largess would ensure—that while the rest of the Havana landscape paled and slouched, Santo Venia would withstand the next forty-five years, not aging in the least.

"I-ahm-heere-to-spik-to-the-Amerikan-gurl," a droopy-eyed man announces.

Carlos Ricardo's head whips around to lay eyes on our interruption. We are in *la biblioteca*, the library, Carlos Ricardo's domain. He is boss of Santo Venia's books and looks after the collection like a bibliophile recovering from OCD. The spine of every obscure volume bears a number in his handwriting—penmanship more uniform than Courier New.

"*¿Que dice?*" Carlos Ricardo asks me. What's he saying to you?

"*Dice que—*"

"*¿Habla ingles?*" Carlos Ricardo demands. Is he speaking English?

"*Si,*" I nod.

"Yees," the man translates me, looking proud.

"I told you, Jesus," Carlos Ricardo responds. "Not today. There are others..."

Jesus is apparently not interview material—not by the Master's standards. Jesus, however, doesn't care. He joins us at the library's front table, reaching for a chair.

Carlos Ricardo looks up at the wall clock, irritated. "Twenty minutes," he concedes, edging his voice with warning. "No more than *twenty*."

"*Si, si,*" Jesus turns to me. "MY NAM EES:" He halts, waiting for me to write down each of four names. "Jesus, Llamas, Valdez, de La Torres."

"*Jesus, Llamas...*" I repeat back, printing the name atop a fresh page.

"I was born in 1926," Jesus announces. "The same year as Fidel."

Carlos Ricardo shuffles off towards the card catalogs, mumbling. Leaving me to the life story of Señor de La Torres.

When the nuns set about institutionalizing Santo Venia, one of them must have been set on proving utility didn't clash with opulence. *Not necessarily*, I hear whispered in the home's considered décor. Murals of young lovers remain. Vases claim the plateaus of short ionic columns. Even the mansion's theater has hoarded its fifty wooden chairs, granting only one concession to the demands of four hundred people: a television, nailed mid-stage.

As for the courtyards, they are now the lungs of a nursing home. They make a generous offering—in vines, buds, dew, palm fronds that hang like whale fins—so that when you breathe in the air of Santo Venia, it doesn't taste like four hundred are doing the same.

Jesus narrates his life story in the standard Cuban way, splicing it into two chapters:

*Before:* Jesus worked as a delivery boy, making tips.

*After:* Jesus worked in a bank, making salary.

*Before:* Jesus gambled.

*After:* Jesus stopped.

*Before:* Jesus married a girl.

*After:* Girl moved to America. Jesus did not.

I like interviewing Jesus. His bluntness helps my translation along. Jesus tells me what he likes—blondes, baseball, children—just as readily as what he doesn't—strict nuns, pulverized food, his sister Marta. Jesus and Marta were born the same year, ten months apart. But Jesus doesn't like Marta. Jesus tries not to speak with Marta. When I ask Jesus why, he obfuscates in the customary Cuban way, falling into code.

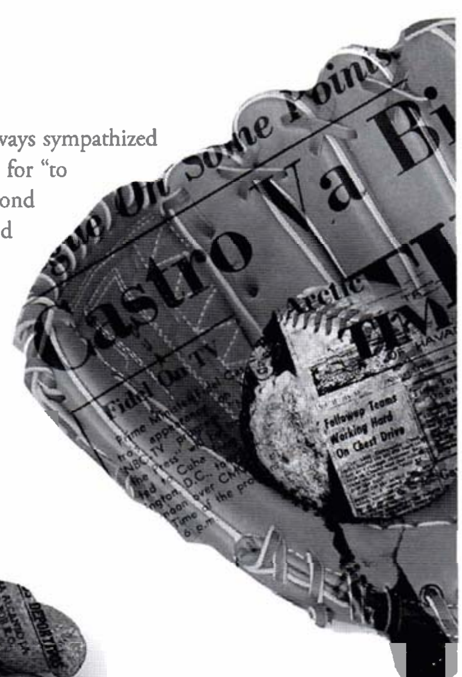
"*Ella tiene sus ideas.*" She has her ideas.

I give Jesus a puzzled look. "*Sus ideas?*"

"She's a revolutionary."

I make a mental note. *Ideas* = euphemism for staunch faith in Castro.

Then Jesus leans closer to the library table. "*Siempre simpatizaba con su país.*" He says, "I've always sympathized with your country." At least that's how I translate. The verb *simpatizar* seems an obvious match for "to sympathize." Though I'm not sure exactly how one *sympathizes* with someone else's country—beyond blondes and baseball, that is—and why Jesus looks at me from his droopy eyes like he's just said the magic word.




I begin all of my interviews with the simplest question you can ask a person about their life: when it began.

"*En qué año usted nació?*"


Gloria de los Angeles sets the outer edge of our timeline: "I was born in *mil novecientos*." Other *ancianos* plot themselves a few steps into the century. 1917. 1921. Jesus stakes claim to 1926, alongside Fidel. Some of the *ancianos* take control of their interviews straightaway, narrating faster than I can write in Spanglish shorthand. Others need prompts—words like *ninez* (childhood) or *trabajo* (job), simple questions like *te casaste*? Did you marry?

Though I feel awkward asking a person with wrinkles what it was like to be a kid, the obvious themes never fail, pertinent to any one's life. The *ancianos* all had childhoods, and every *anciano* I speak with seems able to distill it to an adjective or two.

Francisco calls his "poor"; Jose says "short." Asunción wags her head and proclaims her early years "beautiful," while Gloria de los Angeles claims that her century began "like everyone's." I take this to mean "*Next question, dear,*" and move along.

