

I Come From All Places

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Yo vengo de todas partes y hacia todas partes voy: Arte soy entre las artes y en los montes, monte soy.

I come from all places and to all places I go: I am art among the arts and mountain among mountains.

José Martí, *Versos Sencillos*

I HAVE GONE MANY TIMES to Havana, Cuba to see my first home in the world. Like a ghost, I slip through dark hallways, stumble up the stairs, run my hands over the perspiring walls, and tell myself, “You lived here once.”

I was a little girl when we left, only four and a half years old, so I don’t have any memories of the place, but there are black-and-white pictures of me there, which my mother has kept, proof that it was where my existence began.

Over the last 25 years I have traveled to Cuba incessantly and it has become a ritual for me to keep returning to our old building in the Vedado neighborhood of Havana, filled with *flamboyant* trees that shed their orange flame blossoms in springtime. On the corner of 15 and I Street stands that first home: a five-story walk-up, its balconies sagging with the weight of the years. I feel a thrill and a sense of dread every time I see it again, this home that is no longer mine.

In 1956, when we moved in, my parents were in their mid-twenties, I was a newborn, and the building was brand new and represented the height of modern urban living. Half a block away was the Patronato Synagogue, designed by the Cuban architect Aquiles Capablanca, who gave it the flourish of a stunning pale blue arch reaching to the sky. Opening its doors in 1955, the Patronato was intended to be more than a temple; its huge complex included a banquet hall, a theater, classrooms, and a library. The founders hoped it would become the community center for the island’s Jews, who had made Cuba their America. Only 30, 40 years before, the Jews had come as penniless immigrants from Poland and Turkey, and other countries in Europe. They had prospered and hoped to stay forever. But their world was turned upside down by

the Revolution, and in the early 1960s the majority of Cuban Jews fled, leaving behind their homes and possessions, unwilling to live under a Communist system. My family was part of that migration. Again, I do not remember our flight out of the island, but there are black-and-white pictures of me in front of the Patronato, testimony to my childhood presence in a Jewish community so short lived it felt like a dream.

I have been inside our actual old apartment a few times, when I was filming my documentary, *Adio Kerida*, and more recently when I took my friend, the poet Richard Blanco, to see it. An elderly Afrocuban couple lives there now, and on each visit Hilda carefully points out the sofa, dining table and chairs, the bed, bedspread, and dresser, and even the knick-knacks my parents had to leave behind. "Everything is exactly as your parents left it," she always says, smiling proudly. The house is a strange kind of museum, preserving the material world my parents created as a young couple aspiring to what was then a middle-class life. It is small and crowded, reminiscent of the first apartments we lived in when we arrived in New York. There's a windowless kitchen, a dining room barely separate from the living room, a larger and a smaller bedroom and a bathroom in between. Its greatest charm is the balcony, from which you can see Casablanca's beautiful arch rising tall from the Patronato.

I'm embarrassed when Hilda shows me around the apartment. I fear that she and her husband might think I covet the possessions that once belonged to my parents and that I'll ask for them back. But nothing could be farther from my mind. We have acquired so much in the United States, more goods than we know what to do with. I feel better knowing that the things that were part of our old life remain in Cuba and are being used by Hilda and her family.

So what am I looking for? I don't really know. I feel a desire to see over and over this first home, as if a secret will one day be revealed to me.

And yet the minute I enter inside, I want to run away. There is great sadness lodged inside that apartment. Hilda and her husband were from the countryside and acquired the apartment through his loyalty as a military man to the Communist political system. They began poor and rose up in the hierarchy, but that joy has been diminished by painful losses. One of their sons, at the age of nineteen, fell mysteriously to his death from the balcony. A portrait of him hangs in the living

room. Another son, a father of small children, has also died much too young. I offer condolences and a long and terrible silence falls over us. Eventually, with the usual politeness that is so common among Cubans, I am asked if my family is well, if my parents are well. They've never met my parents, who haven't wanted to return to Cuba. But living among their abandoned things for so many decades, Hilda and her husband must feel they know my parents; know them very intimately.

After we say goodbye, I vow not to bother Hilda and her husband again for a long while. I'll greet them in the hallway but won't ask to go inside.

