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Yellow marigolds for Ochún: An experiment in feminist ethnographic fiction

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The following text is an extract from *Nightgowns from Cuba*, a novel-in-progress. The novel is a mix of autobiography, ethnography, and fiction. It examines the lives of three generations of women in a Jewish–Cuban family as seen from the perspective of an Afro–Cuban woman who was employed by the family as a domestic worker in the years before the Cuban revolution of 1959. The extract focuses on the delicate relationship that developed between Regla, the maid, and her employer Naomi, a Jewish immigrant and socialist from Poland, as the two women encountered each other in a small rural town in Cuba in the late 1930s. In the last section, Regla comments on the return to Cuba, in the 1990s, of Fanny, the granddaughter of Naomi, who is in search of her family’s history and believes that Regla has access to memories that no one in her own family can pass on to her. The theme of the narrative is the transcultural exchange of stories between women and how memory travels and is conserved in strange and unexpected ways. The religion of Santería is the cosmological setting of the story and the deity of Olokún, who inhabits the depths of the ocean and cannot be represented in visual form, haunts the narrative, which ties together Jewish–Cuban and Afro–Cuban histories and desires.

I never wanted to be a maid and Naomi never wanted to have a maid. When Maximó Gliniński brought us inside the house the first day, Naomi smiled wanly and told him to let us go. “It’s not necessary, Maximó,” she said, anger in her voice. “It was a kind thought, but it’s not necessary.”

Maximó pleaded with her. “But this way you’ll have more time to read, Naomi, which you so much like to do. And to rest. Doctor Pablito says you need to rest. After the experience you just passed through. The blood you lost.”

“Maximó, enough!” Naomi nearly shouted. She had grown irritated at the mention of what was clearly an experience she did not wish to make known. She turned to us, and asked us to please come in and sit down. The four of us had been standing awkwardly at the entrance to their bedroom. She pointed to the two wicker chairs on either side of a small writing desk and she took a seat facing us on the edge of the bed.

“Forgive me, señoritas, but my husband didn’t consult with me about hiring you. And, you see, I am accustomed to doing my own housework and looking after my daughters by myself. In Poland I was a socialist, and here I no longer know what I am, but I believe in the socialist ideal that no person should have to be a servant to any other person. I won’t know how to train you, señoritas. I am incapable of telling others what to do.”

“But they don’t need to be trained, Naomi,” chimed in Maximó, who continued to stand by the door. “Tere and Regla have experience. They worked at the dentist’s house. His wife, the *asturiana* who fell off the ladder – Don’t you remember I went with your father to the funeral? The poor woman, she taught them everything they need to know to take good care of a house. They’d still be working for the dentist, but he’s gone to live with his niece.”

Tere and I sat quietly in our chairs. I hoped we'd get the job so that Naomi could explain to me what it meant to be a socialist. I had never heard that word before.

Naomi again turned to us. "How old are you, Tere? And you, Regla?"

Tere answered, "I'm sixteen and my sister Regla is fourteen."

"How young you are! But I was young too when I began working with Papá, going with him on selling trips to the outdoor markets in the small towns near Goworowo, Poland How far away it seems now. In a donkey cart we carried bolts of fabric and the beautiful aprons with the frill at the hem that Mamá sewed. And I was young when I came here to Cuba. Only nineteen when I arrived, alone, traveling for six weeks on a boat and sick almost the entire time" Her voice drifted, but then she resumed talking. "What a pity that you both cannot be studying instead. I always wanted to study, but it wasn't possible. Papá began to have money troubles after the war. Only my brother Natán was able to study" Her voice drifted off again, but she said nothing else.

"Señora," I said. I didn't know why, but my heart beat loudly in my chest. "Our mother died. That is why Tere and I need to work. We are helping our sister Chucha. She's studying in La Habana. She wants to be a teacher. If we don't work, she will have to give up her studies." I was not one to cry easily, but as I finished speaking I had to blink hard to keep the tears from forming.

