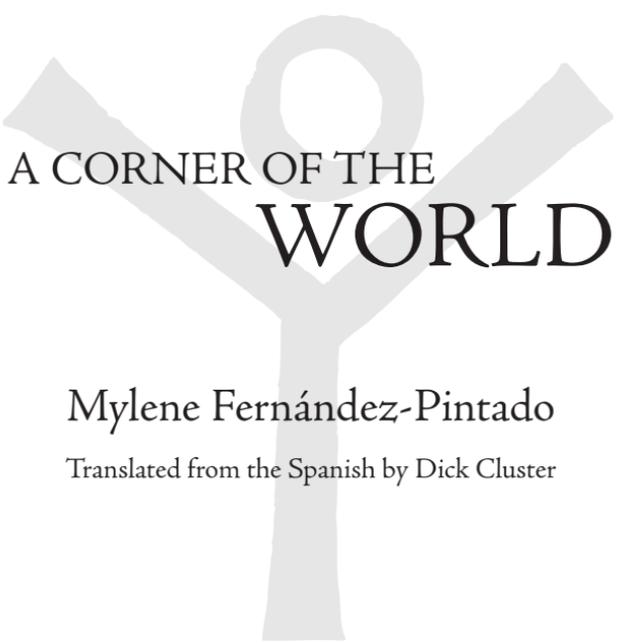


A CORNER OF THE WORLD



Mylene Fernández-Pintado

Translated from the Spanish by Dick Cluster



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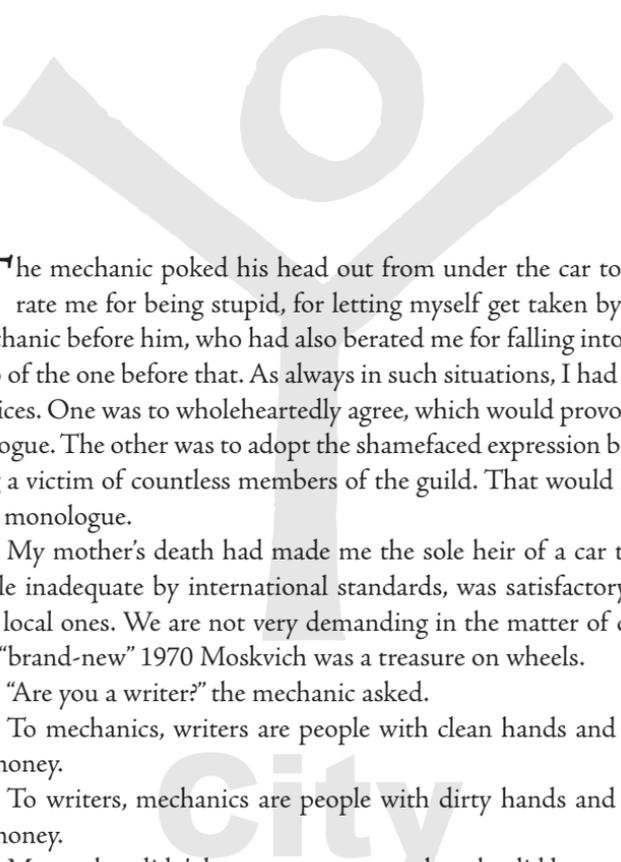
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City
Lights



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The mechanic poked his head out from under the car to berate me for being stupid, for letting myself get taken by the mechanic before him, who had also berated me for falling into the trap of the one before that. As always in such situations, I had two choices. One was to wholeheartedly agree, which would provoke a dialogue. The other was to adopt the shamefaced expression befitting a victim of countless members of the guild. That would lead to a monologue.

My mother's death had made me the sole heir of a car that, while inadequate by international standards, was satisfactory by our local ones. We are not very demanding in the matter of cars. My "brand-new" 1970 Moskvich was a treasure on wheels.

"Are you a writer?" the mechanic asked.

To mechanics, writers are people with clean hands and lots of money.

To writers, mechanics are people with dirty hands and lots of money.

My mother didn't leave me any money, but she did leave some things of value: an upright piano and lots of sheet music. Her music. All I can do with the instrument is to put my hands on the keys and have them respond without much conviction. Still, out of all the objects she left that cluster indifferently around me, that piano feels the most my own.

I also inherited a porcelain table setting, silverware that's truly silver, and linen tablecloths. Also glassware of all sizes and sorts.

Endless treasures that have no means of locomotion. We take care of them all our lives, and they almost always survive us.

Also she left me a gaping void of loneliness, at the age of thirty-seven.

What's the net weight of a writer, I asked myself before replying to the question. The number of books? The number of prizes? The tally of foreign publishers? The crowd of reporters pursuing you? The quantity of gossip?

"I'm no writer," I told him while trying to understand what he was doing to the car and promising myself not to be deceived again.

I don't write stories, novels, or poetry. I don't publish books, win prizes, or get interviewed anywhere. Nobody recognizes me on the street. Nobody snipes at me. That answer, I thought, would be true.

"So what do you do?" The voice emerged from under the car, from the space lit by a crude lantern he must have invented himself.

"I'm a Spanish language professor at the University."

I awaited the indifferent "Oh" of someone who has inquired merely to have something to say, but instead the mechanic wanted to know whether I liked my job.

"No."

He poked his head out again, this time to confirm what is generally repeated here: That *Moskviches* had been produced by the youth of the Leninist *Komsomol* on Sundays of "volunteering."

