

PREFACE

The Boy Who Said No is based on the life story of Frank Mederos, who was born and raised in Guanabacoa, Cuba. Through a number of childhood experiences and the influence of his grandfather, Frank grew to despise the policies of his government.

As Frank matures, he falls in love, is drafted into the army, and becomes a member of Castro's special forces, making him privy to top-secret military information and placing him in direct conflict with some of the most powerful people in the Cuban military. He becomes an Antitank Guided Missile operator, defects, and escapes from Cuba in the manner described.

After being introduced to Frank by his daughter, I began to write his story as part of his family's history. But after several meetings with Frank, I decided that this story was far too compelling not to share with a wider audience.

To advance the plot, I have fictionalized some descriptions and dialogue based on interviews with Frank and with information he obtained from his family, friends, and fellow soldiers after the fact.

Since these events happened several decades ago, and since Frank does not have firsthand knowledge of certain events and conversations that occurred during his absences, I am calling this a "true-life novel."

With the exception of the name of Frank Mederos, all names have been changed to protect the privacy of family members and individuals still residing in Cuba. The material is presented as well as Frank's memory serves.

We are an army of light
And nothing shall prevail against us
And in those places where the sun is darkened, it will overcome.

—José Martí
Cuban poet

THE BOY WHO SAID NO



CHAPTER 1

My grandfather loved to fish.

He fished for tuna, yellowtail, red and black grouper. Sometimes he'd catch octopi, pound them on rocks, and hang them up to dry before bringing them to his home on Pepe Antonio Street. He lived only two houses from my family's simple bungalow, the one my father supported on his meager wages from the fertilizer factory in Havana. *Abuelo* liked the solitude, the peacefulness of fishing. "Gives me time to think," he said.

Abuelo was always ruminating about something, his thoughts fueled by various radio broadcasts and his daily ingestion of news contained in the pages of *The Havana Post* and *El Diario de la Marina*. His was the only house in the neighborhood filled with books, fat tomes on history, philosophy, and religion that sat helter-skelter on tables, some opened to the page he was reading, some underlined and bookmarked with bits of paper, some coated in a thin layer of dust. The neighbors all looked up to him. He was revered as an intellectual by those who knew him.

By the time I was four, *Abuelo* had declared me his "official fishing partner." This made me feel very special. I was his oldest grandson, and he was my hero. When I was around him I felt safe in a way that was hard to explain. I think it was partly because he was a strong man with a soft heart and partly because I thought he was the smartest man in the world.

Abuelo and I fished off the shoreline of the small village of Cojimar, where Ernest Hemingway kept the *Pilar*, the famous writer's boat.

Sometimes we'd fish from the dock. And sometimes we'd hop into my grandfather's old fishing boat and head a little way out from the coast, gazing at the rum and sugar fleets in the distance and listening to the calls of seagulls and the waves lapping gently against the shore.

I loved the smell of gasoline and the white burst of smoke that appeared when Grandpa yanked the cord on his small outboard motor. I was fascinated with how the clear blue water churned bubbly white around the propeller.

Occasionally, Abuelo would take me for a walk along the Havana harbor, a place teeming with fish and clotted with lights, a place where painted ladies in fine fur stoles and glittering jewels teetered on spindly heels so high they could barely walk. These were the wives of rich Americans and Europeans who frequented Havana's lavish hotels and brightly lit casinos, not people we interacted with, not people we knew.

From there we could see the Havana Yacht Club where the wealthy Americans who ran the United Fruit Company entertained each other on their expensive boats. Nattily dressed men smoked Montecristo cigars and gulped shots of Dewar's White Label, while their women sipped daiquiris decorated with tiny paper umbrellas. Abuelo told me that Fulgencio Batista had been blackballed from that club because he was uneducated, a *mestizo*, and a former cane cutter. I thought it strange that the president of the country could be kept out of any club, even if he did have mixed blood.

Early one evening when the air was rich with the scent of jasmine and Abuelo's boat was bobbing beneath us, my grandfather put a hand on my shoulder and urged me to look up.

"I want you to get to know the sky, Frankie. And to learn about the wind."

"Why?" I asked, sensing his seriousness.

"Because if you pay attention to those things, you can predict the weather. And predicting the weather can be very important in life."

I nodded and trailed my fingers in the water. Abuelo ran his hand over the stubble of his beard, making a rasping sound. I liked that sound,

the sound of a man. The back of his hands were furred with curly black hair speckled with gray and riddled with flat, white scars. But his fingernails were invariably clipped and filed. And impeccably clean.