Adulthood follows, the obvious question being, "How did you spend it?" Gonzalo recalls a bus he drove, stressing its air-conditioning. Angel classifies himself as a shoemaker—a shoemaker *who could always provide.* Rolando, the sailor, hints that there's truth in the old adage—the one about a lady in every port. Jesus recalls his messenger job more than his banker job. He recalls, specifically, a message for a thirty-sixth-floor apartment. Climbing. All thirty-six. The tip that awaited him at the top. A tip one still recalls at age seventy-seven.

Barbaritos was a bartender. Barbaritos remembers the night Fidel came into his bar. Barbaritos also remembers that Fidel didn't have enough money to pay his tab. Barbaritos remembers Fidel asking if Barbaritos would vote for Fidel, Barbaritos answering the penniless patron: "Sure. If you do a good job."

Gloria de los Angeles got a doctorate in pharmacy and would like me to consider the date of her birth, and of this doctorate, and the unlikelihood of a woman, in those days, becoming anything at all.

I have to wonder about "the Master." Before Carlos Ricardo became docent in this Spanish-tiled mansion, before he took to tracking dusty old volumes, what did he do? I request an interview.

"*No, no, no.*" Carlos Ricardo chuckles, shooing away my interest. I won't get him ambling down memory lane. Carlos Ricardo neither ambles, nor reminisces. "The others" are better for this.

He tosses out new names: Cristobalina, Pastorita...


"Can you at least tell me what you did for a living?" I temper my inquisition.

Carlos Ricardo pauses. "*Era un estadístico.*"

That moment of recognition—when new Spanish flips into its obvious English cousin somewhere down the ear canal—is like finding trace of an old man in a black-and-white photo. Of course: *es-tad-ist-i-co.* Carlos Ricardo was a statistician.

Santo Venia does laundry for four hundred. Four hundred that leak and bleed and soil. Carlos Ricardo doesn't give me fair warning of the scale of this chore before taking me on a shortcut to the women's unit, passing directly through the central courtyard.

It's a blinding village of white tents. *Blinding,* as in arctic snow meets equatorial sun, mid-morning. Squinting requires all the muscles in my face. Carlos Ricardo lifts up sheets for me to pass under, but drops them before I do, halting my passage with towels and nightgowns and socks. An army of volunteers—*ancianos*—string bed sheets on sturdy rope. The laundry courtyard is the precise nucleus of Santo Venia. To reach the clotheslines, we have to descend a long flight of steps, during which descent I can squint into the panorama and wonder what anyone ever did with such a canyon in the middle of their home.

Jesus is back. Jesus looks nervous. Jesus has something for me.

"FOUR SCORE AND SEVEN YEARS AGO!"

Jesus is booming English in stiff verses.

"OUR FATHERS, BROUGHT FORTH IN THIS CONTINENT..."

A nun wheels a cart by the door of the library, casting a glance inside. Carlos Ricardo glares at me also, hungry for an explanation.

"...TO THE PROPOSITION THAT ALL MEN ARE CREATED..."

I wonder what this explanation might be. Why a Cuban man, born the same year as Fidel, who likes blondes and once gambled, would choose to recite the Gettysburg Address. And what this might tell me about the verb *simpatizar.*

Then comes love, then comes marriage. Some *ancianos* had luck. Others tried again.

"Yes," Francisco answers my question. He married. "Four times." Elena married only once. Her wedding night remains vivid: she discovered her husband was homosexual. And what could be done then? Ramon had three wives. They all told him the same thing on their way out the door: *you need to marry your twin.*

Sylvia found a noble husband. Barbaritos found a dumb wife. Rupert married for independence, grew to like her later. Abud chanced upon his wife. He had just lost his U.S. citizenship, returned home, got on a bus. From his seat, he heard singing. Lovely singing. A woman, sitting alone, was singing a Cuban song. He got up and walked toward her—

"*Perdoname*—" Abud says, shaking his head. "I don't cry like this."

Abud is crying like this. In the library, sitting across from me, in a wheelchair. He has no legs left; diabetes has taken both, leaving stubs. Abud pauses the interview, whimpering.

"*No te preocupes.* Don't worry," I say, switching to the familiar *tu* form, like it might lessen the distance, though I know that's not how Spanish works. I have no tissue.

"She died," Abud explains the obvious.

Catching an old man crying is like finding sap dribble out of a fallen log. It's startling, because you assumed the remains of this tree long-dried. Catch an old man crying and you'll see how the tears get stuck in his wrinkles, in the bunch fanning out at the eyes' edges. Tears catch there, unable to slide off the face, waiting for a rivulet of skin to sip them back.

"*Perdoname,*" Abud says, once more, before we resume.

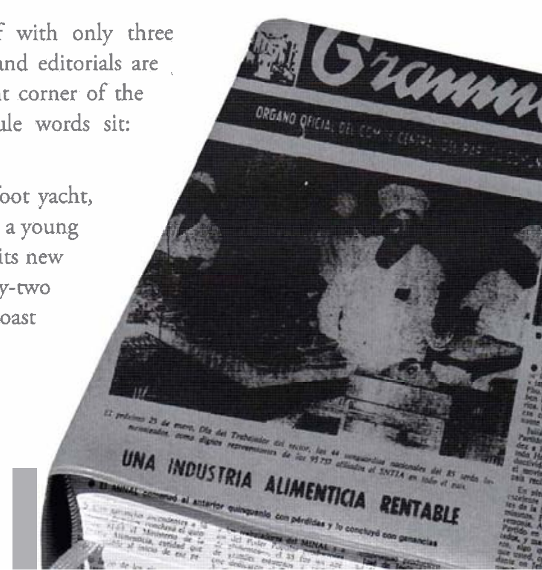
Mid-morning, Santo Venia receives the news. Carlos Ricardo intercepts two copies of the news at the front door, to bring them deeper inside. The news is called: *GRANMA. Organo Oficial Del Comite Central Del Partido Comunista de Cuba.* Ask the Master what *Granma* means and he'll tell you it's the namesake of the Cuban Revolution. But the truth is that Granma means Granma. Short for Grandmother.