"I teach first-year students," I added, "which means my classrooms are full of geniuses who haven't yet found out that what they'll end up learning will serve to make them depressed at the sight of a decently turned phrase."

"And how do you get along with them?" continued the interview from underneath the car.

"I think they think I'm very gray," I said as if I knew what they would answer. "I don't carry out projects with universities abroad, I don't travel, I don't know anyone who's anyone in that world."

“So what? In the end, you’re the professor. Who cares?”

“You’re right. None of it keeps me awake at night.” That was the truth, in fact.

“The shape this car is in, you’re a brave girl driving it around. It’s a miracle you’re alive. Look at this steering.” He made that last comment for his own benefit, since I couldn’t see anything.

“Yes, I’m very brave.” My point was that he shouldn’t see me as a damsel in distress and subject to swindles.

Brave I am not. That’s why I’ve never written anything but class preparation notes. I’d be completely unable to come up with striking answers if I were asked about my next work in progress, or the literature being written on or off the Island, or how I manage to write with so much else to keep me busy.

Other than the sacred profession of teaching, I don’t have anything to keep me busy. No animals, no plants. I have books, but they’ll stay alive even without dusting. I have a room of my own and all the time in the world. In other words, I’d have no excuse for not being a magnificent writer before even composing my first line.

Those were my thoughts as I watched the decrepit Moskvich pant and hiccup at each touch of the mechanic, every time he tightened, loosened, or straightened anything.

OLGA, MY BOSS, ASKED me to come see her after class. To talk. She did that often enough, convinced as she was that she could always assign me departmental tasks. I was the only one who hadn’t taken off on some ambitious personal pursuit. I prepared for class as if for catechism. During our boring staff meetings full of talk about requirements for the major, syllabi, the glowing futures of the School of Language and Literature and the Spanish tongue, I didn’t let my eyes stray to the clock. And as always, I was in no hurry to go home. I live nearby, and nothing awaited me but the voices on my answering machine, my point of contact with the rest of the world.

Olga smiled maternally as I came into the office, assessing me with a glance. The severe eyeglasses on her appealing, plump face contrasted with her clothes of impressionist hues. I thought that Olga radiated vitality and serenity, like sunflowers or the sea. I smiled back and sat down.

“Marian, sweetie, it’s been so long since we’ve talked. I know you’re deep in your work the way I wish the rest of the department would be, but don’t you think you ought to be projecting yourself a bit more toward the outside?”

Since I was not sure how many kilometers were implied by the word “outside,” I envisioned a panorama that stretched from a modest provincial institution to the planet’s most exalted gathering of Hispanicists.

“You know we’re always in touch with the Writers Union, the Book Institute, and the publishing houses. Many of our professors write.” Olga made a face that suggested none of them were any good. “Others do criticism or essays or study Literature for the benefit of audiences beyond their students. You’ve never shown any interest in that. You don’t know the authors of Literature except by hearing of them or exchanging occasional greetings. I haven’t wanted to push you, but lately I can’t get out of my head that it’s just your shyness getting in your way. So I feel guilty. If you haven’t done anything on your own initiative, I haven’t assigned you to do it either.”

This prologue was full of truths, but I didn’t suppose she had summoned me just for us to wallow in our respective guilts. Since I was in agreement so far and wanted to know what was coming, I urged her onward with my eyes.

“Here’s the book of a very young writer, without any literary background, who has won a prize for debut works.” She showed me a bound galley of a thin volume with an awful cover. “The head of the award committee has asked me to provide some words as a preface. The first press run will be five hundred copies, with presentations of the book around the country. The opening pages,

the ones that will give the readers some orientation, will be yours. Tell me, sweetie, what do you think?"

Olga is a forceful person who has taught Literature for decades, which explains why she talks like that. What she offered sounded to me like Gallimard, the Sorbonne, and a European tour. Which is to say, it was terrifying. But I told her I would do it. At least I'd have something to report to the mechanic next time, I said sarcastically to myself.

My acceptance surprised her, but it fit her theory that my problem was shyness, not any lack of desire to step into that world. Her guilt mounted for not having made such a proposal before. She handed me the book. Its author was twenty-two and had written nothing else except a few poems—unpublished, I supposed.

On the first page, she wrote down a phone number, "Because I'm sure it would be good for you to talk with him. You'll want to ask him many things, and probably you'll be the one to present the book to the public, at least here in Havana. It would good for you to be in contact from the get-go."

The Eskimo, by Daniel Arco, went into my purse. That day my pace quickened. I walked the way a writer of great prefaces would carry a great book through a city of subways, taxis, and broad sidewalks. I wanted to get right to work. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to manage it, but the only way to find out was to start trying.

"The Eskimo" was also the title of one of the stories, which in truth was quite good. A man sunk in calculations about whether he could buy a mattress with one month's pay wandered through the city during the uproar of August 5, 1994, that gave birth to the exodus of rafts and improvised boats. He walked amidst people running and shouting, the defense of order and the yen to exercise power, the violence of the situation and the more ordinary kind. Through the roiling streets of Havana on that unusual day, a passerby walked without knowing what was going on. He went over and over his figures and sums without taking in anything else.

Though the story reminded me of one set during the Spanish Civil War, in which a shepherd searches for his goat amidst the conflict between nationalists and republicans, it still seemed quite good to me. It was written with care, especially considering that the writer was unsupplied with formal tools. He must have a grammar-teacher friend who corrects his language, I thought while making my first notes.

