JOSEFINA LEYVA

OPERATION PEDRO PAN

THE EXODUS OF CUBA'S CHILDREN

TRANSLATED FROM SPANISH

BY

DEBORAH A. DOUGHERTY

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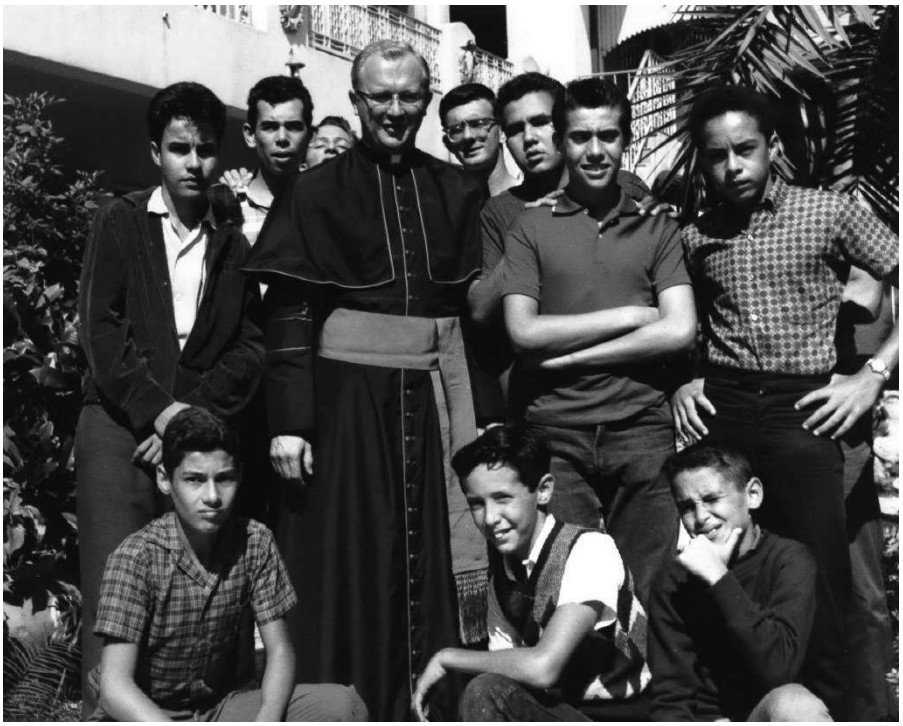
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CUBAN CHILDREN WAITING IN LINE TO EMIGRATE



FATHER BRYAN O. WALSH AND CUBAN CHILDREN

To the mothers of the Pedro Pans, who risked everything to ensure their children's freedom. And to those who cared for them in the United States, whose guidance and support nurtured their dreams and successes as Cuban-Americans.

Josefina Leyva and Deborah Dougherty

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PROLOGUE

In December 1960, a small group of the remaining members of the North American Chamber of Commerce in Havana, Cuba returned to the United States. Those North American businessmen had numerous friends on the island; friends who chose to remain in their homeland, steadfast in their hope of reestablishing democracy by overthrowing a government that was trending toward a dictatorship with Marxist tendencies. Even so, they wanted to save their children by sending them somewhere safe. Some had already sent them to live with family or friends in Miami. However, many found themselves with no one who could care for their children.

By the end of November of that same year, some of the North American businessmen lead by Mr. Jim Baker, Director of the Ruston Academy in Havana, came to me at the Catholic Welfare Bureau in Miami. Unfortunately, few people had such contacts. I understood the need to implement a program to care for the unaccompanied children who were arriving among the tens of thousands of Cuban refugees inundating Miami. The Eisenhower administration had promised to provide funding for just such a program. This was how I could offer my assistance to the Chamber of Commerce group. If they sent the children to Miami, the Catholic Welfare Bureau would care for them until they could return to Cuba or until their parents could join them in exile. We were even able to place protestant or Jewish children with agencies allied with their own faiths. Jim Baker returned to Cuba determined to work toward this goal.