Naomi noticed my stifled sob and let out a deep breath.

"See, Naomi? You will be helping their sister to study. Think of it that way," Maximo said cheerfully, continuing to stand at the door like a soldier guarding his post.

"Well, maybe," Naomi replied.

"Should we try for a few months and see, Naomi?"

"Alright," she said wearily.

"Good," Maximo replied. His cheeks were blazing. "I'll show Regla and Tere the house. Why don't you read now? You have a few hours before the girls return from school."

"Gracias, Maximo, but I shall decide what suits me best to do at this moment."

Tere and I rose to our feet, still cozily swaddled in the sandals that Maximo Gliniński had made for us. We thanked Naomi, who chuckled as she said, "Don't thank me. Thank Maximo." She rose and reached for our hands. I had never shaken hands with a woman before. Naomi's hands were stronger than I'd expected they'd be and her grip was firm.

"Maximo, be sure Tere and Regla eat breakfast before you put them to work," she called to him, and shut the door behind her.

*

Even though I didn't want to be a maid, I became a maid. And Naomi, who didn't want to have a maid, acquired a maid. I worked hard. I did not know how to work any other way. Yet I moved slowly. I never rushed. I gave the clock no respect. And everything got done. What didn't get done today got done tomorrow. I believe that time only exists for those who fear it.

Naomi took notice of my hard work and, true to her word, she never once gave me a command or even so much as made suggestions about what I needed to do. But it was not my work alone that won her favor. I listened to her stories, I gave her my fullest attention. She said that in her religion there was no such thing as confession; you simply had to pile up the hurts and the mistakes and the ugly thoughts and the unspeakable desires and when your heart got too heavy from all that weight you got into bed and you

wept, noiselessly, after everyone had fallen asleep. In the old days, she said, when the Hebrew people lived in the desert, long before they settled in Poland, their priests offered the blood of bulls and rams to their god and they smoked the flesh of these animals for many hours in the fire until their ashes rendered a sweet incense. In this way, her people released themselves of their sins. But the practice of sacrificing animals had been left behind, she said, always with a pride that was incomprehensible to me, once her people became modern and civilized. Many times I was on the verge of telling her that her god must be very lonely and very hungry. For in her faith there was only one god, as she told me many times, again with a pride I found strange, for I would think, *pobrecito*, one poor godforsaken god, and this god had not been given anything to eat for hundreds of years. No wonder her god couldn't dance! With what strength? With what desire? With what joy? What god can intercede for us without tasting the blood that pulses through all living things? What god will listen to our cries in the night who has not been fed the trembling flesh of chickens and goats, the warm honey dripping from the hive, the cool rum that teaches the hips how to move to the call of the drums, the call of the rumba? When Naomi could no longer bear to offer her lamentations to the silent darkness, to the exhausted and ravenous god whom she and her people had decided no longer had need of the breath, flesh, blood, and honey of the material world, she unburdened herself in my presence. After a few months I think it became inconceivable to her to imagine maintaining her life and her house without me.

I came to be glad that Naomi needed me, because soon after Maximo Gliniński hired us, my sister Tere left Agramonte and went to work for Natán Levi, who'd just married pretty and wealthy Rita and had high ambitions for himself in La Habana. Tere had high ambitions, too, as far as her work as a maid was concerned – to what else could she or I aspire? – and she was delighted that in La Habana she'd have to wear a uniform, a crisp black cotton dress with a starched white apron and a cap of the sheerest gauze. You couldn't have gotten me to wear a uniform and a cap for all the money in the world, but for Tere it meant that she was a maid to important people and she embraced her new standing with an eagerness I'd never seen her display for anything she'd ever done before.