The strange thing is I spend a lot of time in our old building. Our former neighbors down the hall are still there after all these years and I've developed a close friendship with them. Consuelito and Edilberto lived there, and soon after, their daughter Cristy was born. Consuelito remembers going out to eat grilled steak sandwiches with my parents and she laughs every time she tells the story of my father rushing to take her to the hospital when her birth pains began and how he was so frantic he went out in his slippers and didn't even notice. Now, they are a three-generation family, as housing in Cuba is very limited. Consuelito and Edilberto, in their mid-eighties, sleep in the larger bedroom. Cristy and her husband, Pepe, both in their early fifties, occupy the smaller bedroom. They have a 32-year-old daughter, Monica, who shares the room with her grandparents. Monica says that she and her boyfriend have not been able to marry because both live in crowded three-generation homes and neither has enough money to buy or rent a place of their own. Cristy and Consuelito are devoted to the Catholic faith and always pray for my safe return to the United States. But Edilberto is a revolutionary, and the reason they all stayed in Cuba.

The family survives thanks to Cristy's entrepreneurship. Two unmarried aunts, who lived in an apartment on the first floor, left it to Christy after their death, and as soon as it became possible to rent it to foreigners, she fixed it up, adding air conditioners in the two bedrooms, a picture window, rattan living room furniture, and a shower with hot and cold running water, a luxury for most Cubans. Cristy is my truest counterpart in Cuba—she lives in the same apartment she lived in as a child, an exact replica of ours, and I can't be around her without thinking about whether I'd be sharing an apartment with my parents if they

had chosen to stay on the island and also trying to make ends meet by becoming an hotelier.

Cristy likes to say, in front of her parents, that I was lucky my parents took me out of Cuba. “*A ti te salvaron,*” she always remarks. I was “saved” from the hardships, let loose in the world. While I have been traveling back and forth to Cuba for years, and visited many cities around the world, Cristy flew on a plane for the first time only just this year. She made enough money from the rental apartment to purchase a ticket to Miami for herself and Pepe. She wanted the satisfaction of knowing she could pay for their plane fare, but during their two months in Miami they had no other option but to stay with relatives who could cover all their expenses. Cristy is privileged compared to most people in Cuba, but she knows that compared to me, and other Cuban Americans who were taken out of the island as children, she’s a pauper. What she has that I don’t have is an unwavering bond with her parents, the result of sharing a home with them for her entire life.

I’ve only recently been able to admit to myself that Cristy is right when she says my parents “saved me” by taking me out of Cuba. Our immigrant journey opened doors that would have been unimaginable in Cuba. Of course it wasn’t an easy ride. As immigrants freshly arrived in New York, we experienced difficult years, my father working three jobs while my mother tried to cook nutritious meals with a limited income, often serving us spaghetti, or white rice, fried eggs, and *pica-dillo*, the Cuban version of a Sloppy Joe’s. My younger brother and I struggled to adjust to speaking English in school, struggled to make friends. But eventually we rose into comfortable lives. Our extended family came together, as did friends of my parents from Cuba, and we all resettled in New York and Miami, forming a community and helping one another.

More than 50 years after we left Cuba, my parents, my brother, and I each have our own houses, our own cars, our own bank accounts, and our very separate lives. Estrangement and distance have come with our prosperity. We don’t see each other often, as we all reside in different cities, but we’ve made it an obligation to get together each year for the Passover seder and for Thanksgiving. My mother, who has a shaking left arm from Parkinson’s and has shrunken to the size of a child from osteoporosis, is still well enough to cook up a feast for us on those holidays. But I learned long ago as a young woman never to talk

about Cuba at the dinner table. My father is against any contact with the island, and my brother more or less agrees with him, so it is impossible to engage in a calm conversation about my visits to Cuba and what I have seen and learned there. Cuba has become such a deep part of my life, but I cannot share it with my closest family. The island lives inside me in a precious but melancholy solitude, like a pearl in a shell.

Growing up in rental apartments, in which I shared a room with my brother and where the TV blared and I had no quiet spaces to sit and read, as a young woman I longed for a house. After getting my PhD, marrying my husband David, and giving birth to my son, Gabriel, I achieved that dream, and bought a house in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where I live today. It was important to me, as a woman, to be able to have the money to buy the house myself. I’d read Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* and knew that a room wasn’t enough. I wanted a house of my own, a house no one could take away. I wanted my name on the property title. I’d lost a country as a child. I wanted some semblance of permanence, though in the back of my mind I knew social upheavals and financial crises could leave anyone shipwrecked at a moment’s notice.

