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City of a Hundred Fires

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Richard Esteves was thankful for the rusty hinges of his bedroom door, thankful for their sorrowful creaking that warned him to put away the letter he had been reading. The letter was cream colored and crinkled, opened once before by a young soldier in Havana, scanned for kernels of dissent, and taped again, a dark curl stuck in the tape. The only sentence on the page was written in the stilted, sharp hand of his grandmother--"*Mi Ricardito, me estoy muriendo.*"

It was his wife Helen who had turned the doorknob. Later that night, as she drank her sweet tea and read the two-day old newspaper, Richard blurted, "I am going to Cuba."

Helen was still, like a fine layer of dust. When she moved at last it was to say, "Don't be ridiculous. You aren't going anywhere."

"My grandmother is dying, Helen. I have to go." Richard moved to their bedroom, his eyes adjusting to the darkness that was like the mouth of a wolf, as his *abuela* used to say. A streetlamp from outside slashed the dark with light.

"She may be dead already," Helen called, though her voice was full of sleep as if she had already won the argument and was ready to rest. "You know how slow the mail is." She undressed at the foot of the bed, unzipping her shorts, removing her socks, unhooking her bra. The room was soon full of the smell of her—musky and perfumed. Richard, in bed under the covers now, closed his eyes and tried to remember a time when the image of his wife disrobing in a dark room stirred him to wakefulness at the end of a long workday. The memory wouldn't come, and when he felt Helen's

hand on his chest, he took it and peeled it off his skin. Helen turned her back to Richard, punched her pillow a few times, and whispered "asshole" twice before falling asleep.

Richard dreamt of his grandmother that night, and the dream was a memory. It was his first memory of his grandmother, María Amalia Esteves, and it came colored in gold tones, like the gold hoops she wore in her ears that brushed her neck. In the dream and in real life, Richard had pulled on one of them hard, could still remember the resisting flesh, Amalia's scream, "Ay, ay, ay," and the soundless release of the hoop going through her earlobe. Gold and blood. And even though his father had wanted to tear him out of her arms, to spank him and then demand that he not cry, Amalia had held him tightly, the blood soaking her silk shirt, saying, "*Mi niño, no importa, no es nada.*"

The dream shifted. She was letting him float in a tin tub when he was a little boy in Cuba, in nothing but underwear and bare feet in a

small Cienfuegos backyard, with the neighbor's chickens running past, their forms a blur of white around him. She dipped his heel in Coca-cola when he was a baby, and kissed the drops of sugar off.

Amalia told stories of pirates, of her own great-grandfather who had been captain of a ship that traversed the Spanish main, how he had had many lovers and had conquered many merchant ships, and how in his storm-withered, old age he had forgotten where the treasure was buried. Amalia explained that the Esteves family was poor now because of an old man's bad memory. And she called Richard her Spanish treasure.

Richard woke before Helen. The comforter covered her to her nose, even though it was summer in Florida and the house was overly warm. Her hair stuck to her face, wet from perspiration. Richard plucked a stiff strand from the side of her mouth before leaving the room. In the kitchen, he started breakfast on the electric skillet, pouring olive oil in figure eights

before laying down a thick layer of hash browns.

"Mm, smells good," Helen said and pulled up a chair. "Listen, Rich, about last night."

"I'm sorry," Richard said, and cracked two eggs onto the skillet. "I was tired, you know. And upset about my grandmother."

"I wish I'd known her."

"She isn't dead yet," Richard said, and Helen stiffened.

Helen smirked and whispered something Richard could not make out. She often whispered, as if it allowed her to say things she shouldn't. "You know what our bank account looks like," she said at last. "A trip to Cuba will be expensive. Besides, you were, what, eight when you saw her last?"

Richard plated all the eggs and potatoes onto one dish and put them before Helen.

"Aren't you eating?" she asked, picking at a runny yolk with her fork.

"No. And I was five when I saw her last." Richard rinsed the skillet, dried his hands, and took up Amalia's letter again.

"Grow up, Richard," Helen said as she watched him reading. "You're going to leave me here alone to go all the way to Cuba to visit a grave. No one down there has even had the decency to call."

"They don't have phones."