She entered a household where she was one of three domestic workers. There was a cook and a laundress, so Tere's only duty was to care for Rita during the season of her first pregnancy, to nourish her with milkshakes blended each day with a different fruit, with mamey, mango, banana, papaya, coconut, watermelon, and strawberries, and to calm Rita's headaches with compresses dipped in lightly-stewed linden tea. Her hardest work came afterwards, when Tere had to look after the children, Anita and Ariel, and feed them in an even more dedicated manner than she'd fed them in their mother's womb, for they ate so terribly badly those children, refusing everything that was offered them and vomiting up the little they managed to put in their mouths, all of it food worthy of the gods, whether it was the glittering yellow broth with the angel hair noodles, or the thick and soothing malanga puré, or the palest and most perfect of unblemished slices of a young chicken's breast. Tere followed those children about the house with a plate of food. With Ariel, she'd sit on the floor as he played with his toy trucks and pop him a few morsels; with Anita, she'd get the girl busy washing one of her doll's dresses, and slip spoonfuls into her mouth. And then the two of them would throw it all up, and the *lucha* to feed them would begin again. But Tere took her responsibilities in her stride; that was the cost of her uniform, the cost of working in a better house, the cost of moving to La Habana. The uniform, though, was only for indoor wear; when she went out for an afternoon stroll on Quinta Avenida with the children, she would put on

her finest city clothes, the white blouse with the zigzag design that pinched her arms just above the elbows, the beige linen skirt with the pleat in the middle handed down to her from Rita after her pregnancies expanded her waistline, the brown patent leather belt, and the high-heeled sandals out of which three of her toes stuck in the front (the sandals Maximo Gliniński made for her had come to seem too rustic and she'd left them behind in Agramonte). She carried a patent leather purse that matched the belt and had a braided fake gold handle and on her wrist dangled the bracelet that was of braided real gold that Rita had given her for her seventeenth birthday. Attired like this, my sister Tere would walk along the grand avenue of Miramar, the most elegant of all of La Habana, surrounded by majestic royal palms and mansions of so many rooms that even their owners surely got lost in them, and she was happy, happy to be far from Agramonte, far from the dust, the dirt, the carmine earth that clung to your skin no matter how many buckets of water you heated on the stove and scrubbed yourself with.

But I, in those years, when I was still tender from the loss of my mother, could not bear the thought of leaving Agramonte. I could not imagine being a long train ride away from my mother's grave, which I visited every Sunday. I could not imagine being a long train ride away from the *fundamentos* that had been in our house in Agramonte since the time when my ancestors were released from slavery and had to learn to become free people.

My mother left her Olokún to me and every week I poured fresh well water and river water into his tureen and I gathered rainwater for him and gave that to him, too. I had not yet been to the sea, and so I could not give Olokún the saltiest and most mysterious water of all, the water that stretched between Africa and Cuba like a prayer, the water of his kingdom on this earth. My mother's Olokún, which now was mine, was of the *monte*, of the hills in the interior, that central layer of the island which feels the sea's nearness, is embraced by the sea, scented by the sea, but cannot reach it, cannot behold it, can only long for it.

My Olokún was stranded in Agramonte as was I, as was Naomi. Early afternoons, as we sat together folding clothes or combing braids for Leah and Raquel, I would say to Naomi, "Tell me about the sea." Her eyes would grow wistful and she would say, "Whoever has never traveled by sea does not know suffering." She would always begin her story like that, telling me of her boat journey from Poland to Cuba. One day, when we were alone, before the girls arrived from school, I remember she spoke at length.

"I have told you, Regla, that I spent more than forty days and forty nights at sea. Most of the time I was dizzy or vomiting. I was only nineteen, just a few years older than you are now. I left from the port of Rotterdam. I was supposed to have sailed with my aunt, but there was an error in her travel papers and she was not allowed to embark. My papers were in order, but I was too young to be traveling alone. At the last minute I had to send word to my mother in Goworowo telling her I needed her permission in writing in order to be able to travel. I threatened her, saying that if she didn't give me permission I would not return home, I would wander through Europe like a gypsy. She wrote back right away giving me her permission. Maybe she was glad I was leaving. Mamá was still furious at me. It was I who had advised Papá to leave for Cuba after the war. His business was in ruins, he owed money, and I told him to go and start a new life, far from the hatred and venom the Poles felt for us because we were Jewish. But what misery we experienced after he left; Mamá hardly able to feed us, and I taking care of the younger children, Dora, Sofia, Dinah, Jaime. Papá left before Jaime was born; he did not see Jaime again until he was an eight-year-old boy. In those years Natán and Leoncio did what they could to send us money from Warsaw, where they were working,