The evening of December 24, I received a phone call from an agent at the U.S. Department of State, Mr. Frank Auerbach. His message was simple: the U. S. government was ready to permit two hundred unaccompanied Cuban children entrance into Miami. However, a non-governmental agency would have to take responsibility for them. He needed an immediate response, so I had no time to consult with my Bishop. I said yes. And at that very moment a process began to unfold that would influence the rest of my life.

On January 3, 1961, the United States severed diplomatic relations with Cuba, making it impossible for Cubans to obtain a visa to enter U.S. territory. A few days later, Frank Auerback called me from Washington to tell me that the Department of State would accept a letter signed by me in lieu of a visa. Such was the beginning of the famous Visa Waiver that allowed the Catholic Welfare Bureau to sponsor the passage of Cuban minors to the United States.

The first Cuban children arrived the twenty-sixth of December 1960. The last, the twenty-second of October 1962, the beginning of the Cuban Missile Crisis or the "October Crisis." Those children, their children, and even their grandchildren remain a part of my life even today. In truth, there are fourteen thousand stories to tell. Relying on the testimonies of just some of those fourteen thousand refugee children, and of some of the adults who helped them, Josefina Leyva tells their stories. They are filled with nostalgia for their homes, the difficulties they faced, the kindness they received from strangers, the misunderstandings caused by linguistic and cultural differences, their adaptation to a new way of life and how they adapted once again when they returned to the bosom of their families when at last their parents arrived.

The "Pedro Pan" children forged their lives in this remarkable land we call the United States. They are Cuban-Americans, but they have never lost their love of their homeland, the "Pearl of the Caribbean." Some have made the pilgrimage back, searching for the street where they lived and the home they vaguely remember. They were shocked by encounters with the places of their childhood, noting how much smaller everything seemed than how they remembered it.

In exile, they have seen their children grow and become adults. Some of the "Pedro Pan" children are now grandparents. Others have passed away here in the United States. Many have buried their parents in this foreign country that now feels like home, although they will always be strangers within its borders. Many have achieved great things in this adopted land. The majority has settled in and become a part of the great American experience as members of the middle class. They see their own children and ask themselves if they would be able to send them

into exile if circumstances repeated themselves. Now middle-aged, they ask themselves how their parents could have made such a torturous decision. Since they always felt protected as children, many have never fully understood the choices their parents were forced to make, or the risk and sacrifice it all represents. Josefina Leyva's stories recreate life in Cuba as it was during the early 1970s, and offer some answers.

How did this come to be called *Operation Pedro Pan*? It was important from the very beginning that we in Miami avoided anything that could jeopardize the exodus, or the people in Cuba who worked to make it possible. We were never under the illusion that the Cuban government was unaware of what we were doing, nor that any publicity could easily have been used as propaganda to provoke some reaction. Therefore, we remained silent. Inevitably the Miami press discovered what was going on. When they came to me looking for a story, I told them the truth; but I asked them not to report it. The press cooperated and gave our work the code name *Operation Pedro Pan*, perhaps because the first unaccompanied Cuban child who arrived in Miami under our protection was named Pedro Menéndez.

Family or friends took in approximately half of the children who arrived. We placed the rest in foster homes or in orphanages spread across thirty-five different states. The majority of the children stayed for four years. When the "Freedom Flights" began in December 1965, their parents were given first priority by both governments to come to the United States. Some children remained in our care until adulthood; there were some whose parents never came. Others felt the separation was too much and they returned to the Island of their own accord.

Operation Pedro Pan opened the door to the United States for more than fourteen thousand unaccompanied children. Under the 1965 accord, only those Cubans who had close family members in the United States could come to this country. Perhaps this accounts for the one hundred thousand Cubans who clung to this hope and embarked on the "Freedom Flights" that departed Cuba for Varadero. Still now, in 1993, middle-aged Cubans in possession of a Visa Waiver ask me if it will still allow them to

enter the United States. For them, it is too late; the Visa Waivers ended with the Missile Crisis in October 1962.

Monsignor Bryan Walsh

CHAPTER 1

"**S**ara, my brother René just killed himself at the police station where he was being held." The ardent voice of Manolo Ray, Minister of Public Works for Fidel Castro's government, rang through the telephone and struck Sara del Toro's fierce consciousness like a bolt of lightning.