Abuelo was always trying to teach me things, practical things, like how to tie different kinds of knots and how to sharpen the blade of a knife. We rarely engaged in idle conversation. It was as if he was trying to impart everything he knew to me before time ran out, before it was too late.

“Do you see those clouds, Frankie?” I looked up to see purple striated clouds in the gloaming.

“Look at how they’re formed, how they move. Different shapes mean different things. I’m going to teach you about them, and I want you to pay close attention. And more importantly, I want you to remember what I have to say.”

Abuelo looked at me, and I nodded to let him know I was listening. We sat in silence for a moment. I wasn’t sure whether the conversation was over. I hoped it wasn’t.

Abuelo coughed. “You’d be surprised what you can tell by watching the clouds.”

“Like what?” I wanted Grandpa to keep talking. He looked at me and laughed at my earnestness.

“Like whether you and Gilbert will be playing baseball together tomorrow,” he said.

I smiled. Grandpa always brought the conversation down to my level. It was one of his talents.

“Look. Do you see the boat drifting?”

I looked at the movement of the boat in relation to the shore. “The boat is moving with the current,” said Abuelo. “You must know the direction of the current, how strong it is and how fast it is.”

“Why?”

“Because the current will take you where *it* wants to go. If you want to go in the same direction, it’s your friend. But if you don’t, you must work very hard to defeat it. Nature is very powerful, Frankie.

Never forget that. But if you pay attention and know what you're doing, you can use the clouds, the wind, and the currents to your advantage."

I thought for a moment, feeling the breeze on my face. "What about the stars, Grandpa, what do they tell you?"

"The stars are very special, Frankie. You have to know the stars like the back of your hand. If you know the stars, you can tell direction, you will know where to go. In the olden days, men crossed the oceans by reading the stars. That's how Christopher Columbus found Cuba."

"Oh," I said, mightily impressed by the power of the stars.

"Do you remember what Columbus called Cuba?"

I thought for a moment, making sure I got the words right. "He said it was the most beautiful land that human eyes had ever seen."

My grandfather nodded, proud of me for remembering. "That's right, my boy."

We sat quietly for a while, and I knew Abuelo was hoping I had taken in what he had said. The water was very still, the way it sometimes got once the sun went down. A dragonfly skated by, its long, slender body barely creasing the water. In the fading light it took on a peacock sheen.

We looked up at the twilight sky suddenly darkened by a flock of wild ducks. They honked plaintively. My grandfather raised a finger skyward.

"Look, Frankie, do you see that constellation? That's Orion, the great hunter of Greek mythology. It is said that Zeus placed him among the stars. If you look carefully, you can see his bow."

I looked where my grandfather was pointing. I felt very grown up gazing at the stars that way. The boat rocked slightly, underscoring my excitement.

"Will you teach me the constellations, Grandpa?"

Abuelo chuckled. "I'll teach you all I know, my boy. Mark my words—someday it will come in handy."

From the time I was a small child, my grandfather would sit me on his lap, his breath fragrant with smoke, and read the Bible to me. His was a hefty book with a cracked leather spine and pages as thin as gossamer. He told me about Moses and the parting of the Red Sea, about the leper Lazarus being raised from the dead, about Noah building his Ark. He taught me about God and the lives of the saints.

In his living room was a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. He was depicted with a loving face, wavy hair, and fire leaping from a red puffy heart. After a cup of rich Cuban coffee, Abuelo would hold his fist to his chest, look at the picture and say, "Dear Jesus, save me from this heartburn!" I figured heartburn was something Jesus and Abuelo had in common, and that's why Abuelo asked for His help.

When I got a little older, Abuelo regaled me with tales of heroes such as Antonio Maceo, José Martí, Calixto Garcia, brave and honorable men who had fought for Cuba's independence from Spain. His eyes glowed when he spoke of them. He told me incredible things, like how Cuba's national anthem, "El Himno de Bayamo," was composed from the saddle of a horse. It was my favorite story, and I pleaded with him to tell it to me again and again. When he described the 1868 Battle of Bayamo, I felt like I was there. When he was finished, we'd break into song:

*Hasten to battle, men of Bayamo!
That the homeland looks proudly to you;
Do not fear a glorious death,
Because to die for the fatherland is to live.*

*To live in chains is to live
In dishonor and ignominy
Hear the clarion call;
Hasten, brave ones, to battle!*

Then Abuelo would tickle me, and we would laugh.



