

Carmen
Miami, 2018

Jeanette, tell me that you want to live.

Yesterday I looked at photos of you as a child. Salt soaked, sand breaded, gap toothed and smiling at the edge of the ocean, my only daughter. A book in your hand because that's what you wanted to do at the beach. Not play, not swim, not smash-run into waves. You wanted to sit in the shade and read.

Teenage you, spread like a starfish on the trampoline. Do you notice our crooked smile, how we share a mouth? Teenage you, Florida you, Grad Nite at Epcot, two feet in two different places. This is possible at Epcot, that Disney tiny-world, to stand with a border between your legs.

Sun child, hair permanently whisked by wind, you were happy once. I see it, looking over these photos. Such smiles. How was I to know you held such a secret? All I knew was that you smiled for a time, and then you didn't.

Listen, I have secrets too. And if you'd stop killing yourself, if you'd get sober, maybe we could sit down. Maybe I could tell you. Maybe you'd understand why I made certain

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decisions, like fighting to keep our family together. Maybe there are forces neither of us examined. Maybe if I had a way of seeing all the past, all the paths, maybe I'd have some answer as to why: Why did our lives turn out this way?

You used to say, *You refuse to talk about anything. You refuse to show emotion.*

I blame myself because I know your whole life, you wanted more out of me. There is so much I kept from you, and there are so many ways I made myself hard on purpose. I thought I needed to be hard enough for both of us. You were always crumbling. You were always eroding. I thought, *I need to be force.*

I never said, *All my life, I've been afraid.* I stopped talking to my own mother. And I never told you the reason I came to this country, which is not the reason you think I came to this country. And I never said I thought if I didn't name an emotion or a truth, I could will it to disappear. *Will.*

Tell me you want to live, and I'll be anything you want me to be. But I can't will enough life for both of us.

Tell me you want to live.

I was afraid to look back because then I would have seen what was coming. The *before* and the *after* like salt whipping into water until I can't tell the difference, but I can taste it on your skin when I hold your fevered body every time you try to detox. Every story that knocked into ours. I was afraid to look back because then I would have seen what was coming.

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DANCE NOT BEYOND THE DISTANT MOUNTAIN

María Isabel
Camagüey, 1866

At six thirty, when all the cigar rollers sat at their desks before their piles of leaves and the foreman rang the bell, María Isabel bent her head, traced a sign of the cross over her shoulders, and took the first leaf in her slender hands. The lector did the same from his platform over the workers, except in his hands he held not browned leaves but a folded newspaper.

“Gentlemen of the workshop,” he said, “we begin today with a letter of great import from the esteemed editors of *La Aurora*. These men of letters express a warm fondness for workers whose aspirations to such knowledge—science, literature, and moral principle—fuel Cuba’s progress.”

María Isabel ran her tongue along another leaf’s gummy underside, the earthy bitterness as familiar a taste by now as if it were born of her. She placed the softened leaf on the layers that preceded it, the long veins in a pile beside. Rollers, allowed as many cigars as they liked, struck matches and took fat puffs with hands tented over flames. The air thickened. María Isabel had by then breathed so much tobacco dust she developed regular nosebleeds, but the foreman

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didn't permit workers to open the window slats more than a sliver—sunlight would dry the cigars. So she hid her cough. She was the only woman in the workshop. She didn't want to appear weak.

The factory wasn't large, by Cuban standards: only a hundred or so workers, enough to roll for one plantation a mile away. A wooden silo at the center held its sun-dried leaves, darkened, papery slivers the rollers would carry to their stations. Next to the silo, a ladder flanked the chair where Antonio, the lector, sat.

He cleared his throat as he raised the newspaper. "*La Aurora*, Friday, first of June, 1866," he began. "The order and good morals observed by our cigar makers in the workshops, and the enthusiasm for learning—are these not obvious proof that we are advancing?"

María Isabel picked through her stack of leaves, setting aside those of lesser quality for filler.

"... Just go into a workshop that employs two hundred, and you will be astonished to observe the utmost order, you see that all are encouraged by a common goal: to fulfill their obligations . . ."

Already a prickling warmth spread across María Isabel's shoulders. The ache would grow into a throb as the hours passed so that, by the end of the workday, she could barely lift her head. *To fulfill their obligations, to fulfill their obligations.* Her hands moved of their own accord. The bell would ring and she'd look at the pile of cigars, smooth as clay, surprised she'd rolled them all. She imagined the layers of brown melding into one another endlessly—desks becoming walls, leaves becoming eyes, and sprouting arms moving in succession until everything and everyone were part of the same physical poetry, the same song made of sweat. Lunchtime. She was tired.