"They must have killed him!" she gasped. "I just saw him. They were going to release him to me tomorrow!"

"How did he seem to you?" asked Ray, doing his best to control his emotions.

"He was fine; relieved that he was being sent here for house arrest" responded Sara. She said good-bye to Ray, dropped the phone and ran through the sprawling living and dining rooms to find her husband on the terrace at the far end of the first floor. Five of their children clamored around him; beautiful, mischievous youngsters. He is kneeling and they are climbing all over him, full of the joyful exuberance of their happy home.

"Amador! They've killed René Ray at the police station where Amejeiras is!

"Weren't you just there?" Amador Odio stand up smoothly, still balancing one of the children on his shoulders, and looks at his wife with alarm.

"Yes! And they must have killed him! He was completely fine—excited because tomorrow they were going to bring him here to our house since we were going to be in charge of his house arrest." Sara recalls the youthful image of René Ray, whom she had seen just minutes ago. Her maternal eye envisions him—a slim, happy youth of medium height with his dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, dressed as the guerilla he had been in the mountains of Sierra Maestra. He had served there in the Rebel Army lead by Fidel Castro against the government of General Batista.

"Who killed him, Amador? Ifigenio Amejeiras's deputy told me his chief wasn't there, and that tomorrow he was going to release René to me himself," says Sara, a graceful woman with salon-styled hair, wearing a beautiful, ruffled beige dress and a strand of pearls.

"Fidel Castro has to be involved if the Chief of Police, Amejeiras, did it," responds Odio. He sends the children to play out on the terrace, straightening to his full height. His ruddy complexion shines against his gray hair. His broad forehead and handsome, masculine features take on a serious, yet loving, expression giving him an air of staid elegance.

Amador and Sara—true friends as well as husband and wife—exchange looks, shocked by the tragic event. For both of them, the heroic prestige of Fidel's image is unraveling like a beautiful fabric un-knit by its maker's hand.

A while later, on route to the *Caballero* funeral home located in the center of Havana, Sara del Toro and Amador Odio talk, their concern over René Ray's suspicious death mounting. It is the uneasy month of March 1959, and just two months ago Fidel Castro assumed political control of the nation.

"Could Fidel be turning into a dictator? Could this be his first assassination?" wonders Amador, although he is little prone to doubt and inclined toward decisiveness. This time, however, he seems unwilling to give up the hope that Castro has brought to the nation. "Maybe René argued with Amejeiras, and he killed him in a rage. Maybe Fidel didn't know," he tells himself, wanting to believe it.

Amador and Sara enter the funeral home with the uncertainty of these questions hanging over them. They offer their condolences and embrace their friend, the Minister of Public Works, with whom they had conspired against Batista.

The atmosphere at the funeral belies the incongruity of the situation that led to it. The question as to whether René killed himself or was assassinated hovers over those who are paying their respects like a furious swarm of wasps over children on a playground. It is obvious that Minister Ray's grief stems not only from having lost his brother, but also from the suspicion that he was the victim of a crime. A few feet away, a stranger with thick glasses and a mustache murmurs about the event:

"They say they arrested René because he wouldn't give Fidel a hundred-thousand dollars that he brought down from Sierra Maestra where he was responsible for administering the Rebel Army's civilian funds."

"But that's not the whole story," whispers a young, attractive woman. "They say that René told Fidel that he had turned that money over to the Treasury Department, where it was supposed to go.

"René was high up in the Expropriations Department and he resigned," comments an elderly man, exhaling smoke from his cigar. "Could he have argued with Fidel?"

"He was Commander Amejeiras's prisoner. And he's one of the worst, even if he is the Chief of Police," murmurs a woman. But she had sympathized with Batista so no one paid attention to her next assertion: "You know he's a low-class marihuana fiend."

"René had written about his time at Sierra Maestra," explained a young man with intense eyes. "It seems that Fidel didn't like the book because René was anti-communist."

