

DAUGHTER OF CARO

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SLOWLY, INCH BY INCH, the guard in her olive green military uniform inspects my U.S. passport. Like other Cubans living in the United States, I used to have to travel to Cuba with a Cuban passport, a special *gusano* passport for “the worms of the revolution,” for which you paid a fee for each year of absence from the mother country. Now the rules have changed, making the *gusano* passport no longer obligatory if you left Cuba before 1970. But the guards sometimes demand to see the Cuban passport anyway. I have it with me, though I finally let it expire, so as not to have to keep paying renewal fees. Just in case, I’m also traveling with a third passport, the passport that offers proof of my innocence, my little-girl passport, the one with which I left Cuba in 1961, just before my fifth birthday.

This is always a tense moment, heavy with inherited paranoia. Will they let me leave the country? Will I be forced to stay against my will? Is that the price I will eventually have to pay for my continued trips back to the island when there’s no longer any reason for me to return?

At my feet are various pieces of hand luggage—a suitcase with wheels; a black oversize portfolio case with a snappy red zipper, for the art I’ve lately taken to buying; a buttery wood sculpture of a male hand and a female hand not quite meeting in space, acquired in a frenzied rainy moment on my last day in Cuba; and my book bag brimming with *Granmas* I never manage to read but keep saving for history. Caro watches me from beyond the yellow line. On my recent return trips, she has accompanied me to the airport. Come to say the last goodbye, the way she did when we left Cuba. My brother was not quite two and he cried and clung to Caro, to Caro who declared when he was born that she wasn’t taking care of a second child, no way, she was quitting, but then she’d stayed and, despite herself, come to adore the boy. She cried too. She cried, waiting until our plane took off. Then she took the bus back to El Vedado, to the two-bedroom apartment with its pink bathroom tiles that my parents had

left to her. Caro had worked for my parents, newlyweds ten years younger than she, as a *criada*, a live-in maid and nanny, sleeping in the same room with my brother and me. By right of her labor that apartment would now belong to her. But Caro never got to sit in the rocking chair on the balcony, sipping iced pineapple-rind water and letting her pregnancy come to term, as middle-class white women, like my mother, had once been able to do.

Within days the apartment was taken from her. Immediately and violently, they took away that apartment, where she’d scrubbed floors every day with soap, cooked sweet yellow rice, watched over children that were not hers as if they were. Caro fought—she yelled, she screamed, she cried, she cursed. And still she lost the apartment. And lost her firstborn. And lost faith in the revolution, just beginning, which she had expected would speak in her name.

Caro never set foot again in the building in El Vedado.

I glance back at Caro, an uneasy smile on my lips. I don’t want to say goodbye to Caro but I also don’t want the guard to tell me I can’t leave Cuba. Caro’s gaze is gentle. She nods her head ever so slightly. She understands my predicament. She’s not asking anything of me.

Suddenly I hear the guard calling. You can go, she says. I thank her, a touch too profusely, and leap over my luggage, stretching toward the yellow line, toward Caro. We hug and I notice that in her hand Caro is still clasping the money I gave her in parting. Caro is a black working woman of the Caribbean; this is her inheritance: to come to the airport to wave goodbye to the little white girl inside the well-meaning woman who keeps returning without knowing why.

I keep waving. I cross through the x-ray zone. One last wave. Then another. I look back. Once. Twice. Again. When I am sure Caro is no longer there, I nervously scour the airport stores to see what I might buy during my final hour on Cuban soil—a bottle of rum? a musical tape? a black coral bracelet? a T-shirt of Che Guevara? I am an emigrant white middle-class woman from the Caribbean; that is my inheritance: to keep wanting the things money can buy.

Caro is from the countryside, from the town of Melena del Sur, an hour’s drive south of Havana. Now seventy, she grew up, the youngest of nine children, in a wooden house with a yard in back, where the red clay soil gave forth mangoes and bananas, okra and plantains. Like many black women of her generation, she came to Havana to work as a maid in the 1950s. She got her job working for my parents through her older sister, Tere, who was employed by my great-aunt and great-uncle to care for their daughter and son. Tere became

deeply attached to the children, and when the son, Henry, became ill with leukemia in 1952 she stayed at his side, refusing marriage offers. Even after our family left Cuba, Tere never stopped visiting Henry's grave in the Jewish cemetery in Guanabacoa, several miles outside of Havana.