The telephone rang quite a few times. I heard voices leaving messages but I didn't want to stop what I was doing. At ten p.m. I decided I deserved a bottle of cheap red wine and went out to buy it.

Since my mother died, I've sold many of the things around the house to an antique dealer, at prices I suppose are quite advantageous to him. Little by little, the contents of once-bursting chests and cabinets have turned into money. Money for eating something not on the ration book, or for dressing up and sipping inexpensive wine on holidays.

I thought about calling Marcos to share the bottle.

Marcos and I were together for a long time. When we broke up, we said we needed a break. People say that to leave the door open. If you don't find someone else or someone better, you can go back to your ex without admitting you've been unable to make a new beginning.

We hadn't seen each other for over a year when we crossed paths at the phone company. I was paying my regular bill, while he was putting money into his cell phone account. After joyful hellos, he told me was involved with a Panamanian company that had to do with refrigeration and with a Panamanian woman in a less chilly way. He invited me to lunch, where he told me more about his good fortune, which I quickly associated with his having excised me from his life. Possibly he did too. Since everything went so well, we ended up making love. I told him that my mother had died and other than that everything was the same.

I think that some way or other I communicated that I wasn't

interested in change. He took me home in his Toyota and we began seeing each other between his trips abroad. Things were much better that way. His failures were no longer my fault, and my few successes did not flow from his lucky star shining on my sad self. We were no longer an upstanding couple making their way in the world, but occasional lovers for whom nothing that happened was the other's responsibility. We did better knowing less, so I decided not to call him to share the wine or the news.

Instead I called my friend the scrivener.

Sergio lives in do-it-yourself quarters on a rooftop in Old Havana. He writes by hand. He dots i's and crosses t's without his fingers ever touching a key. When he reaches the end, the final page does not glow on a screen or rest trapped in a typewriter roller, not even that of an old Underwood. Rather, he pens "The End" with a disposable ballpoint, a tiny gift from whomever, advertising some bar in Italy or Spain. He stacks up two hundred pages of newsprint paper filled with his tiny handwriting, ties them together with string, and adds them to the pile atop the only bureau in the only room of his house.

His head is full of stories. They assail him at the least opportune times. They drag him from wherever he may be, home to his collapsing chair. They demand to be written down. Sergio doesn't know what to do with all the stories in his head, on paper, carpeting the floor like autumn leaves, threatening to tumble from the top of the bureau. He's ten times removed from prize contests, anthologies, translators, publishers, literary impresarios, critics, or journalists.

He writes, and the writing relieves him as if he were easing heavy burdens from his back to the floor. He publishes in the obscure magazines of almost nonexistent towns, illegible supplements to free newspapers, magazines people buy to clean windows or wrap things up to put away.

He gets paid almost nothing but keeps on writing, without caring to learn about outlets that pay nine thousand euros for a

story or about the people who receive such largesse. Book launches and panels that mean airplane tickets, lodging, and tourism in places one would die to visit. Residencies in European castles, parties and cocktails paid for by a foundation. Bright lights, tinsel, and sequins. Fame and fortune, that marvelous duo of soft chords and resonant blessings, neither know nor care that in an improvised penthouse with a view of the sea someone goes on making literature because he has no other choice.

We opened the bottle, and I told him I'd make dinner. He accepted with the proviso that he would buy the ingredients. This time I couldn't talk him out of it. He came back with all the makings for a good pasta dish and then, happily, told me why.

"I've got a job as a letter writer, like that guy in García Márquez. Well, only less romantic. The girls in my neighborhood have lots of international romances. They need to compose siren songs to attract their men across the sea, who now come in airplanes instead of boats. I write love letters for them."

"Love in this city. Under the blue and orange sky of the Malecón," I intoned with some sarcasm. "Endless evenings that commence in restaurants, continue in discos, and conclude in rented rooms with air conditioning and lamps that switch off when you touch them." We nodded in unison, knowing that our love affairs had never been like that.

"They show up and tell me their stories. Some have fallen in love with the guys, some with the life they're going to have. The rest are just calculating whether it will turn out to be a good investment. I transmute all that into love. Which, after all, is at the base of everything. Love of adventure, of the desire to leave, of eating delicatessen or owning a car, of going out shopping and becoming the mainstay of the rest of the family who are still here." He told me all this as we ate.

"At first I was doing it for free, but they insisted on paying me with presents or money. Some have gone, by now. They call or stop by when they come back for vacation. Others are still here,

and they introduce me to their girlfriends who need the same thing. It seems like steady work . . . and no meetings.” That was his explanation. I felt my pasta had turned out pretty well for a change.

While I did the dishes, Sergio read the first story in the book. He thought it was good. He remembered the Spanish tale I mentioned, but didn’t see much similarity between the two. He didn’t take the preface too seriously.

“You’ll do a good job. I’ll read it when it’s done.”

MARCOS CAME OVER TO show off his good fortune under the pretext of sharing it with me. He brought flowers, handing me a slender bouquet that seemed to have been picked from a meadow in some other latitude. It’s amazing, I thought, how even the flowers priced in dollars are better. These served as advance guard for a box of chocolates, which meant he was in condition to offer gifts both luxurious and impersonal. I don’t like chocolate, and my preferred flowers are white daisies of the “he loves me, he loves me not” variety. I thought Marcos would remember that, but I savored the fact that he didn’t. It meant I could have the advantages that came with still knowing who he was, along with those that came with him barely remembering me. So he’s both a known quantity and a stranger, I said to myself as we got into bed.