"What does that have to do with his death?" asks the elderly man who had spoken earlier. "I've never heard anything as absurd as that! There are no communists in this government, and Fidel isn't even remotely communist!

"It's a shame," chimes in a man dressed in a dark suit, obviously intended to resemble Fidel Castro. "Men become heroes for getting used to killing. Then later, when they're in power, there's no stopping them."

"And Manolo, what's he going to do now? Continue on as the Minister and keep his mouth closed, or denounce Fidel?" adds a heavy woman who viewed life in imperious mathematical terms.

The Odios had not known René very well. They had contacted him just to help Manolo who asked them to request his brother's transfer to their home. Now they were beginning to think the Minister had attempted the transfer as a last resort to save his younger brother's life. Sara and Amador were convinced of Ray's trustworthiness. He had proved his integrity working side-by-side with them in the plot against Batista. They cannot conceive of René being capable of robbery. And in their heart of hearts they are sure that René delivered the money Fidel asked him to—and to where it belonged, the Treasury Department.

"Manolo, Fidel is here," someone tells Ray. The Minister furrows his brow, evidently bothered by having to endure a visit from his all-powerful Prime Minister, now in charge of the country

by virtue of public fascination and his charming image as a romantic guerrilla.

"You go and talk to him, Sara. Try to get him out of here quickly. I don't want to see him," Ray tells Sara del Toro who is ever ready to act decisively without a moment's hesitation. She sets off, determined to help her friend, never stopping to consider whether her resolve might harm her in Fidel's eyes if he is involved with this death. Sara arrives to greet the Prime Minister. Her sure step and her candid smile immediately communicate to any onlookers a complete absence of duplicity. Those present at the funeral turn to watch her greet, with the confidence inspired by this openness, the man adored as an idol by the people of Cuba. Fidel stands before her, striking in his olive green uniform, his dark eyes ablaze with the light of prophecy. The magic of his charisma surrounds him, like a religious icon encased in glass. At his waist hang a pistol and bullets, intended ostensibly to defend against any political coup. His black, unkempt beard frames a Grecian profile, giving him the desired messianic look of Jesus Christ and the *mambises* who had waged wars of independence in Cuba a century ago against Spain's colonial power. Fidel's armed guards surround him, looking in all directions as they move about the funeral home. There is a cluster of people without uniforms around him as well who, although people don't know it yet, are an essential part of his guard.

Fidel's hand is strong and smooth as he clasps Sara's slender fingers. As she meets his sharp gaze, she notes an unexpected change, watching the prophetic light of his intense expression dissolve into the coldness of that of a bird of prey. Images of Fidel flash through Sara's mind: the first time she met him in person, just down from the Sierra Maestra at the agricultural festival outside of Havana. At the time, he recalled that his brother Raúl had been engaged to one of Amador's nieces who lived in Santiago de Cuba on the southeastern-most point of the Island where they were from. He also remembered that Amador was the owner of the largest transportation company in the country, started with a single truck and in partnership with a friend. Fidel had called Amador to offer him the position of Minister of Transportation early in his government, but Odio had turned down

the offer in order to avoid any conflict of interest with his highly successful company. "I have a lot of money, Fidel, and people will say that I stole it from the government," he responded frankly. "No. Thank you, but I won't be your Minister. But you can count on me to back you in any way I can." Sara remembers the raffle she organized at the long abandoned *Mazorra* mental hospital when Fidel named her its chief benefactress. Her efforts were supported by the ladies of Havana's high society, still under Fidel's messianic spell as the country's redeemer. They raised more than forty thousand Cuban pesos, which were still equal to the dollar, to repair and transform that depressing and gloomy place.

"How are your children, Sara?" Castro asks her in his role as the thoughtful friend, complete with flawless manners and an exaggerated expression of respect for the dead, in which he is currently immersed.

"My children are well. They remember you fondly," replies Sara, struggling to expel her new image of Fidel as a possible assassin and return to her image of him as a hero.