When I started school, Abuelo helped me with my homework before we went out fishing. Sometimes he would try to tutor Gilbert and Luis. But they were not academically inclined. And Luis tried Abuelo's patience with his constant fooling around. After a while, he only helped me.

Three years my senior, my cousin Luis spent a lot of time at my house in Guanabacoa, a district of Havana. He was lively and fun and my family liked having him around. He and my cousins Tato, Gilbert, and Pipi spent so much time at our house when I was young I thought they were my brothers. Pipi was not his real name. It was just what we called him. Nicknames were common in Cuba.

Luis had his own way of thinking about things. When he got to the fourth grade, he just stayed there. For years. I told him he had to move on, but he stubbornly refused—even though he could.

"I like the teacher and I know the school work so it's easy for me," was his excuse.

"But, Luis, you can't stay in the fourth grade forever."

"Why not?"

"Because it's stupid, that's why."

"It makes me happy."

"You're happy being held back?"

"It's not being held back if you do it on purpose."

"Aren't you bored?"

"No. I know the fourth grade material so well now the teacher says I can help her teach next year. So I'll be smarter than you—I'll be a teacher."

"That's crazy, Luis. You won't be a real teacher. You'll just be a big fourth grader. If you know the material, why don't you just take the test?"

"Because I don't want to take the test, and I don't want to go to fifth grade. I'm happy where I am. I don't think that's stupid at all."

I just shook my head.

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Gilbert had his own little quirks. For the first two years of school he rarely washed his feet. His mother would reprimand him. But nothing worked. Like Luis, Gilbert was stubborn.

Gilbert liked to take his socks off in school and show off his pitch-black feet as if they were a badge of honor. Then he'd scrape the bottom of his feet on the floor beneath his desk to scratch an itch.

The girls in the class would wail and complain, but that just encouraged him. I felt sorry for any girl who sat next to Gilbert. Not only did she have to smell his feet all day, but when he took off his shoes and the odor grew worse, he'd shamelessly blame the smell on her. Gilbert loved girls, and this was his way of getting their attention.

There was no end to our boyish pranks. Some days we got together with our friend Jabao and rigged the blackboard so it would fall down when the teacher touched it. Then we'd all laugh so hard, we'd be sent to the principal's office. Some days Pipi would bring his pet parrot—the one he had taught to swear—to school in a brown paper bag and hide it under his desk. When the parrot let loose with a string of expletives, he'd blame it on someone else. Then we'd all laugh so hard, we'd be sent to the principal's office. Some days Gilbert would put glue on the teacher's seat and blame it on some hapless girl. Then we'd all laugh so hard, we'd be sent to the principal's office.

We drove the principal crazy. He was a strict disciplinarian who demanded to know the perpetrator of these acts. No one would ever snitch. Except Antonio.

Antonio was a slightly built boy, a fearful kid, the type of child other kids pick on. To make matters worse, his older brother was always beating him up. Antonio often showed up to play with a swollen lip, a black eye, a bruised arm. He always claimed to have fallen down.

On warm sunny days when the sky was dotted with fat white clouds, we'd all play hooky and go skinny-dipping in the area's rivers,

marshes, and streams. We would play tag, merrily skipping from one warm river rock to the next, our arms outstretched to keep our balance.

Jabao came up with the idea of playing hide-and-seek by using dry, hollow reeds that grew on the river banks to breathe underwater. For a while it was our favorite pastime. We would sneak up and scare the other boys, splashing and giggling until we almost drowned.

Since everyone in Guanabacoa knew one another, whenever we skipped school we had to figure out how to get back to our homes without being seen. Many limestone caves skirted the port of Cojimar, and a complicated warren of tunnels ran under the nearby *Rio Lajas*.

Always on the lookout for someone who might report us truant, we ran from one tunnel and cave to the next, hiding from prying eyes and enjoying the thrill of it all. Our fear of being caught was somewhat abated because no one knew the ins and outs of these hiding spots better than we.

Mostly I hung out with boys, but there was a special girl in the neighborhood who had stolen my heart. Miriam was sweet and shy and had hazel eyes. My mother said it was just a crush—but it lasted for years. Whenever I was feeling upset about something, I'd talk to Miriam. If I found a caterpillar, I would show it to her, and I was always looking for presents to give her, like shells I had found on the beach or bright butterflies that had lost a wing. On the days my mother made cookies, I would hide one in my pocket for Miriam.