Caro came to Havana on various occasions to help Tere. She soon knew the entire extended family on my mother's side. She knew my mother years before she got married. Caro saw my mother first with two long pigtails, then with high heels and fluffed-up skirts. Caro saw my mother marry young, only two weeks after her twentieth birthday. Caro saw how my mother, the daughter of *polacos*, Yiddish-speaking Jews from Eastern Europe, wed the son of *turcos*, Sephardic immigrants from Turkey, and all the problems that caused. How my mother's mother moaned: And how will we speak to them? They don't know Yiddish. Worse yet, my father was of humble origins and went to work as an accountant for my great-aunt and great-uncle, who had a thriving machine shop in Old Havana. I was born later that same year, in 1956. And a year later, when we moved to the apartment in El Vedado, Caro began working for my parents.

During the day Caro and I were alone together. She'd dress me up and we'd go out for lunch, usually to Chinese restaurants. My father worked at the machine shop and my mother would go lend a hand at her parents' foundering lace shop in Old Havana. In the evening, my parents passed the time with friends, dancing at one of the many clubs in the city, or walking along the Malecón. They'd finish off the night with a pounded steak sandwich smothered with translucent slices of onion.

Caro is a witness to my early childhood years, to my first struggles for self-definition. She has told me stories that no one else in the family has told me. She remembers how my father once forced me to sit in my crib against my will and how I let myself out, falling on my head, but free. She remembers how I refused to get into the cab of a taxi driver whom my mother had entrusted to take me, a child of three, from our apartment in El Vedado to the house of my great-aunt and great-uncle in Miramar. My mother couldn't understand why I was being so difficult, but neither she nor anyone else could convince me to get into that cab. The driver, Caro says I later told her, fondled my thighs during the whole trip back and forth from El Vedado to Miramar and I didn't like that. Caro remembers how firmly I knew, even then, to say no.

Caro is a second mother, even from afar. In her neighborhood I am known as *hija de Caro*, daughter of Caro. That I keep returning, with suitcases full of things for her and her family, is a sign of how well she raised me. People say

about me, *Mira que bien sabe agradecer la crianza de Caro*—"Look at how well she knows to show her gratitude to Caro for raising her."

One night, when we get to talking about the car accident which happened soon after our arrival in the United States, when I was nine, I told Caro I'd broken my right femur and the family feared I'd never walk normally again. Caro nodded her head. It turned out she knew all about my leg. My cousin had written Tere and told her I was walking with a pathetic limp after being in a body cast for a year. Caro said she made a vow to San Lazaro. She promised to walk to his shrine if he made me well.

Somewhere in the shrine of Lazarus a tin leg hangs; it is my broken leg, left there by Caro.

Growing up in New York in the 1960s and 1970s, I'd accuse my parents, over Sunday brunches, of having been imperialists who colonized a black woman. My mother said I didn't understand. Race relations weren't like that in Cuba, she'd say. And I'd ask: What about all the clubs that blacks couldn't enter? They had their own clubs, my mother would say; blacks didn't want to go to the white clubs. And she'd add: You know there were clubs where they didn't allow us, where they didn't allow Jews. Our arguments would conclude with my mother saying: "Look, Rutie, don't believe me, but Caro wasn't someone you could colonize. Caro made all the household decisions. Caro cooked what she felt like eating. She cleaned when she thought it necessary. She went home to Melena on weekends. Caro was like part of the family . . ." Yet my mother always had to admit that Caro could never be persuaded to sit down at the table and have dinner with us. She ate by herself, when no one was looking.

On my first return trip to Cuba in 1979 I went looking for Caro. I arrived in the afternoon, in a taxi. Caro had been waiting on the corner since morning. I apologized for being late. She said it didn't matter. She knew how to wait.

I found Caro in a small apartment in Miramar. Before the revolution, Miramar was a posh neighborhood of huge mansions and suburban homes with U.S.-style yards in front. It was taken for granted that Miramar was lily white. In a gesture of revolutionary fervor, Fidel Castro ordered that scholarship students from the countryside and black families be sent to live in Miramar. The mansions were turned over to embassies. But soon the students were sent elsewhere, and the black families, with a few exceptions, ended up in the apartment buildings, and garages turned into apartments. Miramar kept its air of exclu-

siveness and became the neighborhood of choice for those generals and ministers who'd fought with Fidel in the Sierra Maestra.

Caro came to Miramar with her twin sons and daughter to live with Esperanza, a white woman. Caro laughed when I told her I thought she was Esperanza's maid. She and Esperanza were simply friends; they'd started living together after abandoning alcoholic husbands. Esperanza's health was more delicate, so Caro watched over her, but she was not her maid. After Esperanza left Cuba for Miami in 1983, Caro kept the apartment. Esperanza maintains close ties and has been, through the years, the key source for clothes, shoes, and asthma medicine for Caro's children.