"Your son, Jorge Carlos, is going to be the ring-bearer at my sister Emma's wedding. She asked me to see if you would host her pre-wedding party at your estate. I told her of course you would agree because you are such good revolutionaries. Yes, marvelous revolutionaries!" repeats with characteristic emphasis the man on whose every word and gesture all of Cuba hangs.

"We would be honored to host it," replies Sara, forcing herself to recall her first image of Fidel as a great nationalist leader and reformer: the man the country needed to fix its widespread political and administrative corruption. "He's a rebel, like me," Sara tells herself, remembering her own cracked ribs, suffered during a protest against the Machado dictatorship nearly thirty years ago when she was still just a girl. She also remembers one morning in her childhood when a school friend dared her on the playground, "I bet you won't walk along the edge of the roof!" Sara climbed onto the terraced roof and when the mayor of Santiago de Cuba saw her slender outline walking at the edge of the abyss, sent an urgent message to her mother: "Principal, one of the girls at your school is walking on the roof. She is going to fall

to her death." "It must be Sara," guessed her mother, running out to save her. "Fidel is just like me, fearless," thinks this determined woman, her empathy with her admired leader fully restored.

Fidel again takes her hand, and with the same audacity that propels him past any obstacle put in his path, he goes in search of Manolo Ray who receives him with an expression of complete disgust. Fidel searches his Minister's face with his penetrating gaze, and exits the funeral home, surrounded by the protection of his bodyguards.

"No! Fidel can't be an assassin!" thinks Sara del Toro, the pendulum of her doubt swinging to the other extreme with the passion of her natural vehemence. "René must have killed himself, even it seems unlikely!" and she walks back to her husband, Amador, to share with him her conclusion.

CHAPTER 2

René Ray's death weighed as heavily on Sara del Toro's mind as a shackle on a raw ankle. Nevertheless, she found herself compelled to hide her inner turmoil and feign a celebratory mood for the pre-wedding party in honor of Emma, one of Fidel Castro's younger sisters. The party had been planned before René's death, and was about to begin at *Hurra!*, the beautiful country estate owned by the Odio family just outside of Havana. "Maybe René really did kill himself," thought Sara, refusing to believe that Fidel Castro, the leader Cuba had so suffered to bring forth, could be an assassin. The scandal the Great Leader had unleashed in the press, accusing René of embezzling funds from the Rebel Army, had convinced nearly everyone since Fidel's word carried with it a sort of moral authority.

Amador Odio, an energetic man accustomed to mobilizing and leading others in his many projects, walked among the fourteen servants employed at his country home giving orders so that everything would be perfectly elegant. Later, Amador would mingle with the guests, the majority of whom had come from Mexico to attend the wedding of one of their compatriots to the Prime Minister of Cuba's sister. Flutes of the finest Baccarat crystal balanced on silver trays as the celebratory champagne was served. "And even if Fidel did kill him, it's not Emma's fault. She is good and sweet, charming and refined. Yes, Emma deserves this celebration," thought Sara to herself as she watched her husband mill about.

Fidel Castro had not yet arrived at the party; nor had his brother Raul, recently married to Wilma Espín, a guerrilla from Sierra Maestra who had graduated with a degree in chemical engineering. Also missing was Lina, the matriarch of this unusual family. Of the Castro family, present only was Juanita, whom Sara admired for her frankness and spontaneity.

A banquet of traditional Cuban dishes is served, laid out on both sides of a granite barbeque forming a distinct horseshoe. A few steps away, wrought iron and glass tables lead to the pool, decorated with colored lights. Sweet, melancholy Cuban music

drifts from stone benches and leafy trees, controlled from an extraordinary, imported stereo system Amador had installed in the living room. The house is a two-story colonial with balconies and terraces. A few guests enter the bowling alley, admiring the pink granite floor. And the bride-to-be smiles at her good fortune. She stands excitedly at the brink of a new era, like her country for which all the traditional molds of legitimacy will be broken in order to mend old political evils. Cuba's high society has turned out at the Odio's country home, *Hurra!*, their attention to Fidel Castro's sister an expression of their unconditional support of the Revolutionary Government over which the Commander presides.