but it was not enough. Hunger became our closest friend. Days passed when all we had was potatoes and onions. Friday nights are holy to us, as you know, when we eat the special bread called challah, and there were Fridays when we had no challah, when we said the prayer for bread over a boiled or mashed potato. So when my father wrote after a year saying he was ready to send for Natán or Leo, I wrote back, begging him to allow me, as the eldest child, to make the journey before my brothers. Fortunately, he agreed. My father and I always understood each other.”

She paused and got up to close the door. “I don’t want Maximo to hear this part. He’s so jealous.” She lowered her voice. “You see, there was a young man who was madly in love with me in Goworowo. His name was – Oh, what does his name matter? He adored me. He had dark hair, dark eyes. Here in Cuba they’d call him a *mulato*. We were neighbors. He was my age exactly. He was learning to be a barber. We’d heard that was a good profession to have here in Cuba. He was a devoted socialist and we had high hopes of changing the world.”

I did not usually interrupt Naomi’s stories, but I had been curious for a long time to ask her a question. “Señora, what is a socialist?”

“A socialist, Regla, is a person who believes that everyone should live with dignity and freedom and that no one should rule over anyone. A socialist wants the riches of the world to be shared, so that all human beings will have the basic necessities of life and be able to cultivate their souls . . . He – Shlomo Silberstein, I may as well tell you his name, what does it matter, after all? He was a better socialist than me. I’m much too practical a woman. There is nothing I distrust more than sweet words, though I cannot live without them. I knew that if I stayed in Goworowo, we’d never have anything, except sweet words that one day would grow sour and burn like horseradish. You have probably never tasted horseradish. Eat too much and you grow hot all over, as if you had a fever. One day, you will try it. We eat it with a special fish, on the Jewish holiday of Pesaj . . .

“Anyway, to continue with my story, Shlomo’s mother was a widow, very poor. She sold a few trinkets from the front room of her house and with that she supported herself. She was content with little. I hoped that when I came to America, I would save up money and bring Shlomo and his mother here. How he cried when I left! He acted as if he were in mourning, as if my departure were a funeral. I thought he was going to rent his clothes, he was in such distress. A man shouldn’t grieve so desperately. Especially not for a woman. He said that if he didn’t see me again he’d kill himself, he couldn’t live without me.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “He still writes to me. But the letters are taking longer to arrive. Things are very bad in Europe. He’s had to leave Goworowo, go to Russia. He’s married now too, he has a little boy . . . But a first love can never be forgotten. You carry it inside your heart your whole life . . . I hide the letters from Maximo. Only a few are left. I’ve burned most of them.” She pointed to the drawer where she kept her undergarments. “I keep them there. Maximo is too shy to look in that drawer.” She smiled and recrossed her legs.

“So, Regla, that was how, at the age of nineteen, I found myself on a boat called the Lerrdam, sailing to this island. On the boat I kept to myself. I did not return any gazes, especially not of the men, for I’d been warned before leaving Poland that young Jewish women traveling alone were being forced into prostitution. The boat was a cargo ship, and horses and cows were among the passengers. On the deck there were stables for the animals who passed the days brooding in their dark prisons, eating, shitting, and staring out at the ocean. In the early dawn hours I would go to the deck to watch the stables being cleaned. For a few moments, while all the human passengers slept, the animals

were let loose, and as they roamed freely about the ship I felt I was Noah in his ark, waiting for the dove to return with the olive leaf to let me know that the earth was no longer all water."