Every night the people on my block would dress up and go for a *paseo*, a stroll around the park. The boys would walk one way and the girls would walk the other, accompanied by stern *dueñas* draped in black lace shawls. The boys would wink and wave at the girls, trying to get their attention without attracting the wrath of the women in charge.

They say a small town is like a big family. That's how it was on my block. The people in my neighborhood knew all the houses and everyone in them. We knew whose mother was mean and whose father

was mad. We knew who was sick and who could come out to play. We knew whose aunt drank cane juice and whose uncle drank rum. We even knew the names of each other's dogs. That's just the way it was.

A lot was going on politically in Cuba while I was growing up, but I was too busy being a boy to notice. I was too busy playing baseball to know that Fidel Castro's poorly armed rebels had led a failed assault on the Moncada Barracks on July 26, 1953, an assault that landed Fidel in the Presidio Modelo Prison for two years, but gave birth to a revolutionary movement that would eventually topple the government.

I was too busy playing marbles to know that although Fidel's forces comprised fewer than two hundred men, they often caused Batista's army of forty- to fifty-thousand to cut their losses and run.

I was too busy sunning myself on alabaster beaches to know that opposition to Batista in Cuba had been growing like rice in China, due to his pandering to the American mobsters and big business interests who controlled most of Cuba's resources and wealth. I was even too busy to notice that the dictator had been forced to flee Cuba on New Year's Day 1959.

But eight days later, I got my first inkling that something was happening in my country. Something Abuelo didn't like. That day, after my grandfather and I went fishing together, we stopped in Havana so Abuelo could get some coffee. We were both very tired.

As we walked down the magnificent *Malecón*, the wide seaside walkway that circles half of Havana, a line of heavily armored trucks rumbled by. This was the first in a column of cars, lorries, and tanks that would carry Fidel's now five-thousand-strong victorious rebels into the city.

Fidel and his men had been traveling for days from their camp located six hundred miles away in the Sierra Maestra, stopping to speak to rapturous crowds along the way. I could hear shouts and cheering nearby. When we turned the corner, I saw thousands upon thousands

of people lining the streets, smiling, laughing and hoisting placards that read "*Gracias Fidel!*"

Many people seemed beyond jubilant, almost delirious. As the chanting grew louder, Abuelo's face grew dark, and he quickly reached for my hand. A number of rough-looking men in olive-green uniforms jumped down from the trucks. They were a tough, dirty bunch with grizzled black beards, waists bulging with guns, and feet shod in mud-covered boots. A tank rolled by with Fidel sitting atop a pyramid of men. Abuelo placed his body partly in front of mine, as if to protect me. I tugged on his shirt.

"What's going on?"

"It's Fidel and his rebels," said Abuelo.

"What does it mean?" I was getting a little nervous, sensing my grandfather's unease.

"There's been a fight for control of the government," he said. "Batista's out and Fidel is in."

I looked at the men who had jumped off the trucks. "Are these the guys who won?" I asked. I could hardly believe that these scruffy, long-haired men could be the victors. But people on the balconies of the modern apartment buildings seemed to think so. They were waving red-and-black flags embroidered with a large white *26 Julio*, throwing confetti and chanting "*Viva Cuba! Viva Fidel!*" Several of the men were drinking Hatuey, a fine Cuban beer. I had never seen anything like it.

"Yes," Abuelo said. "These are the guys who won."

A fleet of long, black Cadillacs drove by. The men in the cars were honking their horns, laughing, and brandishing their guns. There were a lot of machetes on display, a lot of knives, a lot of guns. I was eyeing the cars' whitewall tires.

"Where did Batista go?" I asked.

"To the Dominican Republic. Took his family with him. After that, who knows?"

I looked up as several airplanes thundered by. "Why are there so

many planes?" We had to wait for a minute for the noise to die down before Abuelo could answer my question. I noticed some girls wearing tight red sweaters and short black skirts shouting "Fidel! Fidel! Fidel!" with the kind of enthusiasm young women usually lavish on movie stars.

"They're taking the Americans back to the States."

"Why?"

"Shush, Frankie. Not now. You are asking too many questions. I'll tell you when we get home."