"Someone does. Someone has to. Anyhow, what if the house gets robbed? This neighborhood isn't as safe as it once was, you know. What if the car breaks down?" And then, after Richard said nothing, "I know what men do on islands like those. I've heard of the teenage prostitutes. You reject me night after night." Helen put her plate in the sink. Richard was watching her now over the edge of the letter. He wanted to disagree with her, say something about exhaustion, about his faithfulness, her coldness during the day, but he found he couldn't speak. "She's dead, I'm sure of it," Helen said at last, her voice a fading whisper.

The last time Richard saw his grandmother, he was five years old. He and his parents were inside the Peruvian embassy seeking asylum days after a small group of Cubans

had rammed a bus through the gates, hoping to secure passage out of Cuba. Once Fidel made a speech urging anyone who wanted to leave to go ahead and do it, the flood of people invaded the small embassy. Richard and his parents were among them. Richard barely remembered how he held his grandmother's hand through an iron gate, Amalia outside, pressed tightly against the bars. She kissed his fingertips and made them wet with tears, "*Mi nieto, mi Ricardito,*" and she prayed to Santa Bárbara and to God out loud, that her grandson be spared of big waves and bull sharks, of lightning, of slick decks, of a bad memory. She prayed until a guard tapped her on the shoulder and said, "Enough of that, now."

As the boat they'd boarded floated slowly out of Mariel Harbor, Ricardito Esteves, who would become Richard soon enough, was rocked in his mother's arms, and when she put him down, rocked affectionately by the waves. In his mind he heard Amalia singing the one song she knew from the station that picked up American voices, "Do ju want to no a see-cret, hmm,

hmm, hmm. I promees no to tell, oh, oh, oh..." Richard had loved the words he didn't understand. Out on the sea, he remembered the song. The echo of the melody was a lullaby, a ship's engine the accompaniment.

When the boat arrived in Miami and the hordes of Mariel's refugees flooded out into the waiting ranks of marines, Richard's mother lost her grip, and he floated away on a sea of arms. His mother told him how they'd found him in the tight embrace of a blind woman, one of the mentally unstable Fidel let loose with the rest. For years Richard dreamed of his grandmother in his warm, springy bed in Miami, and in his dreams, Amalia had no eyes.

She came to him, after that, in ink and scratchy handwriting. In letters written on thin, onion skin paper, stuffed into red, white and blue airmail envelopes.

Richard skipped the paperwork required to secure legal travel to Cuba. Instead, he purchased an AeroMexico ticket online which would take him from Orlando to Mexico City, then on to Havana.

Richard packed an enormous duffel bag with plastic-wrapped bars of soap, a housedress for Amalia, pens and pencils, toilet paper rolls, lipstick, vitamins, purple reading glasses, books, photographs, underwear, a box of Twinkies and gold hoop earrings. Richard kept adding to the duffel a bit each day, packing two unopened bottles of aspirin and a new jar of cold cream from Helen's medicine cabinet one day, a party-sized bag of pretzels the next, and Helen's brand new tweezers the night before his flight. "Stop it!" Helen had yelled at him. "You're cleaning us out!"

"I have to overpack, Helen. I heard that the guards always take some at customs," Richard explained. But once in Havana, the duffel was searched, and only two CD's of American produced Salsa music were confiscated.

The Cuban taxi driver who met him outside the airport was a woman who could lift the heavy duffel on her own with more ease than Richard had managed during the trip. She insisted Richard sit in the front seat with her.

"*La Calle Madero,*" he said, his d's not soft enough. "*Mi abuela,*" he said then, in clarification. His Spanish was faulty, the words stuck in his throat.

"Of course," the taxi driver responded in Spanish. Her name was Daisy, like the flower, a flower that never grew on the island. She wore shorts and her legs stuck to the vinyl seats of the old, converted Buick. Her skin peeled off the seat in slow motion when she moved to press the brake. Daisy caught him looking.

"There's nothing like the leg of a Cuban woman," she said. "In the old days, men made the tiles on the roofs by molding the hot clay over the thigh of a *Cubanita*. It's the perfect shape."

Richard shifted in his seat. He'd had a tile roof installed on his home last May. His wife, Helen, had yelled at the construction crew for leaning their ladders against her bougainvillea filled trellises. On the ground, her thin hands gripping her waist, she yelled up at them, cawing like a crow.

Daisy's words were percussive, drumming softly over the Buick's motor.