A single dirt road in this town led past the factory's gate and continued on to the sugar plantation a mile down, both owned by a creole family, the Porteños. María Isabel walked this path home, one that snaked through the shadows and gave her brief reprieves from the punishing sun. She thought of Antonio's words: *Study has become a habit among them; today they leave behind the cockfight in order to read a newspaper or book; now they scorn the bullring; today it is the theater, the library, and the centers of good association where they are seen in constant attendance.*

True that since *La Aurora* had expounded the uncivilized nature of cock- and bullfighting, the number of participants had diminished. But it wasn't just the newspaper's recommendation that convinced them to give up blood sport. There were also preoccupations. Other workers talked about rebel groups rising up against Spanish loyalists. About men training in groups to join others headed west toward La Habana. María Isabel had been too hardened by her father's recent death, from a demonic yellow fever that consumed him within weeks, to notice at first, to care much. But then it was all anyone would talk about.

Though by the time rumors of guerrilla fighting had spread to their side of the island, so, too, had stories of infighting. Generals of the militias came and went, supplanted when their ideals became a liability. La Habana, with its manor after manor of Spanish families, looked toward the revolt with indifference, and it appeared more and more likely that the Queen would come down hard on any rebellion. For María Isabel, a scorching anxiety had long replaced those lofty early notions: *freedom, liberty*. She hated the unknowing. She hated

that her own survival depended on a shadowy political future she could hardly envision.

Home. María Isabel's mother sat on the ground, back against the cool mud of the bohío. Aurelia had returned from work herself, from the fields.

"Mamá?" María Isabel alarmed to find her in such a way, an unusual blush spreading up Aurelia's face to the tips of her ears.

"Estoy bien," she said. "Just faint from the walk. You know I am less and less capable."

"That isn't true."

Aurelia steadied herself with one hand to the wall.

"Mamá." María Isabel touched Aurelia's forehead with the back of her hand, which gave off such a stench of tobacco juice that her mother winced. "Stay out in the breeze and rest in the hamaca, won't you? I'll prepare lunch."

Aurelia patted María Isabel's arm. "You are a good daughter," she said.

They walked to a hammock knotted between palms.

María Isabel's mother, worn down by decades of loss, hard toil, nonetheless retained a certain elegance. Her skin was smooth, with hardly a line, her teeth neat rows unstained. After her husband's death, Aurelia had many callers, men with missing teeth and sun-weathered, papery skin who presented little in the way of wealth—a donkey, a small plot of mango and plantain trees—but offered care that she brushed off vehemently. "A woman does not abandon love of God, nor of country, nor of family," she'd said in those days, before the men stopped seeking her out. "I will die a widow, such is my fate in life."

But her mother grew weaker, María Isabel could see. Finding her daughter a suitable husband had become an aggressive devotion. María Isabel protested: she was happiest

in the workshop, in the fields, sweating over fire, peeling yucas and plantains and tossing them into a cast-iron cazuela of boiling water with her sleeves bunched to her elbows, catching pig's blood in a steel bucket to make shiny-black sausage, hacking open a water-pregnant coconut with two swings of a machete. True that cigar rolling was a coveted, respectable job—she'd apprenticed for nearly a year prior to working for a wage. Yet the factory paid her by the piece, half of what the men earned, and she was the only woman in the shop, knew the men resented her. They'd heard about this new invention, in La Habana—a mold that made it easy for almost anyone to roll a tight cigar—and feared María Isabel a harbinger of what would come: unskilled, loose women and grubby children taking their jobs for almost nothing. Suggested she might earn better keep “entertaining” the men herself. Took a greater share of her wages to pay the lector.

There were moments, like now, watching her mother lie red faced in the hammock through the window, when she pictured a world in which Aurelia wouldn't have to work, in which she spent her time caring for her mother instead of rolling tobacco with the men. And she knew with resignation that she'd say yes to any man who offered easier days. Such was her fate.

After lunch came the novels: Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, even William Shakespeare; *The Count of Monte Cristo*, *Les Misérables*, *King Lear*. Some were so popular with the rollers their characters became the names of cigars: the thin, dark Montecristo and the fat, sweet Romeo y Julieta, bands adorned with images of jousts and ill-fated lovers.

They were at the start of the second volume of *Les Misérables*, chosen by a vote of rare consensus after the lector

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had finished *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. The entire workshop had broken into applause at *Notre Dame*'s conclusion, for which Don Gerónimo, who ruled the workshop as though he were *Notre Dame*'s wicked archdeacon himself, reprimanded them. But the workers cheered when Antonio disclosed that he had in his possession a Spanish translation of yet another Victor Hugo novel, this one spanning five volumes about rebellion and redemption, political uprisings and the bonds of love, one that promised to move and enlighten before an aching conclusion.