Fidel approached the podium to address the crowd from the terrace of the presidential palace. He had a rosary wrapped around his neck and he was carrying a rifle. A bank of microphones amplified his voice so it could be better heard by us and by those listening to Havana Television and Cuban radio stations throughout the country. I stood on my toes, the better to see.

"Fellow countrymen—" he began. The crowd grew quiet. People looked mesmerized. A car honked in the background and then the sound died away. Fidel's voice rang out. "As you know, the people of Havana are expecting us on Twenty-Third Street—" The audience stood in rapt attention.

I looked up at Abuelo as Fidel droned on. His eyes had narrowed, and he was listening intently while still holding my hand. A few minutes into Fidel's speech, someone in the crowd released two doves into the air. We watched as they winged their way skyward. Then, as if by divine intervention, one swept down and settled itself on Fidel's shoulder—a symbol of universal peace. The crowd went wild.

Abuelo shook his head, and a cold chill ran down my spine. I was a little scared and very confused.

"Tell me," I said. "Are you glad Batista's gone? Was his leaving something good or something bad?"

Abuelo drew in his breath. He let go of my hand and rubbed my head. "Time will tell. Now let's go get you an ice cream cone."

But from the look on his face, I knew it was bad.



CHAPTER 2

It was a bright Saturday afternoon, warm and dry as old crackers. I had finished my chores around the house and was riding my bike down the road with Gilbert. Dust rose beneath our tires and clung to the hair on our legs. Occasionally I had to wipe it from my nose. A lizard darted near my tires, and I swerved to avoid it.

We were in high spirits, headed for a swim in the river, when Gilbert suddenly stopped his bike and waved me forward. I pulled up alongside him, dragging my foot in the dust to bring me to a halt.

“Why’d you stop?” I asked.

“I almost forgot to tell you.” Gilbert took a breath and puffed out his chest the way he did when he had something important to say.

“What?”

Gilbert hesitated a moment for dramatic effect. “We don’t have to go to school anymore.” A smile lit his face, but a trace of concern filled his eyes.

At age thirteen, I was old enough to know that what he was saying was nonsense.

Still, there was something convincing in his tone of voice. I smiled and shook my head.

“Are you crazy, Gilbert? Of course we have to go to school. Where’d you get that idea?”

“Around,” he pronounced mysteriously. “Fidel’s got a new plan to eliminate illiteracy, so he’s going to close the schools. Not just ours— all of them.”

Gilbert was always coming up with strange and ridiculous stories, and I figured his imagination had run amok again.

“That’s totally backward, Gilbert. If you want to stamp out illiteracy, you *open* schools, you don’t *close* them.”

Gilbert smiled smugly. “I know. But they say Fidel’s going to use *us* to do it. We’ll be working for him.”

“To do what?”

“To wipe out illiteracy.”

“How do you figure?”

Gilbert studied the ground for a minute. “They just passed a law closing all the schools.”

“Why haven’t I heard about it?”

“Probably because you weren’t in school on Friday.”

I looked up at the sky for a moment. A brown bird with a red breast settled lightly on a narrow branch and began pecking furiously at his feathers. He looked at us momentarily and then returned to his grooming.

“Well, I don’t believe it.”

Gilbert made a face. “It’s true.”

“What’s the point?”

“They’re going to get every kid to teach *una familia pobre* to read and write.”

“What poor families?”

Gilbert shrugged. “How would I know?”

I laughed, dismissing the idea as sheer lunacy. “We’re going to be the teachers? Us? You are loco, Gilbert.”

“No, listen. Fidel is forming a literacy brigade. He says a million illiterates in Cuba need to learn to read and write.”

“Literacy brigade? You mean like an army? What will we do? Shoot people with letters of the alphabet?”

“Have it your way. But you’ll see when they send you off to some awful place to teach people to read.”

When I got home from our swim, my mother met me at the door. “I just heard that they’re closing the schools,” she said.

“Gilbert told me. He says we’re going to teach poor people how to read.”

Mima placed her hands on her hips and tightened her lips. “I hear it’s voluntary. Tell me you didn’t volunteer for anything.”

“No,” I said.

She looked at me sternly. “Good, because you are to have no part of this, do you hear?”

“I said I didn’t volunteer for anything.”

Mima gave me a long, searching look and then waved her hand. “All right, go get washed up for supper.”