There had been a time when Richard and Helen took tango lessons together, the movement returning to him like instinct, uprooted from a past not his own. Helen had laughed at the cheek-to-cheek part and Richard had felt her laughter in his own chest. He used to read her letters from Amalia, letters that detailed the birth of a set of twins in the family, promotions, cataracts and swollen knees, and full of stories—the time a giant cricket chased his grandmother into the house when she was a girl, or the time she went roller skating in Cienfuegos and fell into a sewer. Helen used to sigh, her sighs like a breeze sweeping over a sandbank, and “wish that Amalia was my grandmother, too.”

But change had come, inevitably. He had seen it from a distance, like the dorsal fin of shark, circling him in tightening spirals.

Daisy and Richard drove on a long street that curved like a sickle. On the left were rows of palms and

beyond them, the sea. It glittered in the sunlight, but was smooth, like glass. On the right were large houses that had been converted into apartments. The terracotta tiles sat atop the homes. The street was empty except for a lone man carrying a book bag, walking in the middle of the road. They stopped at the end of the sickle, at a house with an arched doorway and exposed cinderblocks for walls.

“*Aquí estamos,*” Daisy said, and she pulled into the driveway of the house on Calle Madero. “Give me a little call when you get a chance.” She pushed a paper square into his pants’ pocket, her fingers lingering inside for a moment. Richard imagined her resting on a bed, with a fistful of dollars in her manicured hand and what that might mean to a *jinetera*-taxi driver like Daisy—a new pair of shoes, a DVD player, passage on a makeshift raft fashioned out of the chassis of a Volkswagen and rubber tires. He left the taxi that smelled like sugar and thanked his driver.

Richard knocked on the door and a woman he did not know answered.

She was somewhere around fifty, Richard guessed, but couldn't be sure. So far, everyone he had met in Cuba was younger than they looked. There was something aging about thinness. The angularity of the faces, of the arms, reminded him of skeletons, of graves. The woman wore a tight, blue t-shirt, with the word ATHLETE in bold red letters across her chest. She had an equally tight pair of blue jeans and only a smudge of red lipstick on her mouth. Her dark curls were in a ponytail, streaked with gray, wiry hairs that stood attention on her head.

"Ricardito?" she asked. Richard said nothing. He had assumed he was at the wrong home and wished that Daysy hadn't driven away so fast.

"Sí," he said and suddenly found himself in a tight embrace. The woman had her arms around him. She was taller than he was, and his face was crushed against the sharp bones of her chin.

"Your *abuelita* has been waiting for you. Waiting and waiting and I said you wouldn't come, but here you are."

Richard found himself looking past the woman, to the walls painted pink and the portrait that hung over the television set—of Richard as a baby, a black and white painted over in pastels. He was wearing a cowboy hat and spurs, and in his hand was a tiny lasso. Richard had no memory of the photo session.

"Can I come in?" he asked quietly and fought the urge to clean the lipstick he could feel on his face. The woman reached a hand over and did it for him, rubbing his skin hard.

"Clear, clear," she said and stepped aside. "My name is Luísa Cristo de Redondo. I'm your third cousin's stepdaughter." She ticked off the lineage with her fingers. "And I take care of your grandmother. *Ay*, she is *muy grave*."

Grave. It was what people said when the end was near. Gra-veh. The word alone was like lead, thudding to the ground horribly. Richard wished Luísa Cristo de Redondo hadn't said it.

"Come, follow to me, cousin," Luísa said in English. Richard

dropped his giant duffel bag (which Luísa had eyed voraciously as soon as he dragged it behind him) and followed her through a small living room, past the built-in that held the ancient television and the shelves of knickknacks. There were plastic daffodils in a blue vase, shiny and yellow, a brass lamp with a fiber optic cascade of lights spinning slowly to the tune of "Raindrops Keep Falling on my Head," there was a porcelain ashtray in the shape of a catcher's mitt, a tiny Siamese cat made of clay, a cake topper bride and groom, their white outfits turned to a dingy, mustard color—enough to fill several Orlando garage sales and church bazaars.

Amalia's room came suddenly, flanked by a small, blue bathroom and another bedroom that was Luísa's. The smell of candles burning preceded it, wafting its way to Richard. In the instant he had smelled it he recalled the candle, a tall glass votive with a picture of the Virgin Mother painted on, her heart aflame in the center. He saw it burning, smelled it, heard it crackle lightly in the caverns of his memory.

Richard thought he had forgotten, but slowly the island was coming back to him, in tiny waves.