This had been the least contentious vote in all of Porteños y Gómez's history. And now María Isabel spent the afternoons traveling far past the sugarcane fields and sea-salt-washed plantations to the hazy shores of France. In her mind, she walked the cobblestone streets of Paris, dipped her feet in the Seine, traversed the river's bridges and arches by carriage like a noble. She smoothed a gristly leaf between her lips, breath drawn in anticipation as police inspector Javert recaptured Valjean, the escaped convict. She thought of escape, of recapture. She thought of herself. Of what it would be like if someone wrote a book about her. Someone like her *wrote a book*.

“A person is not idle because they are absorbed in thought. There is visible labor and there is invisible labor.”

Antonio channeled Victor Hugo with fervor, as though their own labor, the rolling of tobacco, depended on his delivery. And in many ways, it did. María Isabel told herself that she, a young woman who ought to be home awaiting courtship, toiled in this sweltering factory because she'd been left an arid plot of land without a father or brother to provide. But she looked forward to each day, hungry for the worlds that opened as she hunched over her leaves, perfecting each roll and seal—news from the capital to which she'd

been only once, advertisements for slaves beside editorials bashing the practice as immoral and backward, announcements of scientific curiosities and denouncements of barbaric or dishonest plantation owners, travelogues from distant places she could barely imagine.

Also there were the gifts. She'd been on her way out and seen Antonio beside the foreman as Don Gerónimo read aloud the day's production and quotas. Antonio had tied his horse to a post and fixed a saddle on its back, something María Isabel had never seen but in La Habana, where the gentry did not ride bareback as in the countryside. That impressed her, and perhaps he'd mistaken her stare for something of another nature, because the next morning a strand of violet bougainvillea flowers lay on her rolling desk. And then, before Antonio began to read that day's news stories, he'd tipped his hat, looked her in the eyes, smiled.

She'd been afraid, of course—afraid that Don Gerónimo would see the flowers on her desk and call her out for indecency, perhaps garnish her wages or, worse, think her impious, increase his advances. Who knew what Don Gerónimo deemed permissible. His anger was of the untamable sort, unpredictable, without reason. He'd threatened her many times, once grabbing her by the back of the neck when she became distracted by a reading and slowed her rolls. He left finger-shaped bruises that lasted weeks. No man had defended her, not even Antonio. So she'd tucked the flowers down her collar. And in the evening, she'd shuffled out with her eyes to the floor, concerned that Antonio would look toward her once again and sure she would not know what to say.

But the gifts continued—a fragrant, ripe mango; an inkpot with its delicate quill; a tiny filigreed brooch forged of metal. She would find them hidden beneath layers of tobacco leaves and conceal them as best she could. She told no one

of the courtship and avoided Antonio's gaze, though at times he'd read an especially tender passage, and she would glance up for just a second, and always his eyes fixed on her.

And then she'd walked in one morning and there on her desk, unhidden: a book, its spine blue and rough to the touch, its pages a thin, smooth papyrus. She could not read the title, and she hid it beneath the ledge of finished cigars. María Isabel knew Don Gerónimo would think her presumptuous to bring a book to the workshop, accuse her of idleness, perhaps send her home, convinced a woman would never learn the strict norms required of labor. But she raced home for lunch, book tucked beneath her arm, and as she boiled yams over a wood fire, María Isabel fanned the smoke with its pages. When she was sure her mother wasn't looking, she traced the words, her fingers trailing the curves and abrupt edges of their shapes. It was like rolling tobacco, this need to follow the arcs and bends on the paper, to memorize the feeling. She hid the book beneath her bed.

When she met Antonio by his horse that afternoon, before he could say anything, María Isabel made her request: "If I could be so bold as to inquire, and forgive me the indiscretion, as to the title of the book you placed on—"

"What makes you think it was I?" Antonio's smile stretched his pockmarked cheeks. María Isabel instinctively gathered her skirt as though to leave.

But Antonio stopped her with a hand on her arm. "*Cecilia Valdés*," he said. "A novella. I did not know you cannot read. I should not have been so presumptuous. I hope you'll forgive me and accept a sincere assurance I meant no harm by it."

"Why did you give it to me?"

"I will probably sound trite in saying you embody the protagonist, Cecilia Valdés. Perhaps that is why I am drawn to you."

She did not know how to respond, so she only looked away and said, “I must get home before dark,” after which he’d asked her name.

“María Isabel, will you let me read to you?” he said.

“You mean to say outside the workshop?”

“It would be my greatest pleasure.”