The following week, soldiers showed up at our school demanding the names and addresses of all sixth and seventh graders. The school was in an uproar, and the teachers kept leaving the classrooms to confer with each other behind closed doors. Their voices were strained and their faces were starchy with concern. I still couldn’t believe the government would send us away.

Just after the bell rang, four soldiers marched into the classroom, telling us about the difficult lives of the peasants—how they never had a chance to learn how to read and write. They described their squalid living conditions and how they couldn’t even decipher a food label. They told us to close our eyes and imagine how awful it would be to be illiterate. A wave of pity washed over me.

Two well-dressed university professors joined the soldiers to announce that all the boys were “volunteering” to join the brigade. Girls could also join if they obtained their parents’ permission.

Our teacher stood at the back of the classroom looking skeptical. She held her lips together the way she did when she was displeased with our behavior. She questioned the officials about where we would go, when we would return, what we would eat, and where we would

sleep. Neither the soldiers nor the professors provided her with satisfactory answers.

Within a week, signs started sprouting around Havana that read: “*¡No creer, leer!*” “Don’t just believe, read!” The slogan signaled not only a new Cuban government, but a new Cuban society. Rumors filled the air about how Fidel planned to wipe out illiteracy in the whole country. People were lauding his plan as a noble gesture, the first step in making Cuba a world power. Newspapers proclaimed the elimination of illiteracy as Fidel’s top priority.

Parents were put on notice that their sons had been selected to participate in the government’s National Literacy Campaign and that any resistance from them—or their children—would result in severe repercussions. Peasant families were told that they would be given ten dollars to take boys into their homes to teach them to read—whether they wanted to learn or not.

On Saturday morning, my mother got up early to bake *pastelitos de guayaba*. She had just lined up the crescent-shaped dough on a cookie sheet and popped the pastries into the oven when Luis ran in the back door, red in the face and panting.

“What’s gotten into you?” asked Mima.

Luis was so excited he could hardly form the words. “It’s time to go,” he said. “Everybody’s getting ready—it’s really happening. Gilbert says they’ll take you so far away you can’t escape—you can’t get home. They’re coming right now *¡Cuidado!*” Then he ran out of the house, the screen door banging behind him.

My mother looked at me in alarm and turned off the stove. She removed her oven mitts and slapped them down on the counter in an expression of rage. Neither of us could believe this was happening.

My hand flew to my mouth as I considered what to do. The knot that had been growing in the pit of my stomach after I saw the soldiers

at school exploded into a stream of bile that burned the back of my throat. I looked around, not knowing whether to run or to hide.

Our neighbors were standing in front of their houses, stretching their necks to see what was going on. Some people were whispering and mumbling to each other. A few women were crying.

A child being taken from their parents was something Cubans had never experienced before. We had lived under President Carlos Prío Socorrás, a man who hosted lavish parties where guests snorted cocaine and relieved themselves in bathrooms outfitted with faucets of gold.

We had lived under Batista, a dictator who hung dead revolutionaries from the limbs of trees and subverted the interests of his nation to those of the Mob. But the idea that children could be sent to some unknown place for the sake of the revolution was totally foreign.

The “volunteers” were ordered to go to the baseball stadium for processing before being taken to the train station in Havana. I looked out over the crowd and spotted my sisters and brothers. Theresa was holding my father’s hand and sobbing uncontrollably. My brother, George, stood with his arms crossed, looking angry and rebellious. My mother was holding my baby brother Raúl.

Anguish filled her eyes. I was her oldest child and the fear of losing me haunted her expression. My throat constricted in grief as I read the sorrow creasing her face. She squeezed my hand tightly and kissed me before I left.



CHAPTER 3

The railroad station was mass confusion. Trucks were lined up like sentries to drop off more than five hundred boys and adult teachers from all over the city. Some of the younger boys were sobbing for their mothers. The older boys looked just plain angry.

A few scuffles broke out but, for the most part, everyone was too scared not to toe the line. We were herded into cattle cars for our three-day trip to the Sierra Maestra, the wildest, most remote part of the country. The mountains were six hundred miles away, the same mountains where Fidel's Rebel Army had made their headquarters and launched their guerrilla attacks. Most of us had never even heard of the place.

The train ride was long and tedious with the cars screeching and lurching along the tracks. There were no bathrooms that I could see, and kids were peeing and defecating on the floor. Many of the boys got sick. The stench was horrific.

Boys were pushing and punching each other. I was lucky to find a place to sit. I closed my eyes and thought about the long grasses fluttering in the slipstream of the train. I wished I were fishing with Abuelo.