Sara and Amador's ten children enjoy the dazzling evening. César and Silvia, already grown and married, join in the dancing while the younger children amble about with their nannies, riding in their toy cars. As she smiles, jokes, and attends to her guests, Sara recalls the years of fighting against General Batista, spurred on by the desire to replace him with a true democracy, and the months when Aureliano Sánchez Arango, Minister of Education under Carlos Prío, the last constitutional president, hid in her house in Havana and conspired. Sánchez Arango had secretly come out of exile and entered the capital. One night, the police surrounded him, shot up Silvia's bedroom, and Aureliano had to jump from a balcony into the patio of one of Batista's army officials. As a gentleman and the Odios's neighbor, he showed him the door so that he could escape. "I am a rebel and a revolutionary," thought Sara "Amador, too. We're alike. That's why we're so good together." The days when they met in the bustling city of Santiago de Cuba stir in the recesses of her memory. Back then, in spite of his strong personality, Amador was afraid to approach her for fear that she would reject him. "He befriended my sister so he could figure out how to win me over. And I thought he was in love with her." Sara smiles at the memory. Since Amador does not like to dance, and given her natural chattiness, she seeks out a conversation with a guest to pass the time. Sara tells the woman that the school her mother had founded years ago in Santiago de Cuba was closed because she conspired against the dictator Machado in the early thirties.

"When Machado fell Tony de Varona, a member of the Student Board, came from Havana to look for my mother. He put her in charge of secondary education throughout the country. Amador came with him. He was nineteen when we married, and I was seventeen. He started with nothing and worked hard, driving trucks and building his business until it stretched across the whole country. He made his millions with hard work." Sara tells the story because silence and reflection do not come naturally to her. Silvia, her second daughter, comes looking for her and leads her to Emma. Sister of Fidel—whose charisma as a romantic warrior has crowned him leader of Cuba—Emma is tall, fair, beautiful and poised. She smiles at her Mexican fiancé, and is surrounded by more than a hundred guests from Mexico and Cuba's high society, the majority of whom are progressives at this moment in time. The elite support Castro's nationalism in a way comparable only to the wars of independence from Spain in 1868 when rich islanders fought for political power and defeated the Spanish troops that invaded Cuba. Faced with repression, those Cubans sacrificed everything in battles fought with machetes in the fields.

Suddenly, something like a premonition stirs in Sara's heart. She leaves her graceful and buoyant daughter, Silvia, and goes in search of her husband.

"Amador, what's going to happen to Cuba?" she asks.

"Whatever problems we suspect, we'll have to solve ourselves," he responds, spurred on by her admiration and the seriousness of her expression. "Sara, Fidel is moving toward a dictatorship, and we're going to have to begin to fight it!" Having believed in a promising future for their country, their outlook shifts and the two are gripped once again this night by uncertainty, swaying like a pendulum over an abyss.

Emma's exclusive wedding takes place two days later in Havana's eighteenth century Cathedral. This church, with its baroque exterior and a serene neoclassic interior, opens onto an old plaza filled with birds and shadows, flanked on all sides by colonial palaces with paved porticos supported by columns and arches. Havana's elite attend, demonstrating their support for Fidel Castro's restorative and profoundly reformist government. As of yet, they are unalarmed that the Maximum Leader is not

talking about convening elections as he had promised the revolutionary groups that supported him during the insurrection against General Batista. The intellectual and economic leaders of the country applaud his abolishment of prostitution and gambling that had flourished, as the previous regime's police looked the other way. They also support lowering rents, although doing so works to the detriment of many of them, worker protections that conflict with their own interests, and Agrarian Reform that plantation owners' sons support from the universities where they study. The country's rich thank Castro that now Cuba might have a voice in the world since this leader's genius had brought the country to the forefront of international protests against military dictatorships in Latin America. These privileged few hope, in addition, that Cuba will be the spiritual guide for Central and South America, now that it has unexpectedly shed its anonymity.