She handed the book to him.

“Thank you for an offer so generous,” she said. “But I’m afraid I cannot accept.”

María Isabel had thought she was ready to accept, to fulfill her obligation. *Can one learn to fall in love with a mind?* She regarded the bull-necked lector. How amusing that men thought they could so easily know a woman. She would wait until she couldn’t.

Her mother was getting worse though. This she knew by a cough that doubled her over and shook her. Some evenings Aurelia so lacked an appetite that she retired early and left María Isabel to eat alone. And still her mother woke each day and prepared for her trek to the sugarcane fields. María Isabel pleaded with her, but Aurelia would work to the day of her death—and afterward if she could. This they both knew.

And then the war bled into Camagüey. Inevitable, she understood. Every year, *La Aurora* informed of more Cubans and fewer jobs; the economy increasingly concentrated on sugar, on plantations run on slave labor. Also in the paper: the abolition movement stronger each day, and Spanish taxation worse. She’d heard a wealthy plantation owner in Santiago freed his slaves and declared independence from Spain. She’d heard whispers of clandestine meetings. But she hadn’t expected the fight to reach *her* life so quickly.

María Isabel woke one night to the sound of boots crushing

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through vegetation and the light patterns of lanterns dancing on the walls. She peered out the window, careful to remain hidden as best she could, and made out dozens of men in the unmistakable blue-and-red of the Monarchy, their lapels bearing the colors of the flag. They carried muskets and swords, their faces drawn and weary, and she saw, faintly, what looked like dried blood on the breeches of some.

She couldn't sleep that night and clutched her body, heard the first far-off thud of a rifle, her mother waking across from her and coughing in fits all night. They spent two days like that, huddled in the shadow of their bed platforms, as though behind wooden shields. Cries and shots, metal hitting metal, men whose anguish echoed through the noise.

On the third day, Aurelia ran a fever, and María Isabel held her in her lap, wiping her face with a washcloth and whispering prayers to Nuestra Señora de la Caridad as her mother broke into cold sweats. On the fourth, the fighting stilled. Just as penetrating as the sound of sudden war had been, so, too, was the intensity of the quiet that followed, the stench of rot. They hadn't eaten in days, and so they rummaged through cans of sugared guava and fruta bomba and tomato they'd prepared months before, María Isabel spooning slivers into her mother's mouth as she lay supine. And when she was sure the silence persisted, María Isabel ventured out along the path she walked to work each day, now clogged with wisps of smoke, the smell of charred palm. She needed to find food. She needed to find her neighbors. In the distance, she could see fire, and she prayed silent gratitude it'd spared her home.

She walked and walked through the quiet, listening for other people, for signs of life. Only the rustling of sugarcane and saw grass answered her calls.

Then, as she made a turn toward the riverbank where she

did the wash each Sunday and bathed in the sun, she stumbled over what felt like a log anchored in the grass. She looked down and screamed.

A man, his open eyes to the sky and his mouth a permanent expression of disbelief, had his neck impaled by a sword, the pointed end emerging on the other side. Thick, coagulated blood pooled around his head and flies swarmed the wound. María Isabel looked up, past him, and saw it—a field of dozens of men just like him, left rotting in the heat, their innards and flesh unrecognizable, one giant mass of scorched meat, and as a final insult, a hog chomping through the remains, its face and teeth smeared in dark blood. She recognized the face of a fellow tobacco roller.

The grass quivered with María Isabel, oblivious to the carnage to which it bore witness. It began to rain and she stood there until a stream of red forced a jagged path to the river. Then she ran in her dress, torn and muddied and soaked, calling out to her mother as when she was a child, calling out to the giant unheeding span before her, and fell at the door of their home, her sobs heavy.

That night, her mother died.

Nothing was the same after the skirmish in Camagüey. Porteños y Gómez emptied to a third of its workers, the rest dead in the slaughter that had visited them or fleeing to la Florida, chasing rumors of tobacco factories offering refuge in exile. Don Gerónimo left, and Porteños, the owner of the tabaquería, began to oversee the work himself. The mood sobered, the readings changed.

On the first day back in the workshop, after the weeks of burials and rebuilding, Antonio took the lectern and announced that they would suspend the usual reading of *La*

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Aurora, as the rebellion had delayed its delivery to Camagüey. They would finish *Les Misérables* after the lunch hour, and they would begin another novel, one by a Cuban writer, that morning.

María Isabel could not bring herself to look up at him. She concentrated instead on each roll of the leaves, on making tighter and tighter bundles.

“*Cecilia Valdés*,” Antonio began, “by Cirilo Villaverde.”