Fifty years farther back than anyone fusses about details, an American guy wrote the name of his beloved granny on the side of a yacht. The pet name, phonetically spelled, found a strange posterity.

*Granma* is sold in the gray streets of Havana for one peso. This is the job that the Revolution has preserved for its aged. *Ancianos* peddle the paper, yelling "*GRAN-ma! GRAN-ma!*" in low drones, looking haggard. Their feet swell straight out of their shoes.

When I take my turn with *Granma*, I find she concerns herself with only three countries: Cuba, the United States, and Venezuela. Headline stories and editorials are indistinguishable; all news is marinated in opinion. In the upper right corner of the front page, where *USA Today* might note its price, these minuscule words sit: *45th Year of the Anniversary of the Triumph of the Revolution.*

Forty-five and a handful of years ago, in Mexico City, a thirty-eight foot yacht, which had already sunk once in a hurricane, was resold, second-hand, to a young Cuban with a beard. Though the capacity of this boat was twenty-five, its new owner had the gumption to traverse the Gulf of Mexico with eighty-two heavily armed men. *Granma* foundered several hundred yards from the coast of Cuba, nearly drowning a revolution. Nearly.



Carlos Ricardo's eyebrows are huddling in concern. He has a question for me.

"*Simpatizas con la Revolución?*" That verb again. Other *ancianos* have posed the same question. *Do you sympathize?* Answering "no" runs contrary to my instincts as a guest. Santo Venia's special visitor. But the more the sympathy question crops up, the more I fret the politics that underlie it. Maybe they're asking if I *ally* with the Revolution? Against my own country? Stronger than ally—to favor?

But Jesus, having gambled and loved blondes, has always *sympathized* with my country. Maybe *simpatizar* is something innate. A *leaning?* Like when people born in the countryside migrate to cities, preferring the density of strangers and buildings with height.

Carlos Ricardo's question waits. Beneath *simpatizar* I hear empathize, appreciate, comprehend. I hear, most persistently, another question entirely: *Are you on my side?*

So here we are: 1959.

The Year Everything Changed.

No interview can avoid this kink in the Cuban timeline. If an *anciano* doesn't refer to it by number, he does in words: "*Cuando la Revolución triunfó.*" In the Cuban lexicon, the verb *triunfar* ensures the finest connotations for its proper noun. The Revolution didn't just occur. It didn't win. It Triumphed. A capital T to match the capital R.

It amazes me how widely this expression is used: "*Cuando la Revolución triunfó.*" How consistently the *ancianos* employ it—even the men who find ways to insinuate their spite for Castro throughout our Q & A's. Whenever their life stories hit upon 1959, I hear mention of a revolution, how it triumphed, what it trumped.

When the Revolution Triumphed, Jose got a better job, a new apartment, hope. When the Revolution Triumphed, Berta got a promotion. A promotion for her trusted beliefs. When the Revolution Triumphed, Ramon was eighteen: he *thought God had dropped from the sky*. When the Revolution Triumphed, Roberto's entire family went to Miami. Too sick to travel, in 1959, Roberto stayed behind. In 1959, Gloria retired.

"You retired? From the pharmacy?"

"They *took* the pharmacy," Gloria corrects me. "So I retired."

In my twenty-five interviews, this is the single exception to the triumphant Cuban diction: Gloria de los Angeles. When her oral history bumps into 1959, she refuses to call it by its official name—neither a revolution, nor a triumph. Instead, Gloria says, "*Cuando la situacion vino...*"

When the situation came.

Lower case s, lower case c.

Her exception is a striking one. Gloria is by no means Santo Venia's most vocal dissident. In fact, every time our interview nudges Gloria towards politics, she swoops back to her date of birth, defaulting to the neutral number. "I was born in *mil novecientos*."

I wonder if this date could explain the discrepancy. Gloria was 59 in 1959—ready to retire, perhaps part of a different generation entirely, of adults not willing to reform the way they spoke.

Jesus returns. This time, with gifts: the Gettysburg Address written on a piece of yellowing paper, a love poem written on a piece of yellowing paper, and a toy airplane. Did he mention he's always wanted to fly?

Around eleven o'clock, I start hearing what's on the stove at Santo Venia. If it's chicken, I hear earliest. *Hay pollo hoy.* I am reminded to stay, to get my share, because tomorrow may be meatless. In fact, it will. This is just one way food is institutionalized: by rotation.

Fish gets early mention, too: *pescado*. When I choose to stay for lunch, I see why. By fish, they mean a whole fish—from lips to tail fin. All four hundred hungry stomachs get their own, on a tin tray, ensconced on a heap of rice. It's the tender kind of *pescado* that lets go of the skeleton easily, with a fork's first touch, so no fish bones are swallowed.

Carlos Ricardo reminds me why I should value Santo Venia's offering (the *pollo*, the *pescado*): in public nursing homes, ones not watched over by little Spanish nuns with little keys, the employees "*llevar todo*." Carlos Ricardo might call it *stealing* if it was less frequent, but *lifting* is the protocol of state employees across Cuba. Not paid enough to fill their cupboards, they lift the chicken.