As important as the steps before making love are those you carry out when you’re done. Smokers have it easiest: They light up and look at the ceiling. Fleeting lovers look at their watches and hurry up their departures, faced with the distress or indifference, whether real or feigned, of their partners.

Marcos didn’t smoke. His new girlfriend lived in the Isthmus of Panama and was, in truth, quite busy. She was not the type to call her boyfriend for no reason or at an inappropriate time. So we’d begun to invent our own epilogue when my telephone rang.

Marcos gestured that I should ignore it, but we followed each successive ring and then the red blinking light of the answering

machine. We heard a female voice saying, "Sounds like no one's home," and then a click. No message.

"One of your students," he declared. He made a business call, canceled a meeting, and told me to choose where I'd like to go out to eat. Next up, we started talking politics.

MARCOS'S FAMILY HAS A beautiful house in Miramar, the city's most aristocratic neighborhood.

On my first visit there, I was greeted by his mother, the empress of *savoir faire*. Perched on the couch, she jiggled her bare feet like a teenager and bobbed her head frequently, showing off one of those "careless" hair styles perfected in hours with a hairbrush before the mirror. She couldn't stop talking. She was intent not on finding out who I was but on telling me about herself. She was charming and complained about everything.

It was so hard to find people who did things well these days. People who could clean a house without making noise and breaking the nice things. People who could restore paintings or keep up a yard without making a mess of the thing or charging a fortune for it.

Later that night, Marcos told me her true story while we ransacked the refrigerator, in love and ravenous, trying not to make noise.

Marcos's grandmother had been the maid in this house, whose owners' claim to fame had been introducing Walk-Don't Walk signals to Havana. They'd dreamed of widening the Malecón's sidewalk so as to fill it with bistros, umbrellas, and people watching the late-model cars speed by rather than the eternal sea. They'd attempted to install Walk-Don't Walk signals on that historic drive, but the Congress had declared that it was an "express route" and the normal traffic lights were obstacles enough. The Congress was being stingy, but the owners knew by then how money talked inside its halls.

Marcos's grandmother, whose forebears had immigrated from

La Gomera in the Canary Islands, married the chauffeur, son of immigrants from Asturias, who piloted the owners' Cadillac.

Marcos's mother was born in the house. That is, she was born in one of the rooms above the garage, which was across a patio from the mansion itself.

She grew up within those gates, because there were no other poor children in the neighborhood and she couldn't play with the rich ones. She spent her childhood watching the owners' pampered son break toys, cars, and the hearts of girls dressed in expensive clothes who made dates for the *Country* and *Yacht Club* and spent *weekends* in Miami or Varadero.

Meanwhile, she finished junior high. Commuting to a distant and problematic school, she studied hard and tried to believe the rumors about students protesting against the many abuses and about bearded young men who were seizing territory in the mountains and risking their lives so that people would be happier. Her parents never talked about politics. They were poor, which had to do with economics rather than ideology, they said while serving the employers with lowered eyes and expressing gratitude for cast-off clothing, leftovers from dinner, and cheap gifts.

By the opening months of 1961, the owners had grown tired of blacks, slogans, and the fact that their plan for bistros on the Malecón had been declared an example of "prostituting the city" and exiled from any place in Havana's future. The neighborhood was emptying. Every day, Cadillacs, Chevrolets, and Pontiacs carried off those who were leaving the country with tearful eyes and heavy suitcases, bestowing farewell embraces on the neighbors who would follow soon after to the same destination: Miami. "We'll be back," was the shared hope that punctuated each of these farewells.

Not long after, amidst ebullient public celebration, other people armed with bulging key rings came to remove the NO ENTRY signs they themselves had put in place. They opened up houses and took inventory, declaring that the furniture would pass

into the hands of Goods Recovery and the houses to the Urban Reform.

From then on, new families began to arrive. They brought, in turn, their relatives from places with unpronounceable names. They sang battle songs, danced all night long, hung flags and banners, and insisted on calling their new neighbors *compañero* and inviting them to meetings, Sunday morning work details, and rallies for the purpose of insulting the Americans, criticizing the rich, and declaring that anyone who didn't want Socialism could get the hell out.

The owners of the house were resistant. They knew some people in the new government, and had even, during the previous one, once bought some underground bonds to finance a plan for university autonomy. Something told them that all the ferment would die down and things would resume their old course. They kept to themselves and spent a lot of time on the phone with the newcomers to Miami, who called to say that things were not turning out so well there, that one had to work and work hard.

Deliberations about the family future became more pressing, however, when the son came home one day in a militia uniform with a smiling light-skinned black woman alongside him. Without asking for anyone's okay, she sat down at the piano whose keys no one ever touched and coaxed out a contradance tune. The son accompanied the pianist by drumming on the piano bench and on her thighs.

A few months later, these last guardians of the neighborhood left with no one to bid them farewell, though everyone watched the departure through half-opened slats and half-drawn curtains. The owners put Marcos's mother's family in charge of the house, with elaborate instructions for taking care of everything until the proprietors came back.

Marcos's grandparents did not dare sit down in the dining room. They ate in the kitchen on their own plates of ordinary china, and they shined the silver every day as before. Sheets and

towels, tablecloths and napkins yellowed inside cabinets and storage chests.