In the meantime, Tere had indeed continued to work as a maid, despite the revolution, caring for a young Hungarian girl whose parents were diplomats. When the family returned to Hungary, Tere took another job caring for an older woman who lived in the upstairs apartment from Caro; when that woman emigrated, the apartment was left to Tere. A few years later, Caro's husband died. The two sisters, Caro and Tere, reunited in their old age, now pool all their resources and cook their meals on the same kerosene stove in the kitchen painted a deep sky blue.

Caro's downstairs apartment is the hub, the Times Square, of the neighborhood. Neither Caro nor Tere smokes, so both of them sell the cigarettes they get from their ration books. Someone is always stopping by to buy a pack. Their nephew from Melena brings sacks of okra, plantains, and string beans, which Caro and Tere sell for him. A guy who works at the printing press across the street bought a huge bag of cookies from someone who filched them from a factory and he's also asked Caro and Tere to sell his cookies. Most of the neighbors don't have their own telephones, so they come to Caro's house to make and receive calls. There's a pretty young blond woman, the daughter of an astronaut, who comes twice a week to get her calls from her boyfriend in Spain; one day he'll be her ticket out of Cuba. It is to Caro that the neighbors come to ask if the ration of bread has arrived, if there's fish today at the local *bodega*. Then there are the nighttime regulars like Juana, whose head is always wrapped in a glistening scarf; and there's Anselmo, a black man with a full head of white hair, who guards the building next door and comes in his pajamas to watch the soap operas; and at all times there are friends of Caro's twin sons stopping in to say hello. To the precious Miramar suburban quiet, Caro has brought the open-door neighborliness of the countryside.

Since I have no other family in Cuba except for a distant cousin of my father's, Caro provides my deepest emotional link to Cuba. I have now returned

to Cuba nine times, and with every visit I grow closer to Caro and her family. Initially, before I started staying at Caro's house, I booked rooms in hotels and visited Caro and her family in the evenings. Caro insisted I have dinner at her house every night. How are you going to be in Cuba and not come eat at my house, she'd say. I was embarrassed, knowing that with all the hardships and rationing it was easier for me to get food at the hotel. But Caro would prepare such delicious meals it was hard to resist her invitation. Pedrito, the nephew from Melena, always brought fresh plantains, and the rice was always sweet, and there was always a little delicately stewed fish and a salad of cucumber and okra seasoned with lemon. All this food Caro would serve me, alone, on separate dishes, at the dinner table. The rest of the family, and some neighbors, who were regulars at Caro's house, would fan out around the house, eating with plates on their laps. I'd ask Caro why all of us couldn't eat together at the table, but she'd smile and go on serving the way she was used to serving. Sometimes one of her twin sons would sit at the table and eat with me, but no one else would.

Until recently, when only foreigners with foreign passports could enter the dollar stores, I'd accompany Caro to the *diplotienda* down the street from the monstrous Soviet embassy tower and we'd go food shopping. Usually one of her twin sons would come with us and both granddaughters. Those were strange occasions, when I'd become a fairy godmother, buying lollipops and apples for the girls and tomato sauce, meat, cooking oil, and milk for Caro, who was always careful to select the most essential things and those things that cost less. Was this situation, a white woman providing for a black woman, truly any different from the ways things had been before the revolution?

At the same time, life has changed profoundly. As a black woman in Cuba, Caro has gained in strength. There is an old decrepit white woman, Felisa, who comes to Caro's house every night. Caro's daughter-in-law says the woman, who is bone-thin and covered with scabs, looks like a mummy. Felisa was once quite rich and she's well educated, I'm told, but everyone in her family left and she stayed behind alone, taking care of a deaf niece who grew up healthy and strong thanks to her aunt's efforts. The niece married and she and the husband took over the house. Now they confine Felisa to one tiny room and don't let her into the living room or kitchen or bathroom. And they beat her. Felisa smells because she never washes herself. She gathers the almonds from the tree in front of her house and picks leftover food from the garbage. Caro feels pity for Felisa and gives her a plate of food or a *cafesito*, so Felisa comes over night after night. She says nothing; she walks over to the aluminium rocking chair with the arm-

rest that's always falling off, takes her seat, and rocks there, watching television, knowing that Caro won't let her starve.

One night, when there is a full house at Caro's, the conversation turns to the question of immigration. Would you leave Cuba if you had the chance? someone asks. Caro shrugs and says, "I'm not leaving Cuba. Where else would I go? I'll be here with Fidel, until he goes or I go. Let's see who goes first."