When we got to Bayamo, heavily armed soldiers handed everyone a literacy ID card, a uniform, a blanket, and a canvas hammock. They issued each of us two books—*¡Venceremos!* and *¡Alfabetizemos!*

I tried thumbing through the books, which contained pictures of happy families proudly standing next to their animals and produce. One book contained phrases such as “The Revolution Wins All

Battles,” “Friends and Enemies,” and “International Unity” as a teaching aid. I scanned the glossary, but there was too much commotion to read. Soldiers distributed blue lanterns donated by China to be used during lessons.

None of us knew where we were going or how long we’d have to stay. Frightened and bewildered, I hoped I would end up somewhere near my cousins and friends. Luckily, Gilbert, Tato, Luis, and Antonio were still with me. We stayed in a small town in the mountains for two days, sleeping outdoors, drinking coconut milk, and wondering where we were headed. During the day it seemed like a big adventure, but at night I cried a lot.

On the morning of the third day, soldiers arrived to escort us to our assigned families. Fifty or sixty of us walked in single file up Turquino—the highest mountain in Cuba. We marched up a narrow path thick with cacti and then wended our way through hanging vines and dense guaguasi trees. Lizards slithered through the underbrush and colorful birds pierced the air with cries of alarm. We were told to beware of large mud holes that could suck you in so quickly you would drown in mud before you could escape.

When I stumbled on broken rocks, soldiers nudged me along with the barrels of their rifles. One of the soldiers allowed me to sip water from his canteen. A howler monkey narrated the scene.

Boys were dropped off at different towns along the way. When they departed, the soldiers smiled. It was obvious we were a burden they were eager to unload.

Below us, waving in the wind, were rows and rows of King Cane, harvested by the darkest of people, people who were considered too ignorant to make their own decisions and run their own lives.

Giant sugar complexes, mostly American, had either bought out or driven out all the small farmers and now ran their consolidated holdings with an iron hand. The families of those who oversaw the operations lived in nearby gated communities where they swam in crystal-blue pools, dined alfresco, and sent their huge profits home.

We passed under manchineel trees whose poisonous sap caused angry sores on our skin. I used my hands to slap mosquitoes from my sweat-drenched limbs.

Soon the blue lantern felt too heavy, and I threw it down the mountainside. It tumbled over itself and landed next to a fallen branch. Other boys had already discarded their lanterns, so the soldiers barely gave it a glance.

We walked the rest of the way in silence.



CHAPTER 4

When we got to our destination, I was delivered to a Haitian family that eyed me with suspicion. Two boys about my age sat on a dirt floor, while a barefoot girl glared at me from behind a banana tree. A fine layer of clay lightened their ebony skin.

A matronly woman with straggly hair and missing teeth clung to her husband, José, while three dirty-faced toddlers hung on her legs. The father stood tall, an onyx giant, with well-defined muscles etching his shoulders and back. His arms were stronger than his legs and his shoulders showed the results of years of hard labor.

Wiry black hair covered his chest and back. A “lazy eye” wandered around in his eye socket, making it difficult to tell whether he was looking at you or not. A rope hung around his neck and a machete yoked his waist. The carcass of an animal—I didn’t know what kind—hung from a pole to dry. Its skin had been removed and its body was marbled with blood.

I looked at the children, feeling sorry that they had to live in such squalor. I figured the parents were former slaves brought to Cuba from Haiti to work the plantations, but I didn’t ask any questions. That wasn’t my job.

One of the soldiers, the taller of the two, stepped forward and said, “Frank is here to teach you to read.” He spoke loudly and slowly as if that would help the peasants comprehend what he was saying. He butted me with his rifle.

“Show ’em the books so they understand.”

I scrambled to hold up the books for them to see.

José shot me a look of disdain. He fingered the handle of his machete and grunted.

“Ain’t no use for readin’ here,” he said. “Might as well send ’im back where he belong!” The boys nodded in agreement. Then the man spat on the ground and walked away. I wondered how long I would have to stay with these people.

The soldiers shrugged their shoulders and took their leave.

After the soldiers departed, José and I squatted on the ground opposite each other while the children busied themselves winding and unwinding a ball of twine. Neither of us knew what to say. He seemed content to just sit and look at me. He struck me as a man filled with subterranean emotions, one I would have to tiptoe around.