Everyone slept in one room, the guest room, with the doors to all the others shut tight. For fear of interrogation, they didn't talk with the new neighbors, who interpreted the silence of servants as the arrogance of ownership. Marcos's grandparents didn't invite anyone in, nor did they dare to attend the local meetings for fear of betraying those who had entrusted them with so much responsibility. As years went by, local myth converted them into the owners not just of this house but of many others that had been nationalized. Though they never denied the rumors, they died still thinking of the house as someone else's property, walking someone else's floors as noiselessly as possible, and never having touched the washing machine.

Marcos's mother was twenty-two when she came back from the cemetery after burying her father in the crypt of that family which she had taken on as her own. If only she had learned to drive, she thought, she would have returned in the Cadillac and not in a decrepit bus full of common sweat and laughter.

Entering the house that her parents had forbidden her to think of as hers, her feet felt firmer underneath. She opened doors and windows, drew apart curtains, and pierced the house's museum darkness with the light of what passed for winter.

That reminded her it was Christmastime, and she dug out the giant plastic fir tree that for many years had signified this holiday for her. She spent the afternoon searching the nearly full closets for Christmas tree balls, garlands, magi, and manger animals. When she felt she deserved a rest, she strode to the bar and poured herself cognac from a very old, sealed bottle into a fine crystal glass. She sat in the most comfortable armchair, the one for drinking and reading the newspaper. Happiness enveloped her.

Not only the Christ child was born on this Christmas Day. Marcos's mother took the opportunity to invent her past and plan her future. Since finishing junior high she'd done nothing much,

but she had read the papers, watched the news, and kept up with what was happening. And she knew how to sew, which in the Cuba of the 1960s was a quite important thing.

Setting up shop in front of a closet holding the clothes of the absent family while scanning the pages of the fashion magazine *Vanidades*, she devoted herself to making use of every inch of expensive fabric she found.

Over the course of the next several weeks, Marcos's mother crafted a magnificent wardrobe of clothes made to measure for herself. She figured that stuffing the toes of shoes with cotton was not a great sacrifice if it allowed her to be elegantly shod in colors that matched those of the great variety of pocketbooks. The mirrors showed her off as tall and slender, with the face and expressions of a young lady pampered by life. She decided it was time to venture forth and play her cards.

Transferring formal ownership of the house into her name was simple. She had all the paperwork required by the Revolution to make her the proprietor of the place where formerly she'd been only a servant. All the objects in the house now belonged to her by virtue of the change in the order of things, a change in favor of those who had never had anything before.

So the young woman who was taking care of her case assured her, a woman who seemed very young to be handling such responsibilities. "But we've got to do a little of everything, *compañera*," the woman said, smiling. "I'm from San Luis, in Oriente, and here I am doing my part. Nighttimes I'm taking a prep course to study political economy. There's opportunity for all, and you should take advantage of it while you're still young, and so pretty too."

Marcos's mother did not let such counsel about opportunities, youth, and beauty fall on deaf ears. This was a city in which women wanted to stay up-to-date and improvised a thousand ways to do so, yet fashions increasingly came only in magazines and photos from Florida.

Marcos's father, meanwhile, had been studying commerce so

as to take charge of his own father's business, a print shop that turned out everything from postcards to billboards. Though it was only a small family business, they had done well and lived well. Marcos's father learned the value of work in forming ties among men, and the value of making an honest living without exploiting anyone else. When the laws of the Revolution came to rest upon private business, Marcos's grandfather turned the print shop over, content to be contributing to the patrimony of a society that enshrined the principles he had taught his sons.

That same enthusiasm led Marcos's father to abandon the study of commerce and put his knowledge and self-discipline to work as the Revolution might require. He built dams, cut cane, installed telephones, planted coffee, wrapped chocolates—all of which culminated in his being named Cuban consul to Francisco Franco's Madrid.

Marcos's mother came into his life in time to become a consul's wife. Setting foot on an airplane for the first time, she stepped off it in Europe. She saw Las Meninas, the Alhambra, and the Sacred Family cathedral. She ate *turrone*s and Iberian ham, drank Asturian cider and Catalonian sparkling wine, and drove a SEAT 600. She shopped in prestigious department stores, Galerías Preciadas and El Corte Inglés. She saw Paris, Venice, Lisbon. All this helped to cement her recently acquired persona of aristocrat in sympathy with the Revolution.

After six years in the front lines of the First World, they came home to find that things had changed quite a bit. Marcos's mother noted that more items were scarcer than before, and everything seemed to be Russian and ugly.

She hated Russians without exception. "They're fat, they eat oily foods, and they make horrible war movies and worse cartoons." Thus Marcos grew up in the dual world of state instruction on the one hand and his mother's on the other. At school, the Soviets were a brave and generous people. When he went home for snack, they were rude, smelly Russians. Anna Karenina was

eclipsed by Emma Bovary, Kandinsky by Miró, and the Hermitage by the Venetian Academy. The Russians had nothing worth knowing about.

Since Marcos's father was very busy with travels and meetings, his mother had full authority over Marcos's upbringing. She taught him lessons about life and explained that the most important thing was to take constant and very good care of oneself.

That's why, when speaking of politics, Marcos measures social justice on a very personal scale. The country's Gross Social Product and rate of economic growth are equivalent to the money in his wallet. Peace and ecology, religion and philosophic currents have to hold their own among his moods and states of mind. The world's velocity is measured on his speedometer. The planet's future looks very much like his next weekend's plans.

I GOT TO THE classroom and sat down to wait for the students while reviewing my lesson plan. Once when I'd been five minutes late, they had escaped under cover of the claim that they had waited the stipulated fifteen minutes but I had not appeared.