Her hands shook. *Tighter rolls*, she told herself. *Tighter rolls*.

“To the women of Cuba: Far from Cuba, and with no hope of ever seeing its sun, its flowers, or its palms again, to whom, save to you, dear countrywomen, the reflection of the most beautiful side of our homeland, could I more rightfully dedicate these sad pages?”

Antonio’s voice carried the workers through that dismal morning. It spoke of the Spanish and creole social elite; love between free and enslaved Black Cubans; a mulata woman, her place in their island’s history. Even so, the author creole, an influential man. Not so unlike the other authors. After a lunch of hardened bread and bitter coffee, alone in her now empty home, María Isabel returned to hear a continuation of *Les Misérables*.

The days went by like this. Nightmares and crying fits gave way to tired collapse. And for whatever reason, possibly loneliness, possibly realizing she had no one left in the world, a month later she waited for Antonio and said, “I am not Cecilia Valdés.” And then, “I would be honored if you would read to me from any text.”

Once, as a child, María Isabel had accompanied her father to the city center of Camagüey to deliver baskets of a plan-

tation owner's coffee yield to a market vendor. She watched wonderstruck as wealthy Spanish families paced the city's promenade, the women with their parasols and flouncing petticoats of fine linen, the children playing with hoops and sticks, and carrying schoolbook bundles. At the market, she watched house slaves trail women and gather their purchases, how the Spanish women would point and the Black women would gather, their dresses more like the countryside smocks she was used to.

She'd asked her father then, pointing to her skin, "Where are the people like me?" He'd hushed her with a smack. Children did not speak their minds, he reminded her. Children did not ask, children answered. Children did as they were told.

Now she knew the answer. The mulata women were here, in these fields, some free and some not, some passing as creole and some hiding each time a Spanish governor toured a plantation. Some plantations kept slaves, and peasants who earned their keep on small plots of land tended others. For their own reasons, the peasants and slaves, the guajiro farmers and criollo landowners, they all hated Queen Isabel II.

In the final days of war, the reports through the provinces grew more and more dire: public executions, entire villages burned to the ground, formerly free Black farmers forced into slavery. People were hungry, famished. Disease spread and wiped out whole families, whole prisons filled with mambises fighters. Their heroes were dying. Cries for justice quieter by the day.

And still each day during lunch, for an hour, Antonio and María Isabel sat beneath the shade of banana leaves for reading lessons. Antonio read her poetry from Cuba's orators and political theory from European philosophers. Karl Marx, other men. They often debated. He taught her to spell her name, held a quill in her shaking hand as she formed loops and

curves over a small scroll, and though she could not decipher the letters, she saw in the marks a kind of art, a kind of beauty.

“I have a special reading,” he said one day. “Today, in the afternoon. A treat for the workshop.”

“You’ll not read from *Les Misérables*?” They were on the last volume, and its reading seemed the only event worth anticipating in those dark days when every sound of hooves brought fear of more loss.

“Yes, but first, a special reading.”

María Isabel was still the only woman in the factory, now shrunken. The other rollers were fathers and husbands but also children whose hardened demeanor belied their innocence, who smoked puros larger than their hands. María Isabel knew to count her blessings—some of these boys had also lost entire families, had grown into men over one bloody night, had woken up the guardians of younger siblings, bellies rumbling.

“Today brings a rousing announcement,” Antonio said from the lectern as the workers settled back to their desks. “One of our own great thinkers in exile in New York, Emilia Casanova de Villaverde—leader of the women’s independence movement and wife of the famed author of *Cecilia Valdés*—wrote to Victor Hugo. Our beloved señora Casanova de Villaverde informed señor Hugo of *Les Misérables*’ popularity in this, our tobacco workshops, that bring Cuba’s artisanship to the masses. She informed him of the lot our women begin to occupy—how their hands, too, have taken up the work of men as they seek to liberate our island. I have in my very possession, a translation of Victor Hugo’s remarks to his faithful admirer Emilia Casanova de Villaverde—and to you, the people of Cuba.”

A murmur overtook the workshop, and Porteños lifted

his head from his accounting desk on the second floor to note the disruption. But all were silent and attentive as Antonio unrolled a large scroll whose black ink filtered through the fibers in the light.

“Women of Cuba, I hear your cries. Fugitives, martyrs, widows, orphans, you turn to an outlaw; those who have no home to call their own seek the support of one who has lost his country. Certainly we are overwhelmed; you no longer have your voice, and I have more than my own: your voice moaning, mine warning. These two breaths, sobbing for home, calling for home, are all that remain. Who are we, weakness? No, we are force.”

María Isabel’s hands shook even more, and she tried to still them, tried to still her rage.