Her room was dark but for the religious candle. Amalia wore a hospital gown, speckled with blue boomerangs. Her hair was dutifully dyed brown; the curls limp against her head, against the pillow. She was thin, but for a loose bag of skin around her stomach, that fell over to the side when she stirred. Her eyes were closed. In her ears she wore the gold hoops of Richard's youth and they dangled too low. Richard stepped into the gloom.

"¿Abuela?" He came to her bedside and sat uncomfortably on the arms of a child's rocker that sat there like a museum piece. It creaked under his weight.

Amalia's eyes opened and her fingers twitched.

"¿Abuela?" Richard asked again. Again, a twitch, but the eyes were fixed on the window, its panes hidden by shutters, peeling with white paint. The light came through like darts. *I am too late*, he thought. *Helen was right. I've come home to a shell.*

"Are you hungry?" Amalia asked, suddenly, and Richard jumped, startled. The kiddie rocking chair squealed.

"¿Abuela?"

"Yes, yes, it's me, quit asking," she said, and turned her head to face him. "I'm glad you are here. Are you hungry? Have you eaten? Luísa can make you a little *guayaba con queso*. ¿Quieres?"

"I've come for you. To say..."

Richard stopped. In his throat was a fist, flexing and forcing the tears.

"Sí, sí, to say goodbye. We'll do that later. But first, eat. Luísa! Luísa!" Amalia shouted then and her voice shook the figurines outside. Luísa came into the room slowly, not bothered by the shouting, her walk languid, cat-like.

"Bring my boy something sweet to eat. He likes sweets." Luísa nodded and patted Richard's head, as if he were still the child in the portrait, the cowboy in his spurs.

The fist hadn't gone away, but Richard could now look at his grandmother without feeling the jerking strings that were pulling his eyes down, away, away, out of memory. He caught a wetness in

Amalia's own eyes, that soon gave way to syrupy tears that stained her pillow. Luísa came in with the guava, "I'm sorry, *primo*, there is no cheese left this month. But the *guayabita* is really good," she said, set it in a napkin, and gave it to her cousin. Then Luísa left, with another ruffle of Richard's hair.

"Well," Amalia said at last, the tears gone. "There are some things we need to talk about." Richard leaned forward, his hand now in his grandmother's. It was a hand that had spanked him, had taught him to tie his boots, had made the sign of the cross on his head through fevers, and had fished an American penny he'd found on the street out of his throat when he choked on it. Richard expected to hear something about his father, perhaps, or how he might help the rest of the extended family (the Esteveses in Cienfuegos, the Redondos in Perico, the Acostas in Havana), or how she wanted to be buried.

Amalia cleared her throat and began, "Do ju want to no a see-crat, hmm, hmm, hmm," the song now a whisper.

"What?" Richard asked, the wave cresting.

"I'll tell you a story. A story about the hundred fires." Amalia sat up in bed and the smell of food stirred with her. She waited for Richard to push himself into the rocker more firmly, waited until he was comfortable. "There was a tiny church that sat just down the road, in the days when Spain's flag flew over the towns on this island." Her voice gained strength as she spoke. "And in the church was a priest, a Padre Pedro, a short man. *Ay*, so short, he could barely see above the altar." Amalia laughed softly, and then coughed and heaved. Outside, a seagull squawked.

"Yes, short. But such a voice that it made the lamps that hung from the rafters swing. He liked to say, 'God will come, is coming. Can you hear him?' he asked, because the thunder outside was sounding louder and louder, like God's music. *Las viejitas* waving their Spanish fans would faint in the aisles, I tell you. Then there was a boom!" Amalia raised both arms over her head, covering her ears as if the sound was real. She paused.

Richard leaned closer. He was in it now, like the old days, when Amalia told him about pirate ships for the first time, lost in the story. He thought he could feel the pew beneath him, the splinters in his thighs, the darkness of a candlelit church. There were colors before his eyes, trapped in his grandmother's hair like bits of confetti, like light from a stained glass window.

"It was lightning, *mi amorcito*, and it set the steeple on fire. But that isn't the best of it, no, no. You see, the moment the lightning struck, the blind nun sitting at the organ, the one who could play without sight, could suddenly see the ivory keys. And the young woman from Santo Domingo, at the back of the church, who was carrying a dead baby in her belly, a dead thing that was killing her from the inside out, felt the child stir. And you won't believe this, Ricardito." She stopped again, her lips twitching in anticipation. "Padre Pedro grew a whole foot when the fire began. Sprung up like a bean plant."