During the summer of 1995 I decided to travel to Cuba with my husband and son. I rented an apartment next door to Caro. I wanted to see what it would be like to be neighbors.

A few days before leaving for Cuba I went to a conference in Miami. A friend of my parents, a white man who'd been our neighbor in the Vedado apartment building, drove me. As we approached the hotel where the conference was taking place he said to me, "If you want to take a walk, go that way, where there's a nice mall with good stores. But don't go that way. That's a black neighborhood. It's not safe." And then there I was in Havana next door to Caro. Next door to Caro and her black sons, her black daughter, her black sister, her black neighbors, all of whom watched over us and protected us and gave us their affection.

Caro wasn't feeling her best. Her ulcer was acting up and causing her pain. But she wouldn't let me pamper her in any way. I offered to accompany her to the doctor's and hire a driver to take us to the clinic. She insisted on going to the doctor alone and taking the bus. She worried, instead, about our well-being and sent Guarina, her niece, a sixty-year-old woman who had never married, to cook and clean for us. Guarina came gladly, happily, shooing me out of the kitchen when I'd try to cook or wash the dishes. "Caro says you work very hard with your head all year long and you need to get some rest." There was no way to convince Guarina that we didn't need help. Caro said we needed help and that was that. Did I want to go and argue with Caro?

Caro, indeed, was in charge. When people came selling fish just caught on the Malecón, or eggs, or cheese, or chicken, or a chunk of beef, Caro would send them over to me, so I'd buy these things in dollars. I'd keep a small portion and send over the rest to Caro. In turn, Caro would send over plantains and okra, and before I left she secured three rum-size bottles of the honey I adored from Melena.

Soon I gave up trying to do any household chores. Guarina knew how to wash the floors better than I, with soap and a bucket of water. She understood

the drippy ancient refrigerator. When I longed for green vegetables she knew where to go get swiss chard for a few Cuban pesos. Guarina cooked incredible meals, delighted by the electric oven, the rice cooker, and the gas stove that came with the apartment, luxuries that few Cubans could afford. When she learned that my son liked to eat white rice scooped up with fresh plaintain chips, she made sure to prepare this delicacy for him every day. During our month's stay all I managed to cook was a flan, which I prepared early one morning before Guarina arrived.

Each day I asked Guarina to join us at the table for lunch and dinner, but she always refused. She often closed the kitchen door when we were eating, to give us privacy and, I suspect, to give herself privacy too. She said she was used to eating standing up in the kitchen. She ate as she worked. That's how she'd always eaten. She'd worked for a French family and eaten that way. I wondered if Caro had eaten that way when she worked for my parents.

I'd returned to Cuba with the best of intentions, in hopes of undoing racial and class borders, and I'd succeeded in reproducing, in my relationship with Guarina, my mother's relationship with Caro. As for my relationship with Caro, it was clear to me she felt she had to continue to care for me. In Caro's eyes I was still a little girl, a white girl who needed to be served. I was other things, too, of course. I was an anthropologist doing research, a professional woman with an immense network of social ties in Cuba, a poet who'd dedicated a poem to Caro about how she, above anyone else, had made returning to Cuba possible. Caro understood all these roles of mine and expressed her desire to see me succeed in the only way she knew how: by making it possible for me to concentrate solely on my intellectual labors. In that way she was fundamentally no different from my mother, who'd likewise always insisted on doing all the household work so I wouldn't be distracted from reading and writing.

Daughters of Caliban stand tall only when the backs of their mothers stretch wide.

Just before we left Cuba I invited Guarina to go out to a restaurant with us for lunch. She accepted and dressed up in her light yellow culottes and high-heeled sandals. At the restaurant she refused to order the special chicken dinner that my husband and I were ordering because she felt it was too expensive. She ordered an individual pizza for herself, which cost one dollar less. When the bread came, measly rolls that were smaller than the daily ration provided by the state, we each politely ate a piece. There were exactly four miniature rolls.

No one touched the butter. Before the waiter had a chance to take it away, Guarina opened her purse and gently tossed in the yellow wads of fat. "Don't you leave them any soda in your Coke cans," she said. "If you don't want anymore, give it to me." I don't know what possessed us, but we refrained from giving Guarina what was left of our sodas. We gave her the mixer she wanted in order to be able to bake cakes to sell, we gave her lots of used clothing, shampoo, cologne, toothpaste, soap, and money, but something possessed us, and with desperate thirst, as if we'd never have any again, we drank up every last drop of our Cokes.

III

WOMEN AND HEALTH