She shook her head. "But you don't want to hear this, do you? I'm boring you."

And I told her I did want to hear, that I wasn't bored. She laughed and said, "Regla, you are always asking me about the sea, but you should feel blessed that we're not very near the ocean. How badly I slept all those weeks I was at sea! One night I was certain water had consumed the earth. I feared I'd forgotten forever how dry land felt under my feet." Her head fell into her hands. "I have talked too much. I have made myself sad with my own words." I assured her that I was glad to listen to any stories she wanted to tell me.

"Regla, I don't know why I am telling you all this. I assume it is because I expect you will forget everything. You are so young, your life is just beginning. Of what use can these stories of mine be to you? I am a *polaca*, you are a *negra*, what can we possibly have in common? One day you must tell me about yourself. You talk so little!"

"I'm sorry, señora."

"What is there to be sorry about? You will talk to me when you're ready. For today, I'll tell you one last thing. You know, before I left Poland I consulted with a gypsy. I don't really believe in such things, but I was there with a few friends, and each of us asked the woman to tell us our fate. To one friend, she said that her life was in danger and she would not last long on this earth. How bitterly this friend wept! It was a Thursday. The gypsies always came on Thursdays. When my turn came, the gypsy took a quick look at the lines on my palm and said, 'You will take a long journey. You will meet a tall man with light hair. You will marry. And you will have seven children.'

Suddenly Naomi began to weep. "She was right. I took a long journey. I married a tall man with light hair. But seven children! I hoped she was wrong about that At first, it seemed she was. I had trouble getting pregnant. After I married Maximo it took me five years to conceive. We had begun to think I was barren. And then, before I had Leah, I became pregnant. But since I was convinced I couldn't bear children, I didn't pay any attention to my nausea and stomach upsets. It turned out I was pregnant with twins. And I lost them – two boys, each with his foot in the other's mouth. I went to a doctor who was too stupid to know I was pregnant and he recommended I get my insides scraped clean. But now – Now I don't have anyone to blame. I got rid of this child all by myself...."

She wept more loudly. I stood by her side, not knowing what to say. I patted her shoulder lightly, barely touching her. "I'm sorry, señora."

"I have told you already that there's no need to be sorry, Regla." She paused and felt her wet cheeks. "Would you please pass me a handkerchief?" I gave her one of the white lace handkerchiefs I'd just washed and ironed and put in the drawer. She wiped her face and continued, "Some women aren't made to be mothers. I'm one of those women. I can barely take care of Leah and Raquel. The thought of having another child was terrifying to me. I was losing my mind from worrying and there was no one with whom I could talk. So I went to see Doctor Pablito and pleaded with him, 'Give me something, please, so what's inside me will dissolve like air, as if it never existed.' He gave me nine pills. He said, 'Take three at a time, three times a day.' I only dared to take one pill. Just one! And in an hour I was vomiting, fainting, falling on the floor. And then the bleeding started. A baby makes so much blood! Blood and more blood. I didn't faint, but Mamá did. I never told her I'd taken a pill. Even Maximo doesn't know. No one knows, except Doctor Pablito. And now you. I trust you will keep this a secret?"

“Yes, señora, I will tell no one, not even my sister Tere, to whom I tell everything.”

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I was only fourteen, too young to do more than listen to these stories and say nothing. But they made a deep impression on me because I heard them with all the innocence of youth. I did not give advice, I did not express shock, I did not pass judgement. I simply absorbed what I heard and took mental notes, without any clear purpose or selfish desire. It was as if the loss of my mother left a chasm in me and I had room enough, heart enough, for stories that weren't mine, stories that could never be mine.