I watched them drift in little by little, like words divided into syllables, while I reminded myself that I too had once been a beginner and that first-year students pride themselves on their expertise like no others. They feel very special. What matters most to them is the fact of having made it this far, not what they have left to accomplish here.

But any classroom, of course, is like the vineyard of the Lord. You've got those who want to show they know everything, those who approach the professor's desk every day to say something, anything, so that I'll remember them when it comes time for me to grade exams. You've got the shy, smart ones, the snobbish stupid ones, and the snobbish smart ones.

Like a good shepherd, I learn their names right away. The idea is to make them feel more relaxed, although sometimes I think they're entirely too comfortable and feel they're doing me a

favor by coming to class. At least at the beginning. Later I end up liking them, just when they're on their way out.

Ana interrupted my meanderings with a smile and a question. She's tall with long hair and a pair of very dark eyes that contradict her blond bangs. She's not a beauty, but she's attractive and she knows it. She's made friends with the seniors and with some of the professors, she's a member of the tap-dancing troupe, and she expects life to provide the opportunities she's convinced she deserves. As a student, Ana is good but not outstanding.

"*Profe*, are you writing the preface to *The Eskimo*?"

"Yes I am. Do you know the author?"

Bingo. That was the question she was fishing for.

"We've been going together for a few weeks now. Daniel is a very intelligent person and we're doing really well. He's working on a novel with a terrific plot."

The classic young girl dazzled by her bohemian lover. I smiled at these unrequested confidences.

"What do you think of the book? Do you like it?"

"On the whole, yes. I was thinking, in fact, that I ought to call Daniel Arco soon and have a chat with him."

"We called you a little while ago, but the machine picked up and we didn't leave a message. He's very interested in meeting you."

"I'm interested in meeting him. I'll let you know when, so you can try to set it up." I got to my feet to suggest that the quorum for a class had finally assembled.

Ana went happily to her seat. She wouldn't pay the least attention, I thought, because she'd be busy thinking of the good news she could carry to her writer boyfriend. But I decided against letting her savor that expectation, and instead made her work like the rest of the class. I always tell myself I'm doing this for their own good, but I know I'm denying them their time to dream and sentencing them to the here and now of a boring afternoon of dead and buried Literature. I'm the professor, after all.

The next day I handed Ana an envelope.

“Give this to Daniel Arco. It includes the date of a possible meeting. If he agrees, he should send me a message through you, or call me at home.”

Ana took the envelope and noted that it was sealed. I didn't like having a student in the middle of this. I would have preferred for this new period in my life not to have any witnesses from the previous era, but if Daniel Arco was sleeping with my student, there was nothing I could do about it. Above all, I couldn't do anything about her finding his beginner's contribution to Literature to be so marvelous.

MARCOS AND I BECAME lovers again after living together and then separating. What was most strange was how the success of the new relationship stemmed not from what we knew about each other but from what we had let go of. We could evoke the past the way one remembers scenes from old movies. Neither of us wanted more. Marcos, because he had organized a future that had no room for me. Me, because I didn't think about the future and I had never even organized our past.

The phone rang, and Marcos reached for it. When I stopped him, he laughed. He was amused that I didn't want him announcing his presence.

It was Lorena, my oldest friend. Lorena hates talking to the answering machine, so her opening paragraph is always the same, with minor variations.

“Do me a favor, move your ass and pick up the goddamn phone. I bet you're standing right there like an idiot, not answering. By now you know it's me and not some pervert making indecent proposals, which would actually be good for you considering how dull your life got thanks to that guy you were tied up with. I know perfectly well you're sleeping with him again, as if he had the only available dick in this town where what everybody does best is fuck. Whatever. Call me when you can.”

Marcos laughed again, because he'd long ago given up on

making an ally of Lorena. While we were together he had tried win her over by all possible means until one day she'd yelled at him that he was such a phony in every way, she was sure he was the only man in the world who faked his orgasms. His response was Aesopian: He said she toiled like the ant and would starve like the cricket.

Lorena is a painter and sculptor. To Marcos, that means a fool with no future. He's convinced that art is something that no one with a modicum of intelligence should pursue today. The *Mona Lisa* and the *Garden of Earthly Delights* have already been painted, *La Traviata* and the *Mass in C Minor* already composed. Ditto for *Hamlet* and *Uncle Vanya*, *Don Quixote* and *Remembrance of Things Past*, although those who make Literature receive a bit less disdain. To him they're minor characters on life's journey, over-interested in the curves of the road rather than concentrating on the pot of gold at the end. Now that his goal is in sight, he views artists with pity disguised as tolerance.

From the answering machine, we heard Lorena renew her attack:

"I know you're there, cavorting with that clown dressed up in dollars. I hope you'll open the door for P.T., because I sent him over with my latest paintings that need someplace to dry. I've got no more room, and no way to protect them from the kids and their games."

Marcos's tolerance, the mask of his pity, promptly shut down. He made an ugly face, chastising me for splashing around in the same shallows as ever, stagnant puddles that would never turn into anything else. He dressed in silence. He gathered up the things that keep him company these days: his laptop, cell phone, tie, and briefcase. He set off, with the White Rabbit's hurry, for the rest of the world.

LORENA HAS ALWAYS HAD her finger on the pulse of Havana. When we were young, she was the trendsetter and tastemaker

every Saturday night. Now her house is like the main square of some *città vecchia*, an obligatory stop in which to see and be seen.