I notice something peculiar about the utensils of lunch: there are no forks here. Only spoons. I am about to ask Carlos Ricardo why, but pause. Of course: *spoons*. A spoon does everything a lunch designed for four hundred *ancianos* could require.

Lunch takes a small village. Carlos Ricardo is one of the *ancianos* who pitch in. He helps spoon feed in the *invalidos* unit, getting puree between lips. Then Carlos Ricardo partakes of his own (solid) meal in another wing of the mansion—perhaps less hungry, perhaps more grateful.

Carlos Ricardo has recorded every meal that the *ancianos* of Santo Venia have eaten during his residence. You could trace Cuba's food shortages through his ledgers. I wonder if he is looking for a correlation between life expectancy and fish lunches. He has already proven one of his hypotheses: that the *ancianos* who volunteer at Santo Venia live longer. Longer—he points out—than those *ancianos* who spend their days in rocking chairs, in slow clouds of cigar smoke, with memories.

There are two countries every interview touches.

Mine and theirs.

Los Estados Unidos & Coooba.

Though the *ancianos* take a shortcut with names, calling my country *alla*, which means "over there." The word *alla* is often said with a toss of the head, as though our chat were casting a fishing line across the Florida Straits, to that other place, where things are vaguely more prosperous and shiny.

*Alla*, the dogs are as big as wolves. Rupert knows from his son's photos. *Alla*, you can go years without meeting your neighbors. Rupert knows because *he's* the one who informed *his* son that his son lived down the block from a blood cousin. *Alla*, you don't "drop by" peoples' houses, not without good reason, without warning. Elena noticed while visiting her sister, while sitting in a cool, noiseless house.

*Alla*, Cubans will work any job, anywhere. Ramon has heard of Cubans working in Alaska. Egypt! *Alla*, labor has fruit. Ramon knows because his son works a brutish job, beside stupid people, but has the means to buy a car. *Alla*, Elena says, you splurge your profits in a new way every year. *Last* year, her sister remodeled the house; *this* year, Elena's sister is traveling Europe.

*Ancianos* who I don't interview—who the Master didn't select—approach me in the Spanish-tiled hallways to broach the same topic: *ALLA*. The *ancianos* name-drop blood relatives as if my country was the size of a suburban cul-de-sac, where everyone's last name was printed on a mailbox.

They have a sister in Miami. A cousin in Miami. Two ex-wives in Miami. I can't imagine my freckled face bears any resemblance to these relatives, but it doesn't matter. Before I can open my mouth, speak an accented word, explain where I'm from—(a snowy city bordering Canada where no sane Cuban would fathom relocating)—they have made the link. So I play ambassador to Cuba's phantom countrymen, nodding, repeating the name back—*Marisol*—like a promise I'll look for her; do my part to diminish the distance between *Aqui* and *Alla*.

Some *ancianos* find me a second time, handing over photos of houses with siding, tan grandkids posing beside Cinderella. They write down addresses and phone numbers on old envelopes, phone numbers lacking area codes and final digits.

"Give her a call when you go back."


Too many things have been lost. I record what I hear. What I can.

Lost: Jimberto's brother—the playboy, the partier, the one who took more than he gave.

Lost: Jose's first wife—strong personality, demanding, governing. "After the childhood I had," Jose asks, "was I going to be whipped by her?"

Lost: A son of Rupert, twice. Lost to Germany, to study. Lost to Florida, to defect.

Lost: Gloria's brother-in-law, in Spain, in the middle of the night, in the Civil War. Taken by soldiers and never seen again.

Lost: Gloria's pharmacy, in 1959.

Lost: Gloria's extended family—the Melendez-Garcia's—in 1959, to Miami.

Lost: Rupert's spot in the boat sailing from the Mariel to Miami.

Lost: Rupert's relations aboard that boat, capsized, amid *aqui* and *alla*.

Lost: Maria's retarded son; Elena's two houses; Barbaritos' favorite son; the favorite son of Barbaritos' wife; the sanity of Barbaritos' wife; the number of years that Elena was married to the homosexual (five, seven, doesn't remember); Abud's U.S. citizenship, after serving in WWII, after "misbehaving" in Germany; Elena's homosexual husband, to testicular cancer; Gonzalo's taste for politics; Elena's taste for politics; Gloria's willingness to utter the p-word; Alfonso's faith in things he cannot see.

"You ever seen the patron saint of Cuba?"

Alfonso didn't think so.

I have a simple question for the *ancianos*, but no sense of how to pose it tactfully. I bumble through a preamble with Carlos Ricardo, asking him about the *ancianos*, the ones "like him," the ones who are healthy, who volunteer, who give the Spanish-tiled hallways its morning traffic, too energetic to belong—

"*Ah,*" Carlos Ricardo nods at my confusion, catching me in my American frame of reference. "You have to understand the context. *Where you are.*"

Where I am: a country where housing isn't regenerative, not at the pace of families. Carlos Ricardo learned this, he says, sleeping in his daughter's living room, at the mercy of a son-in-law who liked to watch TV—at night. Carlos Ricardo didn't look for conflict; in fact, he looked for his meals in the street to avoid it. He shakes his head at the memory—of the couch, of the street, of something else.

"*He was jealous,*" Carlos Ricardo says, looking away. I don't ask him to clarify, his point made clear: Cuba is out of housing. And the *anciano* has weakest claim to what remains—the skeletal apartments of Habana Vieja..