I believed Naomi when she told me how poor she and her family had been in the country she came from, just as I knew that Maximo had made the sandals for us because he himself had known what it was to lack good covering for your feet. I believed, too, what Naomi told me about how in the country she came from, across the ocean, there were people who hated her kind because they did not believe Jesus Christ had died on the cross for their sins too. And I believed Naomi when she talked about socialism because she always treated me well and never told me what I had to do. But in Agramonte she and her family became *gente decente*, the decent people of the town, part of the little circle of power that included the doctor, the judge, the mayor, the dentist, the local historian who headed the Masonic lodge, and of course their families. Naomi and her family were accepted as *gente decente*, but I and my family, we were and would always be *gente de color*. It didn't matter that there were white-skinned ancestors in us, we were poor and we were colored. Even when I was young, I despised that expression, *gente de color*, as if only we had color, and they, with those reds and purples that blazed in their cheeks and shriveled their necks, were somehow invisible, of no color at all.

It was my Papá who told me about *la guerrita*, which our people fought after Cuba became an independent country. Ay, how that “little war” consumed tender-eyed black men in the precious flower of youth, so many thousands who wanted us to have our own political party of *gente de color*. If we were going to be colored people no matter what we did, then at least we could try to find strength in that coloredness. Ay, but how quickly those tender-eyed men were vanquished. Crushed like ants under the feet of our government. And over their gleaming bodies, splashed with blood too fresh in those blue veins to be spilled, the leaders of our government dared to say, “Poor devils, did you forget we fought for our independence together, blacks and whites? Did you forget how Martí told us Cuba is more than white, more than black?” Our blackness was of no consequence, we were Cubans just the same, so tell me, why did those who wanted their blackness for once to truly be of consequence have to be yanked from the soil like weeds? Weren't they Cubans too?

These were passions I acquired from Papá, who'd known young men who'd fought in the *guerrita*, just as he'd known old men who'd fought, side by side with Antonio Maceo, our *mulato* hero, for our nation's independence from Spain. It was Papá who'd tell me, when I'd come home bearing one of Maximo's gifts, or invoking Naomi's vision of the socialist paradise, or reciting a Hebrew prayer I'd heard fall from the lips of the *viejos* Abraham and Hannah, not to grow too fond of the *polacos*, to remember that, yes, they were good people, but good only as far as white people go. I would argue with him a bit at those times, though never very aggressively because I respected him deeply. I'd say, “Papá are *polacos* white people too? Their skins are like those of the white people here, but in their souls they seem to carry an ancient well of hurt and shame and that reminds me a little of us. Naomi tells me that at her school in Poland the other children spit at her and the teacher ignored her when she raised her hand. She tells me that once,

on a train, a boy walking through the aisle grabbed at the beard of *el viejo* Abraham and pulled out a few hairs and that caused everyone to laugh. She says she felt no sadness when she left her country and for her Cuba is a paradise because Cubans have no hatred in their hearts. She tells me they are *polacos*, but not Christian. They are Jewish, and their religion is so old that even Our Lord Jesus Christ was a Jew before he became Our Savior, and she says they, too, were slaves, but a long time ago, in Egypt, and that the Jews are a people who believe in a God that is present in all things, but they don't make offerings anymore to their God, like they used to in the beginning, when they gave the blood of animals, as we do to our *orishas*, because they're convinced their God is content to eat memories, to be fed the stories of the blood sacrifices their ancestors gave years ago."

And Papá would remark with an amused smile, "Ay, Yeyita, the ideas your head is being filled with! Just remember your skin is always going to be black, and the *polacos*, even if they don't realize it yet, are white people here in Cuba. When they stepped off the boat, their hands and feet weren't shackled. They didn't feel the icy coldness of steel chains on their hot bodies when they landed on this island. They didn't have their children stolen from them. They worked for themselves and not for a slave master. And they never had to hide their saints in soup pots. If it hadn't been for our sacred batá drums, our beautiful trio of *okónkolo*, *itótele*, and *iyá* with which we call the saints, we would have perished. But even when they dare to take away our drums, as they still do today, we continue to call down our saints, on wooden boxes if need be, with rhythms serene and beseeching, with voices that don't tire." And he would grow quiet and gently tap on the table a couple of beats of an *oru* to Changó, the warrior god that was his spiritual guardian and to whom he was devoted.