“Consciousness is the backbone of the soul. As the conscience is upright, the soul stands; I have in me that strength, and it is enough. And you do well to contact me. I will speak up for Cuba as I spoke up for Crete. No nation has the right to hammer its nail over the other, not Spain over Cuba nor England over Gibraltar.”

Antonio trailed off, and María Isabel looked up to see Porteños stomping across the overlook and down the stairs, his face red and sweaty, the workers silent as he grabbed the papers from Antonio and commanded him to read from *Les Misérables* and only from *Les Misérables*.

“You are to inform me immediately of a desire to deviate from the preordained readings,” he barked, his linen guayabera damp with perspiration. Everyone had feared Porteños’s arrival. Workers whispered that he’d broken the legs of an insouciant servant, that he knew about cigar factory strikes in the US and said he’d shoot anyone in his own workshop who dared complain.

“You are not to *incite* our workers with the imbecile ramblings of European artists with little understanding of the practical labor our good people perform!” Porteños yelled.

Antonio looked at the crumbled scroll in Porteños’s sun-spotted hand. He muttered what sounded like an apology, turning so that María Isabel could see only his back. Her hands trembled so fiercely now that the tobacco fillings scattered across her lap.

Antonio turned, spun the pages of the book on the lectern, adjusted his glasses. He read from *Les Misérables* as though no disruption had taken place. He didn’t look toward María Isabel once that day and rode off before she could meet him by his horse. And the words of Victor Hugo to Emilia Casanova de Villaverde reverberated through her that lonely night: *Who are we? Weakness. No, we are force.* She wished he’d read Emilia’s own words.

Each week, there were fewer and fewer rollers in the workshop until only two dozen remained. Some had grown ill from diseases that spread after the fighting—obvious as they grew sallow each day, as they stopped smoking because of the labored breath that followed. When they stopped showing up, María Isabel assumed they had died or grown so sick they could no longer work. Others continued to save their earnings to secure their place on the private ships and dinghies that trekked to Tampa. The war made trade difficult too. Fewer cigars made their way out of the eastern provinces, though demand did not cease.

Antonio took on a different tone—seeking the most uplifting news from *La Aurora* to highlight, the paper finally reaching them, and suggesting novels that detailed adventurous quests, dramatic romance. When *Les Misérables* con-

cluded, Antonio never mentioned Victor Hugo again. Voting stopped too. Now Porteños approved the readings, which Antonio spread across his desk each dawn, and María Isabel could sometimes hear whispered objections from Antonio quelled by a slammed fist on the table.

But at lunchtime, as they ate fruit and salted meat beneath their tree behind the workshop, Antonio shared his reserves. He read to her from Victor Hugo's second letter, printed in the paper—this one addressed to all the people of Cuba—in which he preached abolition and praised the Cuban rebellion against colonial rule, sending encouragement to the rebels whose numbers increasingly waned. Sometimes she cried at Hugo's words. More than once, Antonio gathered her as María Isabel shivered and shook in his warmth. She had found in Antonio a friendship she hadn't thought possible with a man, he of a gentler variety, seeming to relish in María Isabel the same spirit most sought to smother.

Behind the workshop, Antonio read to her from *La Aurora*, too. More and more each day, Porteños disallowed large portions of the lectors' newspaper in the factory. He was impartial to both sides of the war, but his were commercial calculations. Business was failing yet Porteños held on, sure that the Spanish would win, that resolution would come and, with it, a return to prosperity. So he held on, feigning loyalty to his gubernatorial overseers. And María Isabel began to realize why he censored *La Aurora*—the editors grew more alarmed at the repression overtaking the country each day. They denounced the tobacco factory owners who had banned the practice of lectorship as impeding the progress of culture, keeping workers calculatingly ignorant. Porteños determined to prove them right, she thought.

“They are careful not to write in favor of the rebels,” Antonio said to her. “But the intimation is obvious.”

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The day Antonio asked her to marry him, a storm of fat, thick rain surprised them beneath the tree, and they ran for shelter under the roof ledge of the workshop. No one was around—not even Porteños, who went home to the plantation for his meal. Soaked, she unfastened the pins in her hair and let her curls loose around her face. He raised a hand to a sodden lock, and she pulled away, unable to look at him. She knew he was enamored of her; that much was obvious. But they had never spoken of marriage, and though he knew there was no one to ask for her hand, she knew little of his family, of his plans. Increasingly she grew wary of his intentions, wondered whether he saw in her a passing amusement and little more.

He bent before her, holding his hat, his own hair glistening with rain. “I know I have little fortune to offer,” he said. “But I love you and promise I always will.”