The ancianos come to Santo Venia for all reasons, but there are common ones: no children, too many children, children in Miami with poor memory (*Give her a call...*) and ceilings that fall without checking who's home first. Ask Berta. (*...had never seen so much blood...*). Faviola tells a similar story (*...fell in the middle of the day...*), though she leaves out the blood.

The wish of Santo Venia's benefactress held like a prophecy. *Ancianos Desamparados:* Old People With Nowhere Else to Go. Here, *ancianos* become wards of charity, eating mushy food with spoons, sleeping in long rows of throaty snores. They bring no more than a drawer's worth of practical clothes, because not even this mansion can manage four hundred of anything beyond beds, spoons, pills, names. Certainly not life stories, I find, cut short by the Master's watch every time.

Found: Gloria's only love. Enrique, Enrique, Enrique. Found: Gonzalo's dead mother—in a vision. Found: Gonzalo's faith in things he cannot see. Found: Room for Rolando-the-sailor's second book, on the flip side of his first. Found: a second wife for Jose. Found at a dance.

"She was beaten down by life," Jose says. "*Y yo simpaticé.*"

That verb. *Simpatizar*. The question. Do you sympathize with Cuba? Would you hit it off at a dance? If I dance a pitiful salsa, can I still claim yes? Knowing these nuances of Cuban sympathy, I'm no less bewildered. Though whatever I've been saying to the *ancianos* of Santo Venia—*si, no, no sé*— I suspect it has spread. My ambivalence has bounced off Spanish tiles, leaked between male and female units, reached the caretakers in their crisp white habits (who may not spread gossip, but surely hear it). However it is I've defined my sympathies to this country and its ancient ones, Santo Venia has been listening.

*Siestas* steal over the lobbies of Santo Venia, nagging eyelids until they seal. Those awake since dawn with itchy skin, bleating nonsensicalities, now go quiet. Godsends, for everyone. Intermission.

Wherever I can, I detour through courtyards, catching a dozen steps of raw sun. In each courtyard, a few *ancianos* sit, beside huge wicker cages of green parrots. I meet the petite *anciana* in charge of tending to the birds, who lugs their cages inside every afternoon. Her brown hair is pulled back in a perky ponytail, showcasing just one wisp of gray. She tells me that the parrots are orphans: that a woman who moved to Spain left her pets to the nuns.

"The parrots are like the *ancianos*," she tells me, reaching her hand inside the cage to change the water. "They come with

their idiosyncrasies. Lord knows how they picked them up." The skinniest green bird tries to peck at her naked hand. She waves it away with a flick, undaunted. "You can split the men from the women. You keep the crazy from the sane. But in the end, you have to put up with what everyone brings."

She leans down toward the birds and coos at the nearest one. "*Buenos días.*" Trying again, "*Buenos días.*"

The bird lets out a screech.

"Stubborn," she dismisses. "I've been able to teach them. But you wouldn't believe the garbage that comes out of their mouths."

There's an old pastor living in a nursing home who yells cuss words all day long. *Dick, shit, fuck.* A man of God, turning potty mouth, mere steps from his heaven. It's simpler to make sense of the behavior of the *anciana* restrained in the Santo Venia *invalidas* unit. Of course she would call out for her mother all day. She's tied to a commode.

"*Siempre*" is Spanish for "always." In my interviews, *siempre* marks the things that have been consistent, or at least felt consistent, over a lifetime.

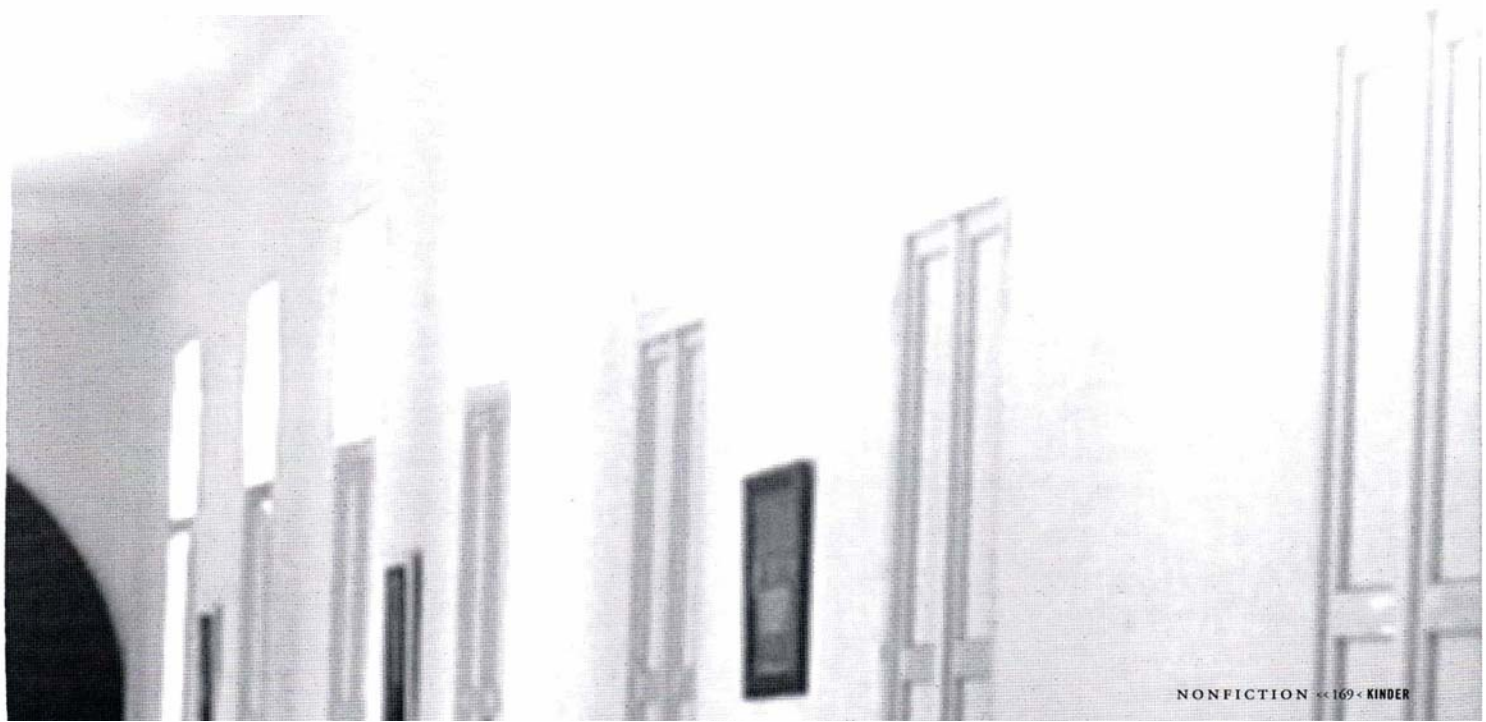
Elena has always been a romantic, her thoughts in the clouds. Rolando-the-sailor always appreciated the sea. The days when waves crashed on deck. Cristobalina always got along with her husband: a simple, noble man. Elena always wanted to be a violinist, an actress, a writer—anything proffering fame. Elena has always believed that God's second coming is near. That soon, she'll be rewarded. That soon, everyone will see. And yes, Jesus has always sympathized with a certain country. The country of blondes, baseball, gambling.