Not knowing what to do, I unlaced my boots and rubbed my feet, which were red and sore from the long hike up the mountain. My boots were heavy and stiff as cardboard, and I knew they would be difficult to walk in for any length of time. I fingered a plump blister, rolling the liquid beneath the skin. I was tempted to lance it, but I looked at my dirty hands and thought better of it. I felt a pang of longing for Mima. She was the one who tended to my scrapes and cuts.

José was still staring at me, and I figured I looked very young to him, far too young to teach him anything. An uncomfortable silence hung in the air. I lowered my head and studied the ground in an effort to look respectful. I knew I’d have to prove myself to him—and to everyone else.

My first order of business was to figure out where to bed down for the night. The two boys, Juan and Ernesto, showed me the primitive hammocks they used for sleep, and my hopes for a bed evaporated like smoke in the wind. I unpacked my own canvas hammock, and the boys indicated that I was to tie it between two trees.

I glanced at Ernesto who was eyeing my blanket enviously. I offered it to him, and he took it with a smile. I knotted the rope the way Abuelo had taught me and climbed into my gently swinging bed. I turned on my side, drew my legs to my chest, and listened to the insects hum in a minor key.

I missed Abuelo. I missed my parents. I missed the sweet smell of my sheets and the coldness of my pillowcase against my cheek. I missed my mother's pastries and the sound of her laughter. I missed the safety and surety of home.

I looked up at the moon and felt comforted that it was the same moon that shone on the roof of my home on Pepe Antonio Street. Then I cried myself softly, very softly, to sleep.

My life in the hills was very different from my life in Guanabacoa. The thatched-roofed hut that the family called home had no electricity, no stove, no refrigerator, and no indoor plumbing. Chickens pecked the hut's mud floor and pigs roamed the crowded living space.

The urine and feces of the two animal species melded into a smell so foul it made my eyes burn. Large black flies feasted on the scraps of food that littered the children's mouths, and ugly sores festered on their shoeless feet.

I figured I had to fend for myself to survive. Although I was an official "teacher" and was not required by the State to work, the only way to earn the family's respect was to pitch in and help.

Our routine was to rise early in the morning and wash our bodies in a nearby stream, the same stream where Maria did the family's laundry. José, Juan, Ernesto, and I then went out to work, while Maria stayed home to tend the younger children and to prepare the morning meal. Around ten o'clock she'd bring breakfast for us to eat in the fields.

The family wore rubber shoes made from old tires. I drew my knife and sliced off enough rubber to make shoes for myself. Maria, a large, powerful woman with a sweet smile, showed me how to sew

the ends with a long curved needle and urged me to stuff the shoes with rags the way the family did. While serviceable, the shoes were slippery when wet, and I had to sit and slide myself over rain-slicked rocks to avoid an accident.

The family grew coffee, which required long hours of picking, sorting, and packing the beans into rough burlap bags. With no electricity and no machinery, all the chores had to be done by hand. The boys and I found a flat spot on the side of the mountain. We set up a large tray to spread the coffee beans. We spent hours pushing the beans back and forth to dry. Although I ached all over, my arm, shoulder, and leg muscles were beginning to ripple beneath my skin.

In addition to coffee, we raised red, black, and garbanzo beans, yams, maize, and other vegetables. We mostly ate dried corn, fried plantains, and boiled yucca, augmenting our diet with snakes, iguanas, and small animals. We roasted birds and guinea hens over an open fire. Juan, Ernesto, and I climbed trees for bananas, coconuts, and mangoes. I could smell a ripe banana a mile away.

Work ended when the sun went down. After dinner, by the light of the family's three candles, I tried to teach. The content of the two textbooks the soldiers gave us related to current issues facing Cuba. These books were very different from the ones I used to learn to read.

I tried teaching José and Maria some letters, but it was tough going. José saw little use for reading and usually pushed me aside. Maria followed his lead. But once a month or so I got her to sit and work with me.

Most of the time, my teaching was frustrating. I didn't know how to teach, so I did the best I could. I held up the letters of the alphabet over and over until the boys knew them by sight. I had to further drill them on a couple of letters such as *W* and *H*.

The times when the children sounded out a word were satisfying—even fun. But it wasn't enough to make me happy or to keep me from being homesick.

For after I blew out the candles, after the weary red sparks died

on the wick, after the inky night swallowed the last curl of smoke, I was still a thirteen-year-old boy, alone. High in the mountains and very alone.