She said yes though she meant *perhaps*; wedding vows had long ceased to signal escape. She said yes because she had nothing left, and a learned man seemed as hopeful a prospect as she could conceive. And she sensed that he, too, sought a conciliation through marriage. In María Isabel, Antonio had found a way to flee without lusting after other shores, had found a reason to feign a braver face each day. She knew and, despite the weight of it, accepted her role as liberator of a frightened man. María Isabel thought it had always been women who wove the future out of the scraps, always the characters, never the authors. She knew a woman could learn to resent this post, but she would instead find a hundred books to read.

-1— She moved in with Antonio’s mother, a widow, and his un-
0— married sister. They were kind to María Isabel, but she knew

they couldn't fathom why she continued to work. When she came home each afternoon to her mother-in-law rocking on the porch with a fan in her hand, María Isabel avoided her incisive stare.

But how could she explain that the workshop had become deliverance? That mending her husband's chemise or pound-ing boiled plantains in a mortar without words, all the words from the workshop, would beat her mind to submission?

She cried for her mother, for her father, for her own lonely self as Antonio slept. She reached for him and wondered if the temporary relief of warm hands to grasp her own, trem-bling, was love. And she whispered the words often for com-fort: *Weakness. No, we are force.* Now, they were her words.

The day the readings stopped was a sunny one, a bright one. Where she had struggled to see the leaves before her, that day a faint veil of light floated over each desk. The air was so thick, so humid, María Isabel barely needed to moisten her leaves.

She'd heard the mambises wore thin, that dreams of tak-ing La Habana faded. She'd heard of families disappeared, of martyred fighters, of generals exiled throughout North America. Peace was coming, she could feel it, though peace meant surrender, slavery, so many dead for nothing.

Antonio was reading from the permitted sections of *La Aurora*. Its editors grew more abstruse each issue—they never mentioned *freedom* or *uprising* or *war*. But they spoke of self-determination. They spoke of culture as a means of liberation. They criticized slave owners and urged abolition. They told the workers to hold on.

And the workers did. Each day they took their stations and nodded at one another, transmitted courage in furtive

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looks. They walked past the empty workstations and blessed them. They gave up more of their pay to the lector, knowing there were fewer of them; offered fruits and bread to the skinniest among them; placed thicker cigars and fuller offerings of rum before the saints in their homes. Antonio's words comforted.

“‘To Youth,’ a poem by Saturnino Martínez, in today's *La Aurora*.”

Oh! Dance not—Beyond the distant mountain
See how it appears
A fierce cloud which, blurring the horizon,
Announces a tempestuous storm is near.

The Spanish militia fighters did not make a large production of their arrival. A knock. Señor Porteños looking up from his perch. The workers met his eyes. He dashed down the stairs, wiped his face.

Three of them—slender, mustachioed men with handsome faces. They were there to deliver an official edict from the governor. The workers knew better than to stare, but María Isabel could see their rolling pause, could see how they all strained to hear.

Antonio folded *La Aurora* and placed it on the lectern as Porteños read the scroll before him and the soldiers watched. Porteños said the words under his breath and guided his fingers across the lines. Then, hand on the back of one of the soldiers, he guided them out the door, where they continued to huddle and speak in whispers.

“Gentlemen,” Porteños said with a nod. The door's closing echoed through the workshop.

“There will be no more readings,” he announced, matter-of-fact.

Antonio kept his eyes to the ground when Porteños led him out. María Isabel could hear them speak outside but could not make out the words. Antonio sounded agitated, and Porteños seemed to calm and admonish him simultaneously. Then, silence, just the brusque click of Porteños's heels as he reentered the workshop and walked back to his desk.

Everything in María Isabel told her to go after her husband. She closed her eyes and silently repeated the words that had carried her through past weeks: *We are force*.

She stood. She tucked her chair into the desk and walked out the door, knowing she'd never walk through its arched entryway again. A handful of workers followed. Porteños didn't even bother to look up.

They knew they risked their lives. But María Isabel and Antonio had ceased to care. Something greater than themselves swam in their blood; this would be their war.

Each day, when the workers who remained at the workshop had their lunch hour, María Isabel and Antonio met them in a clearing in the middle of a sugarcane field. Antonio struggled to receive copies of *La Aurora* now that Porteños y Gómez no longer employed him, but he rode into the city every few days to bring back other news. They made the trek to their meeting spot with a bundle of books each, philosophy texts and political manifestos, mostly. The workers repaid them with yeasty bread, with fat sausages, with cauldrons of ajiaco. On Christmas eve, they even slaughtered a pig that roasted for hours. Every day at noon, they lit their cigars and took a place on dried palm that lined the ground. They nodded and clapped at passages that inspired or put to words that which they all felt.