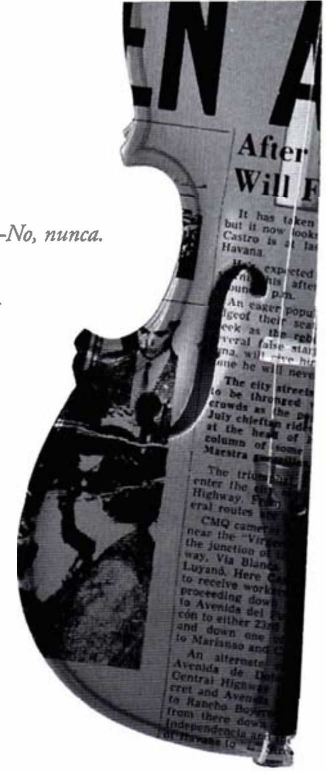
*Siempre* marks what an *anciano* has come to appreciate about their nature, their proclivities. *Siempre* begins an assured, declarative statement, hinting self-endearment. *Nunca* signals the contrary, requiring more pause, more words.

No, Marta never had children. She was a teacher, though. Many, many classes of students. She couldn't even *count*...

It takes longer to explain what a person *never* did. A never has to be dwelt on, justified.

No, Berta never married. There were interested men—sure. But she preferred *to devote herself to culture.*






A head is shaken—*No. Never.*—while the listener's expectations collapse, the head continues shaking—*No, nunca.* The no is repeated, the head re-shaken, for everything behind the never. For all that a void becomes.

No, Gloria never had children. She had Enrique, but none of his. Elena never looked for another husband. The homosexual cured her of that desire.

The nevers of old women get holed up in institutions. This mansion houses too many of them. Never having married, a woman has one less caretaker. Never having children, a woman has fewer. Never having mothered, a woman's body holds up better, longer. Her spine is straighter, her mind less taxed with worries. She stretches out a familiar solitude. She becomes the 103-year-old pet of a nursing home, whose birthday (July 3) never passes without a celebration.

"I was born in *mil novecientos*," Gloria de los Angeles tells me. I look down at my notebook. My pen treads air above the page. Gloria has told me this five times.

Some lives, I notice, bear more shape than others. A couple read like timelines, spliced with the clean Before/After. But others dip and turn, colored by bursts of scene. I wonder if it's in the telling: if some people simply see more stories when they look back from this far. From Santo Venia's Spanish-tiled hallways.

Like Rupert, whose wife and daughter took all the money his son sent from Miami. Like Rupert, whose wife and daughter never said a word about this money. Like Rupert, whose wife and daughter are "sown from the same thread."

Like Barbaritos, whose wife had a minor drinking problem. Like Barbaritos, who looked after the problem, ordering pop when she ordered beer, switching glasses.

Like Hilda, whose eighteen nieces and nephews all earned university degrees—courtesy of the Revolution. Like Hilda, who believes Cuba is showing the world.

Like Jimberto, who tells me Cubans have no more faith in God. Like Jimberto, who jokes that instead, "Cubans have family living overseas."

Like Ramon, who thought God had descended into Havana in the year 1959. Like Ramon, who decided otherwise by the year 1964.

Like Miguel, whose entire family fled to Miami and ceased to communicate. Like Miguel, who routinely hears of their deaths, through non-partisan friends.

A foreigner, like a spelling bee contestant, has the right to request a repetition.

*¿Que?* I ask. What was that?

In Spanish, confusion is posed between a pair of question marks—the first one hung upside down, looking doubly puzzled, matching my usual state in Cuba. There is a limit to how many times I can play the que-card, though. Once or twice is fine, but by the third, the *ancianos* grow impatient; I sense them doubting my intelligence. After all, to the *ancianos*, the *ancianos* make perfect sense. After two *que's*, I have to nod and write something down.

¿ ? -Why Jose cites "Kool-Aid" as the cause of his wife's death.