I stayed loyal to Papá and his passions and yet I was drawn, by curiosity and empathy, to the dramas I witnessed in the house of the *polacos*. It seemed to me I had been placed there for a reason and that a day would come when that reason would be revealed to me. One thing I learned from my mother before I lost her – nothing happens by chance in this world. My destiny, I knew, was entangled with theirs in ways neither they nor I could yet foresee. I had been put in their path and they in mine, and this had not been in vain. I believed this fervently, for I could never have allowed my beloved mother's death, which was the event that had left me an orphan at the doorstep of the *polacos*, to be in vain.

And it was because I believed this fervently, and honored with my bones and my soul the memory of my mother as a *santera* and midwife, that I went to our church in Agramonte and lit a candle to Ochún, in her Catholic form as La Virgen de la Caridad, and offered her a thick handful of yellow marigolds on behalf of Naomi. I wanted Ochún to protect Naomi's womb. If left unattended, I feared she would become barren or ill. I didn't speak to Naomi of my actions. The slightest sign of disapproval or apprehension is capable of blocking Ochún's grace. I kept my secret from Naomi, just as she had kept her secret from Maximo and her family.

I sometimes wondered if she'd told Abraham Levi the truth; she was very close to him, and trusted him greatly, more than she did her mother Hannah Galant, and it was clear that he adored her too. What made me think she'd told him was that I saw him praying more vigorously than usual in the weeks after I heard her story. Or maybe, after knowing what I knew, I was drawn to examine Abraham Levi's acts of devotion more closely than I had thought to originally. How resolutely he prayed – in the morning after waking, before lunch and after dinner, and on Saturdays, the holy day of the Jews, for long hours in the morning and afternoon. I think he prayed with such urgency

because he prayed on behalf of and in the place of all the members of his family, who didn't pray and who worked on Saturdays, the same as they did on other days. Abraham Levi prayed alone, in a kind of trance, rocking his body back and forth, a shawl of blue and white silk with long fringes draped on his shoulders, his eyes never moving from his book, his lips pronouncing words filled with despair and melancholy. I noticed he did not pick up his pen to write in his notebook on Saturdays but that he often read from the pages he'd already written and at certain moments he shielded his eyes, as if what he'd written was too terrible even for his own gaze.

Whether it was my offerings to Ochún or Abraham Levi's solitary prayers chanted into the air, Naomi recovered. A few years later, she became pregnant again, but the baby, a boy, which she carried to term, was stillborn. And soon after, shortly after she and her family left Agramonte for La Habana, and I with them, she gave birth to Pablo, bearing for Máximo, finally, the son he had so desired.

Exactly as the gypsy in Poland predicted, Naomi took a long journey, married a tall man with light hair, and had seven children, including the four who died and the three who survived.

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But I have jumped ahead too quickly, leapt over too many long-lived years, which is unlike me, I who am never in a rush, in telling a story or living my life. I am the kind of woman who finishes cooking the entire meal before scrubbing the stove. And before I eat, I serve the *orishas*. First you fertilize the field, then you harvest. So where am I now? Tell me I am still sitting on the balcony of the apartment on Calle Quince and I Street, sipping pineapple-rind water, waiting for Paquito to return home from work, on the same balcony where only two years earlier, in 1959, the year of the triumph of the revolution, I'd served Raquelita a glass of pineapple-rind water as she patted the belly in which her Saulito was growing ever larger, so large that he'd weigh ten pounds at birth and nearly split his mother open. But really it is later, much later, many more years have passed, and I am in the basement apartment in Miramar left to me by Isabel, for she, too, has abandoned this island and abandoned me. And even that happened long ago, but it was just the other day, wasn't it, that one of my own twin sons, Marco Antonio, blessed like his brother by the spirits, also left, because I let him leave, because I thought he would break my spirit if he stayed even one more day.