And María Isabel learned to read more each day. Now

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that she had empty time at home, she sat with Antonio for hours, and when all had gone to bed, she ran her fingers over crisp pages by candlelight until the stub wore to darkness.

But still, they were dark days for her, filled with hunger, with panic, with mourning, even as she celebrated a secret: she was pregnant, her belly beginning to swell and round. She'd known for months before she shared the news with Antonio or his mother; she'd known even before she walked out of *Porteños y Gómez*. But she had kept quiet because marveling at what a life could be felt tenuous when death sank its tentacles into everything else. When she finally told Antonio, he lit up like wildfire in a field of grass, deepened his resolve to resist the terror the governor's edict had staked in their minds.

But Antonio didn't want her making the trip to the clearing with him any longer. He urged María Isabel to rest, take shade. Her mother-in-law agreed and made hot compresses of cheesecloth and cotton for her aching back, told her to mind her priorities. For a few days, she listened to them and stayed in the comfort of their homey cabin, stewing beans and embroidering a baby bonnet. But even in her state, she yearned to leave. She made the trips until her ankles could no longer tolerate them. And then she put aside all her housework and read for hours.

She could now string letters into words. She marveled at the magic of it all, how human beings had thought to etch markings on stone to tell their stories, sensed each lifetime too grand, too interesting, not to document. She placed one hand to her belly and felt the *something* in her move and stretch as if seeking its own freedom, felt as if the whole world were her womb. She wanted to write her own words. She wanted to write her life into existence and endure. Perhaps a piece of her knew death crouched close.

How did the soldiers find out? No one would ever know for certain, though they would speculate: perhaps Antonio had left behind compromising evidence at Porteños y Gómez (the translated letter from Victor Hugo?) and Porteños denounced him, perhaps a worker had betrayed him, perhaps it was simple bad luck—the soldiers marching through the field and finding the clearing, hearing the voices, the words.

The four soldiers were kind enough to let the workers go after they disrupted the lesson with whip cracks, a pistol shot. But they stood Antonio atop one of his fat books. One said, “Now will your literature save you?” Antonio clasped his hands behind his back, looked up.

And María Isabel, as though she knew, collapsed on the floor of their home, moaning, watching the liquid burst beneath her. She gripped her sister-in-law’s hand and screamed, beseeched the santos. She let Antonio’s mother wipe her brow and pray before her. She called the names of everyone she’d loved and lost.

“Declare your loyalty to the Crown,” the soldier in the field said, rifle pointed at Antonio’s head.

“Libertad!” Antonio yelled, loud enough that he hoped María Isabel would hear, that she would know he’d fight until the end.

But the world was going silent for María Isabel as she strained with the little strength left in her. She tasted the salt of her sweat and pushed and grasped at all before her, saw the room undulate, felt the waves crash inside. She heard her mother-in-law and sister-in-law’s voices as if sieved through layers and felt herself go in and out of consciousness. Her fingers brushed against the stickiness of her own blood.

María Isabel felt her mother-in-law grasp at the fleshy head that emerged. And she heard her own pulse inside her,

loud, multiplying as if fighting for two, for three, rippling. *We are force.* The resounding scream of life rushing out of her.

A soldier commanded his fellow men to raise their rifles. Antonio cried out again.

There was a click. There was a “Fire!”

The baby’s wailing mixed with the firecracker sounds of guns ablaze, yelling to the sky. Antonio’s mother cut the cord, placed the wriggling infant in María Isabel’s arms, wrapped a blanket over mother and child. But María Isabel pulled herself to stand on wobbly legs. Weak, smeared with blood and sweat, trembling. The baby cried out again, and she held it close to her heart, tried to remember the feeling of her mother’s arms as a child. Cecilia. She rocked her to exhaustion, watched as her tiny lids fluttered into sleep, never taking her eyes off the field framed in the window. Antonio’s sister had gone to look for him. But María Isabel already knew the task would prove fruitless. She had felt the truth of the moment in her bones, in her breath. And she thought she had heard it: a faint, barely audible cry for liberty.

She brought Cecilia to her chest as tears clouded her vision, and the infant’s newly found screams quieted when she felt the nipple and suckled. María Isabel had worried her milk sparse since regular meals had become an increasingly rare luxury. She fought anxiety over what solid food she could provide when the moment came. Instead, María Isabel fixed on a ribbon of smoke outside as it curled into itself, formed a slow waltz upward. She could think only of a cigar ashing on the edge of a life, could almost feel the warmth of its dark, woody embrace. But just like that, the sky was clear again.