She has a convivial talent for gathering people around her, making decisions for others without causing to them to feel compelled. In her orbit, everyone feels comfortable and relaxed. She knows how to get the right people together, introduce them, and get them talking. That she didn't become a diplomat would be a real loss to the nation if she weren't so foul-mouthed as well.

When she was a girl, she'd spend hour after hour drawing circles and arrows, comets and tails in red, blue, and black. Suns, moons, and cockroaches. Her mother never showed the drawings to anybody. She didn't sign her up for art courses or get her a good box of colored pencils. She waited patiently for Lorena to grow out of this phase and take up some serious pursuit. But Lorena went on painting, sculpting, and printmaking, with such seriousness that her mother began to leaf through books about art. Her lack of interest in her daughter's precocious works morphed into fanatic devotion. She began to notice traces of Giotto and Hieronymus Bosch, or was it Klee and Miró?

Lorena's first husband set off one Sunday morning to play dominoes with his friends in Old Havana while she was shaping clay into a new David, which she called David Revisited, with a penis more in keeping with his stature. That night, as Lorena gave up this attempt and decided that Michelangelo had in fact known what he was doing, her husband called to say he was still playing dominoes and drinking beer with his friends, only now they were in Florida, so she shouldn't expect him home. Since then there's been no further word from him. We always joke about how his game is going—and hope he's losing it.

Her next husband was a depressed psychoanalyst who had, in addition, a penchant for biorhythms, astrological charts, Hirschman grids, and energy pyramids. Hewing to so many doctrines as guides for life had robbed him of even the slightest freedom of action. Making love became a sort of Kabala located

somewhere in chaos theory and dependent on variables such as the Zurich stock exchange index and Chechnyan election results.

He enrolled in a course in Lacanian Anguish which then became his chief preoccupation. Any attempt by Lorena to make him laugh was treated as a boycott of his central concerns. He sought out communication with his fellow anguishers around the globe and became fascinated by the high suicide rate of Scandinavia. Finally he got in touch with a Norwegian philosopher who responded with some interest to the experiments he carried out on himself. The Norwegian man proposed a trip to the fjords to see how he would react to an absence of sun. He went, his depressions lifted, he fell in love with the Norwegian, and off they went to Australia to go surfing so as to demonstrate the importance of physical exercise in the freeing of endorphins and the maximization of libido.

Lorena paints, spoils her children, curses everything, and has a heart of gold. Also two hands and a new husband of the same quality. This husband is called P.T., for Pleasdtomeetyou Tellmegoodbye.

P.T. became obsessed with travel after an event that left a life-long imprint on him. This event occurred in May of 1968, when he was ten years old. At that time, the rest of the world was just something the adults in his household paid attention to each night on the TV news.

His aunt and uncle were happy in the possession of many things, including their son, who was the most important to them and to P.T.

P.T. and his cousin never fought. They shared everything with a generosity never possible among siblings, and they defended one another in and out of school as if each were simultaneously the master and the samurai in the pair.

Every Sunday, P.T.'s aunt and uncle planned an outing with straw picnic baskets, checkered tablecloths, and a store of jokes the uncle had collected during the week.

This time, P.T. was not invited. They said the expedition would require getting up very early, that it was a very long and tiring ride. They promised that next time he would come along for sure.

Stubbornly refusing to be left behind where a Sunday without his aunt and uncle might as well have been a Monday, P.T. stayed up all night watching the cuckoo clock.

The wooden bird came and went many times, but when P.T. fell asleep for what they call “just a blink of the eye,” the Chevrolet carrying his aunt and uncle and cousin took off for a Sunday without him.

On Monday there was a math test at school. P.T. waited for his cousin so he could whisper the answers to him as always. In return, he would get valuable information about syllabification and iambic pentameter. But his cousin failed to appear, and when the teacher asked, P.T. said only, “I don’t know, I didn’t see him yesterday.” He can still feel that sensation of being ready to burst into tears.

P.T.’s cousin didn’t come to school the next day or the days that followed, and P.T. passed the Spanish exam by the skin of his teeth. So the teacher put it, drawing exclamation points in the air with the effect of public embarrassment and a private sense of discredit.

P.T. didn’t ask where his cousin had gone that early Sunday morning, or when he’d be coming back. A year later, the first photo arrived, taken on a beach. His cousin was taller, fatter, and pinker. His aunt and uncle were also fat and pink, as was the car. The photo was signed and dedicated by his cousin in misspelled Spanish with English words mixed in.

After that P.T. applied himself to Spanish in school so as to be able to pass tests without his cousin, and to English on his own so as to be able to stay in touch. He never denied that they corresponded frequently or that his room was full of photos showing how his cousin grew bigger and fatter as if consuming some magic potion, perhaps in the form of hamburgers in buns.

Whenever he had to fill out any kind of official form, it always contained the questions, "Do you have family in the United States?" "What is the exact relationship?" and "Do you maintain communication with them?" P.T. always wrote "yes." He was never named a vanguard student, never received a good conduct medal, and never was selected to join the Young Communist organization, the school band, or the basketball team. When he finished high school, the laws changed. Those who had departed could come back to visit those who had stayed. They brought pounds and pounds of clothes and shoes with them on the plane, and then they bought electric fans and tape recorders in special stores. Nonetheless P.T.'s aunt and uncle declared that their permanent departure precluded visits to the Island, because they didn't want their money going into the hands of the communists. So they never came back.