Now, now, now.

It is now.

Time does not exist. Here. Time has crumbled. See how the dog-toothed rocks turn to sand under our feet.

I try to explain to Fanny that on this island time does not exist. She lives in anguish about time. I swear she lives with a gun pointed at her temple. She's at the wall waiting to be executed. She trembles and is overwhelmed with last thoughts, not knowing the gun isn't loaded.

Yes, Fanny has returned. She's a grown woman, but she is the same girl to whom I waved goodbye all those years ago. I knew she would return. That she would be the one to return. Because a lie told to a child is a wound. It never heals. Never, never will she be able to tell the difference between truth and betrayal. All she can do is return to the source of the wound. And be wounded again. She came seeking my love. And I, what choice did I have but to give it to her? I have never been able to withhold anything of mine that is desired by someone else. I give her my love because I don't know how not to. She has taken it upon herself to keep returning, not once but more than a dozen

times, to this island she cannot remember leaving, poor thing, begging me for memories of her family, for secrets she is certain have been withheld from her, those long-lashed black velvet eyes of hers always with a look of hurt in them, even before the blow has struck, and the helpless innocence that won't learn. Things come to Fanny, but with difficulty, too much suffering And like her great-grandfather Abraham Levi, she struggles to write things down in a notebook; she too writes in a foreign language, not Yiddish, but English. She dreams of etching words on paper as no one else, not even she, has done before, and these dreams make her sick with worry, make her afraid to write, which is what she says she most wants to do of anything in the world.

But I am rushing forward, out of breath, the way Fanny rushes, always glancing at her watch, never stopping to let things unfold in their good slow time. That is why she suffers from those attacks of panic she has told me about, when everything speeds up inside her – her heart, her thoughts, her life – as if the world were coming to an end. I listen to her, but I must unfasten all the anchors of my own life to imagine what she feels. I have never known the pain or fear she speaks of. I only know the serenity that comes from never having left this island, this island which I don't even know in its entirety. I have never been to Cienfuegos or Trinidad or Santiago or Pinar del Río. I have never been to the beach at Varadero. There are parts of La Habana where I have yet to set foot.

And I will never travel to Isla de Pinos – the Isle of Youth, as they call it now. It was there that my sister Chucha was sent to teach when she finished her degree. It was there she became ill, she who was so full of life. It was from there that they sent her back, in a wooden box covered with a Cuban flag. They sent her back, dirt in her fingernails, mosquito bites on her brow, her hair unbrushed. Tere, who is not afraid of the dead, washed her, scrubbed and cut her nails, brushed her hair, and dressed her in the pale-blue fitted suit with the wide lapels that she used to wear on her visits home. Between the two of us we forced a fourth-grade grammar book into her hands, already stiff and cold. And we buried her next to my mother in Agramonte.

Long before my sister died, I had forsaken my dream of studying, like her, to become a schoolteacher. But after Chucha died, the tiny pearl of ambition that was left in me wasted away completely. By then I was already working for Raquel and Rubén and taking care of Fanny, who was not quite a year old. I told myself I did not need a lot of things to be happy. I had a cot in the room I shared with Fanny. A salary that paid for my clothes and weekend visits to Agramonte to see Papá. I cooked what I pleased – and I ate standing up in the kitchen. I strolled through El Vedado with Fanny as if those streets lined with frangipani belonged to me. And when Raquel and Rubén left, and passed on their apartment to me, I told myself I was happy to have an aluminum rocking chair with a green woven straw back. I told myself I was happy just to sit rocking on the balcony.

I am not ready to leave that aluminum rocking chair on the balcony. Nor to swallow the last drop of my pineapple-rind water, which I have prepared for myself, for there is no one to serve me. It is May, the year is 1961, and I am carrying a baby, a girl, my firstborn, and I don't know yet that she will die.

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I don't want to know yet that she will die.