¿ ? -What Gonzalo intends me to infer: "There are some things I won't talk about. Got it?"

¿ ? -When Ramon wrote a card to himself to say "all of the things no one ever says," what, exactly, Ramon wrote.

¿ ? -Why Gonzalo tells me, halfway through our interview, to put my pen down—"That's it. That's my life. You can stop recording."— then proceeds to talk for a half hour.

¿ ? -Why Gloria swats at my notebook—"*Don't write that!*"—after telling me about her sister's husband, the one kidnapped during the Spanish Civil War. Erased.

¿ ? -Why Raymundo will only talk of Argentina, where he has fifteen nieces and nephews, affiliating me with the Argentine embassy no matter how much I resist the affiliation.

¿ ? -How sane Raymundo is.

¿ ? -Whether Raymundo's interview was ever sanctioned by the Master, or whether Raymundo was just roaming through the library one slow afternoon and found a foreign face, an open notebook.

Because I am a foreigner in Cuba, I can't help but ask the foreigner-in-Cuba question. What's ahead for this country? The forecast, read from Santo Venia, varies.

Miguel warns that his country will be harder to conquer with time; that an attack on Cuban soil will be deadly. Marta is convinced that life moves in a circle. Turning and turning. Cuba is coming into its era. Jesus likes to quote his grandmother on the matter: "*Preocuparse por el futuro es preocuparse dos veces.*" To worry about the future is to worry two times. Ramon agrees: "The hurricane can go anywhere." Ramon adds: "I wish Castro a very long life."

I pause and give Ramon the bewildered stare he must expect.

*¿Que?*

Wasn't he the same *anciano* who denounced the Castro regime in terms so livid I blushed and hoped no nun was in earshot?

Ramon nods, and reiterates his stance.

"That's right. Fidel deserves the country of cowards he has created." Ramon's grinning bunches the wrinkles throughout his face. "This country, Fidel Castro deserves for a million years more."

There's an awkwardness that trails each interview. It's not unlike seeing someone you've been intimate with, passing in the street. You know too much. You've undressed their persona, gotten the grittiest glimpse. And now you're sitting with another man, asking him his date of birth, the name of his wives, his take on the future of Cuba.

I see the *ancianos* in the Spanish-tiled halls, and panic in search of their names. I will confuse a Juan and Jose, forget my name trick for the 103-year-old—that my own grandmother was called Gloria. What could be more *rude* than forgetting the name of a life story I transcribed just days ago? Beyond names, I worry about what we should say to each other. How to return to casual topics: the heat, the humidity, lunch.

With Ramon, the aftermath is worst. Our interview went on for almost an hour, filling eleven pages of my notebook. *Eleven*. Ramon's story was impassioned, candid, complete with peso-to-dollar conversions of his salary spelled out on a nearby *Granma*. He left nothing untouched: his fruitless career, his take on God, his symmetrical trio of romances, and finally, the book Ramon has been writing for forty years, which—so people tell him—reads like a Marquez novel.

Ramon confesses a preference for solitude. Walking the halls of Santo Venia, saying good morning: these things tax him. He would prefer not to muster the effort. But living in a nursing home obliterates that sort of daily solitude. Ramon tells me that people wear masks most of the time. He despises them—both the masks, and those who wear them.

I assumed that our interview was an exception—unmasked—and that future run-ins would be comfortable. After all, Ramon talked longer than anyone. Our interview had about six climaxes. I scribbled down his quotes, keeping them in Spanish, oddly attached to his eloquence. I kept assuming Ramon's words were final. But there were always more coming. Everything Ramon said rang like an adage: wise and concise.

Finally, Ramon switched into English—the second language he learned as a school boy—signaling the true denouement.

"To be or not to be?" he carefully enunciated.

I thought of my friend Jesus. First Lincoln, now Shakespeare.

Ramon raised one hand above the table and slapped it four times for emphasis. The closing translation came out awkwardly, but I smiled and wrote down his final words, as is.

"I am TO BE."

Marta intercepts me in the Spanish-tiled hallways, shooing Carlos Ricardo away. Marta has a grievance: my month of interviews is nearly over, and I haven't met all the *right* people. She suspects Carlos Ricardo has been keeping me to his male friends. Why this would be problematic, Marta does not say.

Instead, she leads me to the nearest bench and pulls out a sheet of paper. Marta has typed up an essay entitled "*Realidades y Caraceristicas del Anciano.*" To help me sift through Santo Venia's multitude of voices, she explains that the anciano can have many temperaments: some are *calm*; some *neurotic*; some are *rebellious*.

Marta wants to hear about the *ancianos* I have spoken with. Their names? What have they told me about Cuba? Has her brother filled my ears with his nonsense?

"Your brother?" I ask.

Marta nods. "Jesus."

Brother Jesus. Sister Marta. That's *right*. Born the same year. The same year as Fidel. Reunited at Santo Venia, their innate preferences—for distance—the same.

Marta changes the subject. "How about Pastorita? Have you talked to Pastorita yet?"

"You can't talk to *everyone*," Carlos Ricardo mutters defensively, as we walk back to the lobby. "It's impossible."

He has guided me all over this mansion for four hundred, with the blue and gold Spanish tiles running alongside, inexhaustible, like panels in a video game. Carlos Ricardo doesn't disagree, however, that *Pastorita* is the missing *anciano* in my line-up. The final voice. The twenty-fifth.