From that far off Sunday onward, travel became P.T.'s obsession, whether in *The Arabian Nights* via magic carpet, in Salgari's *King of the Sea*, or in Jules Verne's *Rocket to the Moon*. P.T. filled his bedroom with maps. Thanks to his curiosity to know or imagine what might lie across the sea that surrounded every inch of his Island, he became very well read. Speculation about his future career centered on possibilities that matched this desire: seaman, ambassador, astronaut.

But the curious fact was that his restlessness died down as soon as he reached the shores of the endless beach that surrounds us. It was enough for him to be at the borders, the edges, the limits where farewells and welcomes take place. After getting a degree in transportation engineering, he took up the following jobs:

Ship's pilot, which meant guiding freighters, cruise ships, and tankers in and out of Havana's harbor, through the channel between the fortresses of El Morro and La Cabaña, and along the coast paralleling the Malecón. Knowing that on the ship he piloted, many were marveling in the manner of new arrivals, or expressing relief in the manner of those who choose to leave.

Air traffic controller, watching over the flights traversing the Island's swath of airspace. Imagining the passengers pressing their noses against the windows as they flew.

Driver of shuttles ferrying passengers between the airport gates and the steps of the airliners. Watching them take their first or last steps on the Cuban soil.

Later, he landed a job as a guard outside an immigration office. Seated in his chair and supplied with a travel book, a bottle of cold water, and a sandwich—so as to leave his post as little as possible—he would watch all the people endeavoring to find out what lay beyond the first waves tumbling against the beach.

These people arrived at the office very early, in the wee hours of the night, to secure good spots in the line. They arrived armed with patience to wait and determination to hold onto their places and not let anyone slip ahead. Keeping order in the line was not always easy, because once the early comers had claimed their ranks they would go off in search of someplace to get a little shuteye. P.T. tried to help out, acting as judge and justice when necessary, or standing in for those who disappeared for a break, or overseeing the list where people wrote their names in order of arrival.

None of this did the trick. When the office opened for the day, the magic of that open door, the signal that the night's wait was over and the day's wait had begun, completely upset the tired brains of the clientele. Numbers changed, names migrated, newcomers appeared at the front of the line or the top of the list. Everything seemed to happen in accord with the biblical maxim that the last shall be first.

Behind the arguments over who belonged where, he could hear a constant counterpoint of cries from the hawkers of goods and services those in line might desire. Vendors of coffee, tea, cigarettes, beer, sandwiches, pastries, candy, and aspirin. Typists who would fill out forms. Taxi drivers who would negotiate the *via crucis* of stamps, letters, bank drafts, identity documents, and birth, divorce, marriage, or death certificates.

P.T. carefully read the instructions posted on the wall at the entrance to the office, and then he learned more, studying the laws that lay behind these rules.

Thus he became the key figure in this place. His always friendly expression invited questions by the score. He outlined procedures, summarized steps, and explained the schedules of banks, post offices, and travel agencies where the applicants needed to go.

At the same time, he was the perfect vessel for the rain of curses directed at a set of procedures that satisfied no one. He tried to calm heated spirits, encourage depressed ones, and share the joy of those who, their arrangements completed, bade him adieu.

“What’s this line all about?” Lorena asked him the day they met.

P.T. saw before him someone dressed as if she’d run out of the house in a rush, leaving her chores behind for a few moments at most. She was wearing the apron she used for painting, which displayed stains of all colors and shades.

“It’s for traveling,” he said with a smile.

Lorena looked in P.T.’s eyes, incapable of deceit. She gave the line another look and asked. “Where to?”

Surprised by Lorena’s innocence with respect to one of the best-known offices in the city, P.T. explained that she would need a letter of invitation from the country where she wanted to go. That could be any country in which there was someone willing to pay for the costs of red tape, airplane tickets, and the expenses of her stay.

Then he recommended some far-off and least-visited destinations for which—since fewer Cubans traveled there—entry visas were easier to get. The embassies of the most-requested countries, in many parts of Europe, had by now grown suspicious of all claims about relatives, friends, lovers, or studies that provided justifications for the visa requests. These embassies were fed

up with Cubans, people who were not from the First World yet not from the Third, who were neither citizens nor immigrants. People who traveled out of their own country so as to tell everyone where they went about the great charms of their home. Who lectured anyone who would listen and some who would not, drawing on their endless storehouses of nostalgia, taking full advantage of their new surroundings but always with disdainful expressions of melancholic superiority.

Lorena gazed at the line as she might at a canvas by Miró. She smiled at P.T. to demonstrate that she had carefully followed every word, and she asked one question more.

“And what do they distribute here? Visas or airplane tickets or what?”

“Passports and exit permits,” P.T. answered, and once more explained the steps, rules, requisites, stages, and prices until his voice had become a lovelorn whisper on the bench of an autumnal park.

P.T. TELLS ME LOTS of things about life in exile, a term which is itself a cliché on this island which offers so many ocean views that the fever to cross the sea is nearly epidemic. But what are clichés except oft-repeated truths?

He says that those who leave always find themselves missing something. Maybe what they're missing is us. No matter how many new friends you make, there's always someone you're longing for, he says. Other places may also have very blue skies, hot weather, a seacoast, and fine heavy cloudbursts, but what they offer in terms of spatial features they lack in terms of temporal ones. Time keeps passing, corroding walls, yellowing photographs, and burying the old folks from the house at the corner—but now it's passing without you.

He's convinced that not even those who have triumphed after leaving—those who enjoy professional success, MasterCard, and high-octane gasoline—are happy. They've all left behind the most important thing, which for each of them has a different name.