Amador Odio and Sara del Toro are among Cuba's progressive millionaires who enter the Cathedral arm in arm, where members of the Castro family await. The Odios see Raúl, elegantly dressed; and Lina Ruiz, mother of the two peasant brothers whose popularity has converted into living myths. Lina softens the plainness of her appearance with an expensive mantilla. The bourgeoisie congratulates Fidel and Raúl Castro, these upstarts who lead the progress of the nation day by day, and accepts them without reservation.

Emma arrives in a black Cadillac but Fidel, who is to give her away, has not yet appeared. The bride waits for him in the car, anguished by every tick of the clock. She waits and waits until finally she decides to walk down the aisle with someone else; someone hurriedly selected from among the guests. She enters, concealing her annoyance at her brother's betrayal, and walks to the alter where her groom awaits. Preceding her down the aisle are the ring-bearers: Jorge Carlos, one of Sara and Amador Odios's young sons and another boy, the son of Manolo Ray, the minister whose brother, even in death, is at the center of a scandal over supposed embezzlement. Organ music erupts in the Cathedral, redoubling the solemn atmosphere. As a beautiful soprano voice begins the traditional *Ave María*, Fidel enters the island's principal church, his muddy boots echoing and staining the carpet of the

center aisle. He arrives without a jacket or tie. The collar of his olive green military shirt is open and the belt that holds his pistol and ammunition weighs heavily on his strong hips signifying virility. His bodyguards surround him, dirty and in shirtsleeves like him. Sara and Amador see him arrive and hear the Cathedral doors close, in order to prevent any attempt on his life.

Ray, the minister who is at the center of a conspiratory situation in which the Odios are now implicated, whispers to Sarah, "I'm in grave danger here." Sara and Amador feel that Fidel, with his deliberately late arrival, his gun, his heavy footsteps and muddy boots, is insulting God, good-taste, the sanctity of marriage, tradition, and the people who support him. The people, who do not see this behavior, follow him—among other reasons because they think he is religious when they see the medallion of the Virgin of Charity that hangs around his neck, as strong as that of a Greek athlete.

"You're an animal, Fidel! Look at you, showing up like this!" whispers Sara, as if joking, feeling him pass by her. The Leader, masking his cynicism with humor, emits a guffaw that shatters the trills of the *Ave María*. It's like a vow that he will destroy this world that he hates because he feels left out, being the bastard child of a peasant family. Because, although he was educated by the Jesuits, he hates the God that made men unequal, even though he's drawn to the sides of the most disadvantaged. That is why he will bury God, in order to crown himself as the all-powerful god of the masses.

CHAPTER 3

"**S**ara! Save me a seat at your table. I'm on my way over!" Fidel Castro, an unexpected arrival at *El Carmelo* that darkly foreboding night in1960, greets Sara and Amador Odio, seated with Pelayito Cuervo, sub-secretary of the Department of the Interior. Sara, Amador and Pelayito look at one another, unnerved by the arrival of the Maximum Leader as they wait for Zurbarán, a Venezuelan diplomat, to pick up Pelayito and take him to the embassy for asylum. Pelayito has left his resignation in a drawer at his vice-ministerial office, and the three hold their breath wondering if Fidel has already found it and that's why he's hovering around, or if his appearance is simply a coincidence.

In this country, it's clear not only that Fidel has initiated a dictatorship, but that it is decidedly communist. He has established diplomatic and economic ties with the dreaded Soviet Union and all of its satellite countries. He has confiscated the assets of all foreigners in Cuba, including the telephone company. He has nationalized industries that were flourishing. He has made Agrarian Reform distinctly socialist. In addition, he has placed troops at the entrances of all Latin American embassies to arrest anyone who seeks asylum.

Amador Odio, quiet and serious when he's not fond of the company, looks around without saying a word. He, Sara and Pelayito Cuervo look at each other again, thinking about Fidel's inopportune arrival at this famous Havana restaurant that has always attracted rich, high-level politicians, intellectuals, dancers from the National Ballet, journalists and members of the social elite. "Fidel's a communist! Who could doubt it now?" Amador ruminates; and he feels that Fidel, this sly fox who is just beginning to show his Machiavellian tendencies, knows that he is conspiring to bring him down.