*Pastorita* is Santo Venia's recurring name. *Pastorita* is the glaring omission that Marta will not forgive the Master. Pastorita is the warning Jesus gave me, an addendum to the Gettysburg Address. *Pastorita* is the name *ancianos* bring up before launching into their life stories, wanting to know *who else* I've talked to. They suggest *Pastorita?*, the question mark lifting their eyebrows high. Someone touring a nursing home in a foreign country must have a reason, and maybe, they keep hinting, *Pastorita* is mine.

There is a reason Carlos Ricardo has not introduced me yet. Pastorita does not live in the women's unit, or the men's unit, or any of Santo Venia's units. She lives separately, in a quiet area you reach by passing through parlors with stained glass doors. Aside from the nuns' quarters, it's the only piece of Santo Venia that has not been institutionalized, invaded by beds and bibs.

Carlos Ricardo halts at these stained glass doors and signals that I go on ahead. Carlos Ricardo seems slightly uneasy about handing me over—for her sake or mine, I'm not sure.

"Find me before you leave," he asks.

The room I pass into is dim and occupied by furniture no one sits in. Beyond it: a hallway, better lit, not dressed in

Spanish tiles. It wears something the rest of Santo Venia does not: personal affects. Photographs of people. People I recognize.

A familiar bearded man wearing military fatigues. He looks tall, because he is tall, but also because there is a short young woman posed beside him, hardly reaching his shoulder. A stout little pit-bull, standing erect alongside her *commandante-en-jefe*. The young woman also wears military fatigues. The belt hugging her waist gives her physique an extra thickness. A photographer shaded her cheeks an unrealistic pink, keeping Fidel's plain beige.

A certificate of honor hangs nearby, framed. I read the name in calligraphy:

PASTORITA NUÑEZ GONZALEZ

The walls begin telling her story. Pastorita was not just a revolutionary, she was one of the originals, hiding in the Sierra Maestra, gaining on Havana. Pastorita was one of a handful of women who fought alongside Castro, winning the Revolution in the name of both sexes. Since this victory, forty-five years ago, Pastorita has been a celebrity, a name which—when appearing on applications for private housing in nursing homes—gets particular consideration.

Normally, Pastorita resides in a small house that stands a deliberate ten yards from the old mansion. This house is currently being remodeled (remodeled, I've learned, is a verb only hotels and cigar museums get to use). For now, Pastorita's belongings have been transferred to this special area. Her certificates, her photos, her typewriter all came, making living quarters of the rooms. There is a couch. Lamps on end tables offer light in small doses. And finally, in the space six wheelchairs would usually occupy, one sits.

The woman in this wheel chair bears a resemblance to the photo, though her face is no longer so full. The skin sags, giving her cheekbones a striking pronunciation. When Pastorita turns around, these cheekbones take fierce aim in my direction. Not surprisingly, Pastorita would like to know who I am.

Once I clarify—a foreign visitor (*sí, Americana*)—she would like to know my opinion of the Embargo, my opinion of "Boooosh," my intentions to vote for his opponent, the political party my parents belong to, and finally, most importantly:

"*Simpatizas con la Revolución?*"

I stare. I know this question, but not posed this way. Asked by Pastorita, the sympathy question makes me feel hot, squeamish, eager to remove myself from Cuban scrutiny, from Havana, from politics that predate me, whose four hundred legacies I can't begin to weigh.

Pastorita's cheekbones look tensed.

SYMPATIZAS CON LA REVOLUCIÓN? Pastorita cares to know.

I open my mouth. "*Claro—*"

This becomes my final answer. Clearly. To Pastorita's liking. Of course. On her side of Santo Venia, you either sympathize with the Revolution, or you sympathize with the Revolution. Without pause, without qualification. Yes, ma'am.

"Good."

Now that politics have been covered, we can get to Pastorita's story. A story which, like Elena's and Cristobalina's, is based in nevers. A story which, like Jesus and Marta's, is spliced into Before and After.

Pastorita never's: no husband, no marriage, no children. No contact with siblings, After. No contact with parents, After. Nothing but Revolution, After.

Pastorita considers herself an exemplary *anciana*. Not long after moving to Santo Venia, she decided that the *ancianos* were too idle. She wrote a letter to Raul Castro, brother to the *Commandante*, asking that the government build a garden in Santo Venia's front yard. The government obliged. The arable land of Santo Venia is her creation. The *ancianos* who pick the lettuce and bananas and tomatoes do so in the name of Pastorita.

"I don't mix with them very often," Pastorita tells me.

Them?

The *ancianos*, she means. The old people.

"I say something and they turn it around and go telling everyone," Pastorita remarks, viscerally repulsed. "I've heard the way they talk, and I don't want anything to do with it."

I notice a tray of food beside Pastorita's wheelchair. A tray of food carried here by one of the nuns. The same nun who feeds Santo Venia's four hundred in measured pours, also walks to this private lair, three times a day, with single portions. Pastorita lives and eats in solitude. And now I know the reason: she doesn't want to be misquoted. The matron of the Revolution would rather keep her name in absolute form, as nailed on her wall: Pastorita Nuñez Gonzalez.

Her eyes follow mine to the nearby dinner tray. "I'm about to eat."

Across the Spanish-tiled mansion, linen tents are being frisked for moisture, then pulled down. An old pastor is cussing at the still afternoon air. I wonder what age will do to the Revolution's heroine. If Pastorita were to lose hold of her tongue, would the nuns go on treating her as Pastorita? With separate sheets and separate lunches from all the Glorias, all the Cristobalinas?

I now understand why the *ancianos* cared to know if I'd met Pastorita, before divulging more than their dates of birth. It's a less pointed version of the same question: *Simpatizas con la Revolución?*

Whose version did you come to hear?