My house is a Victorian house from the 1880s with oak doorframes leading into every room, plenty of windows, and an upstairs and a downstairs and a garden where pink and white peonies bloom in June. The exterior is painted in nine colors, sea blues and greens, pink, yellow, and lavender, and being on a small street, it stands out amid the monotone houses in the neighborhood. Over the years, it has grown more and more cluttered, filled with all the things I have brought back from my travels, from Turkish rugs to Spanish pottery to Mexican inlaid wood furniture to Cuban sculpture, art, and handmade books. Maybe because my parents were forced to leave everything behind in Cuba, I have become a collector of material things. Lately, my house seems less a home and more a warehouse.

But that warehouse in Ann Arbor is my sanctuary. It is to that warehouse that I happily return, collapsing from exhaustion after my journeys, sometimes staying indoors for days on end to recover, with David thankfully acting as my messenger, providing me with food and all that I need from the outside world. Now that Gabriel is grown-up and living on his own in New York, and David and I have been married for such a long time that we are able to carry on our relationship no matter

how far apart we are geographically, I have become a restless traveler, a nomad who depends on the kindness of strangers. My life is now a pendulum and I am either sequestered in the quiet of my warehouse, surrounded by all the things I have carried back from my travels, reading and writing peacefully, or I am in a place that isn't home but could be home, finding my way in the world with a faith that surprises me, a faith that I will travel safely, that I will find my way, not get lost and never be heard from again.

The other day, my friend, Rolando Estévez, who makes beautiful handmade books in Cuba, asked me for a list of twelve cities that left a lasting impression on me. I easily named these cities:

- ♦ *Havana*—the city of my birth, the city of lost memories.
- ♦ *New York*—the city I grew up in and left, and where I never returned to live, but where my son now lives, the city that still harbors memories of the haunts I escaped to when things were difficult with my parents, the fountain at the Frick Museum, the books for sale on the outdoor racks at the Strand.
- ♦ *Ann Arbor*—the city where I became a mother, a professor, a homeowner, the city where I learned the names in English of the flowers in my garden.
- ♦ *Madrid*—the city where I lived alone for the first time, at the age of nineteen, and drank my first gin and tonic, and walked the streets late at night, protected by Cibeles on her chariot led by lions.
- ♦ *Santa María del Monte*—the village in northern Spain where I became an anthropologist and learned to hide my Jewish identity as though the Inquisition still existed.
- ♦ *Mexquitic*—the town in Mexico where I felt the weight of the border so heavily on my shoulders.
- ♦ *Miami Beach*—the city of family vacations, where we'd go because we couldn't go to Cuba, hungry for sunshine, the ocean, and pink mamey milkshakes.
- ♦ *Istanbul*—the city of my Sephardic ancestors, full of mystery, where I traveled up and down the Bosphorus on boats drinking apple tea from small glass teacups.
- ♦ *Goworowo*—the city near Warsaw where my maternal grandmother and her family came from, a place that has erased all memory of the Jews who lived there.

- ♦ *Tel Aviv*—the city of Israel modernity, full of Jews who want nothing to do with Judaism.
- ♦ *Jerusalem*—the city burdened by history, where I could not approach the Wailing Wall without an Orthodox Jew demanding I cover my arms.
- ♦ *Tokyo*—the only city in Asia I have ever visited, where I felt at ease and met Cuban musicians and wandered in the subways fearlessly.

And there are more cities I could name, for I have also felt at home in Seattle and in Naples and in Dublin and in Buenos Aires. Oh, Buenos Aires, where I even have cousins, part of a family branch that went there rather than to Havana, and where the tango, with its pained sense of loss and unshakable melancholy, moves me to tears like no other music.

I have packed and unpacked suitcases many times, and I have come to realize that the greatest gift my parents gave me, in daring to leave Cuba for an unknown world across the ocean, was the gift of feeling that I can be at home in many places. The great Cuban poet José Martí, himself an exile in New York for much of his life, who fought and died for Cuba's independence from Spain, gave voice to this idea: losing his first home turned him into someone who comes from all places and goes to all places. This is the legacy I have inherited.

Yet Martí's worldliness coexisted with deep roots that pulled him back to Cuba, though his parents were from Spain. His origins on the island were etched into his soul. Cuba was the starting point and the ending point for his journey.

Is home where you are born or where you are laid to rest for all eternity? More than once I have asked myself if, when I die, I'd like to be buried amid the royal palms in the oldest Jewish cemetery in Cuba, which is in the town of Guanabacoa, on the outskirts of Havana. I still do not know the answer. Maybe because I am so afraid to die, I keep postponing my decision. For now, I am content knowing our old apartment is still intact in Havana, knowing my quiet warehouse awaits me in Ann Arbor after every trip, knowing there are still places I hope to visit, with my traveler's prayer always in hand, always.