Meanwhile, the great leader's military escorts don't miss a beat. They have erupted into the spacious salon and fanned out; sniffing the air for any imminent attempt against their commander, ready to defend him with their lives. Devoid of even a hint of decorum, they begin to search the place as has become the custom

wherever Fidel appears. So, they look under tables and chairs, they inspect the walls, examine lamps and monitor those present, obviously trying to intimidate them. Outfitted in olive green pants and shirts with heavy belts bearing their pistols and ammunition, they carry in their agile hands the latest model sub-machine guns. They walk with arrogant strides, brazenly gloating over their power. They don't realize, unfamiliar as they are with history's violent turns, that their attitude and their actions represent a tragic return to a centuries old phenomenon that had been eradicated by western political progress—despotism, and its terrible consequences: intellectual slavery, human insecurity and Barbary.

"Fidel is here!" The news spreads from person to person throughout *El Carmelo*, filling the patrons who overflow the chattering tables with anticipation. Some hope that his ardent charisma will inspire them. Others are simply curious to see, for the briefest of moments, the man they have deemed a monster.

Extricating himself from the crowd of people who have surrounded him, hoping to hear his national and international prophecies or to touch him and feel his magnetism, like that of some religious icon, Fidel comes to the Odio's table and sits down with solemn and theatrical flair. His bodyguards stand around him, surveying every detail, looking for some presumed assassin among the well-mannered diners in the room.

"If Fidel knew that I have resigned and am planning to request asylum at the Venezuelan embassy, he would have had me arrested and made an example of me. It's very likely he would have had me shot," thinks Pelayito Cuervo, whose father was assassinated by general Batista's men the night of the assault on the Presidential Palace, March 13, 1956. That night, they arrested Amador and all of the employees of his company, *Shipping and Transport*, implicated by his friendship with Menelao Mora who had died leading that suicidal mission. César, Amador and Sara's oldest son, was also incarcerated that day. He was a member of the Civil Resistance Movement. That night, Commander Ortega, one of the Odio's neighbors, jumped the wall between their homes to warn Sara: "Run! Tonight they're going to kill Pelayo Cuervo and your husband, Amador." Terrified, Sara went to see Anselmo Alliegro, a minister who had been one of her mother's students.

He promised he would speak to Batista and save Amador's life. Pelayo Cuervo was hiding at a friend's house where they found him and killed him.

Taking a seat, Fidel asks Pelayo Cuervo's son, "How's your work at the Ministry going?" examining the fine features of Pelayito's face with his penetrating stare.

"Very well," responds the other, swallowing with some difficulty a spoonful of ice cream.

"Sara, I'm going to recite the names of your ten children, in order," announces Fidel, repeating the feat that had amused the Odio family the year before.

"Let's see."

"César, Silvia, Sarita, Any Laury, Mary Loly, Amador, Javier, Freddy, Jorge Carlos y Marianne."

"You've got the memory of an elephant!" responds Sara, masking the tension of the moment with humor. "You didn't make a single mistake!"

As Sara and Fidel continue to chat, Amador thinks to himself, "I have to get out to the street to tell Zurbarán to keep circling the block until Fidel leaves."

Castro glances with interest at Sara's Rolex watch, to which she responds: "Fidel, you're not going to take it away from me, you already have two!" pointing at his well muscled arm, hardened by exercise and shooting.

They laugh and Castro devours his ice cream. "Amazing," thinks Sara, "since he never eats anywhere these days. Amador wonders, "Is he eating with us in order to fool us? To make us think that he doesn't know we're conspiring against him?" Amador excuses himself and walks toward the restroom. On his way, he turns toward the sidewalk, walking between Castro's military and civilian guards. He stands there, awaiting Zurbarán's car. "Could he have left already? Maybe he thought we didn't show up," he wonders. And thinks, with neither fear nor regret, having carried out similar missions for many others: "If Fidel had found out that we were going to help Pelayito gain asylum tonight, he would have arrested all three of us, Pelayito, Sara and me." Finally, the car appears at the corner. Zurbarán himself is driving, implicating himself to the core in who knows how many