Luísa stumbled in at that moment. "There are people here to

see you, aunt Amalia." She was out of breath and on tiptoe, like a child at Christmas.

"Ay, but no one ever visits," Amalia said and slumped down under the bedcovers. She coughed again, into her shirt, and shivered.

"I know. They must have heard that Ricardito was back." Luisa was smiling.

Richard turned quickly and the rocking chair's cane back punched out of place. *How many people had Luísa called in just a few minutes?* he thought. "Why do they want to see me?" he asked.

"Because you were a baby when they saw you last. And because they love you still," Luísa said.

"And I have a wallet full of American dollars?" Richard thought, hearing Helen's voice in his head.

"*Bueno, apúrate.* Don't be rude, Ricardito." Amalia turned over in bed and faced the window shutters again. "I'll finish the story later."

Richard went into the living room reluctantly. He was embraced on all sides by cousins. He had heard of them from his parents and there they were—young, old, papery like

the pages of a novel. Cynicism fell away and he spent the afternoon there, huddled in the living room. They asked him about America and he emptied his duffel bag for the relatives. He took their pictures and held a pair of baby twin cousins (the grandchildren of his mother's best friend). Richard promised to visit them all, helped Luísa pass out more of the meager *guayaba* slices, told them about his "beautiful, blonde American wife" back in Orlando. They asked him if he remembered, and he said, "*Sí*, of course I do," and felt he was telling the truth, so long as he could smell his grandmother's candle.

They left in the evening. Most of them found their way to Amalia eventually, asking, "*Ay, vieja*, has it come to this?" and then whispering to Luísa in the doorway about Amalia's condition, "*Tan grave*, poor woman."

Richard was tired but did not want sleep. He thought of calling Daysy, the taxi driver. He sat on the sofa and fingered the scrap of paper with her name on it. She would be warm to touch, warm like fever, and

he would kiss her and her teeth would melt in his mouth like sugar cubes. Richard rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands.

"Ricardito," Amalia called from the bedroom. The candle was almost out. Richard stood in the doorway and sighed. "You are tired," she said, diagnosing him like she used to, when she'd press her cheek to his own and announced his fever in Celsius, loudly, accusing his mother of making him sick.

"Sit down. I've got a story to finish." She was angry that she had lost his attention for so many hours.

Richard sat and took her hand again, "Of course, *abuela*. Tell me."

Amalia smiled, sat up again and coughed. Richard waited for her to catch her breath, squeezing her hand as if it might be her lungs, pumping it with life.

"News of what had happened at the church spread and people came with torches to capture some of the fire, to take it home. You see, they wanted a little bit of miracle for themselves. Who doesn't?" Amalia coughed again. When she spoke at last, her voice was weaker. "And the people of this town started a

hundred fires that night. One hundred! Can you believe it?"

Richard imagined a city burning. He saw himself carrying a torch to his subdivision in Orlando and setting fire to all of the houses with their Doric columns and speckled brick. He saw the members of the homeowner's association trying to douse the conflagration with puny garden hoses, and he imagined that the flames would heat Helen's body and soften her, like gold under fire.

"Did they get their miracles? Were they cured of their illnesses?" Richard asked in a whisper of his own, hoping that they had, that the fires had worked their magic.

"No, *m'ijo*, of course they didn't."

He hadn't wanted to cry in front of her, but he couldn't stop himself. He had missed her so much, missed the stories, the rhythms of life on the island. Richard had forgotten how much he had longed for it. He wiped his nose on his shirt collar, a little boy again.

"So that's the story? A hundred fires. *¿Cien fuegos?*"

"*Sí, mi vida.*"

Richard knew that the town was named after some Spaniard who'd

had money, skill with a bayonet or some such thing. Though how that gentleman got his own fiery surname was a great mystery. Amalia had told a lie and Richard understood that there were no pirates, no giant crickets, no Spanish treasure. No hundred fires. He'd always known it, but hadn't really considered it before. They weren't real. Not like sickness was, or death, or a string of lost years.

"Do you believe me?" Amalia asked and brought her hands to his face. She looked at him and Richard felt loved, wholly and tenderly.

"Of course, *abuela*."

"Good," she said in return and turned her head away.