## PROLOGUE (Excerpt)

In mid-March 1993, a tropical storm pounded the city of Havana, elevating the sea level, destroying tens of thousands of homes, tearing up tobacco plantations and intensifying the anxiety that Cubans were experiencing in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse.

From my apartment on the twenty-fifth floor of the Focsa, the tallest residential building in Havana, I watched this meteorological phenomenon that the Cuban media had termed, "the Storm of the Century." Fifteen-foot waves crashed over the picturesque Malecón, the sea wall that runs along the coast, and covered the four-lane boulevard. A block away from my apartment, in front of the U.S. diplomatic mission, stood a billboard. On it was a cartoon of a Cuban peasant in a straw hat yelling at Uncle Sam: "Imperialist sirs, we are completely unafraid of you!" Salt water licked the bottom of the sign. I watched the thundershowers move across the shadowed city. They soon entered my neighborhood and battered my windows with rain until I couldn't see anything.

I had arrived in Cuba almost two months before, expecting hurricanes in the fall, not in the winter. On the morning that the storm let loose, I had been at my job with Radio Havana Cuba. The station closed early, and I was sent home. I struggled to walk through the hundred mile per hour winds that ripped down the eight blocks between my work and my apartment. I was either propelled forward with such force that I had to grab onto a streetlight to stay standing, or the wind acted as a blockade and impeded me from advancing down the street. I was drenched and trembling by the time I entered the lobby of the Focsa, where I discovered that the building had lost electricity and I would have to climb the twenty-five floors to my apartment.

The wind blasted through my apartment, slamming doors, catching in the vents and creating a cacophonous howling at all hours of the day and night. I shivered under my sheets, flinching at the sound of shattering glass, unable to sleep as Havana was inundated and broken into pieces.

As the Storm of the Century ravaged Havana, I felt oddly comforted by the way that the weather reflected the turmoil and uproar that had engulfed me since my arrival in Cuba. The hurricane echoed my inner chaos, and provided an incident to watch, an end to await, a few statistics to put forth to depict the brutality of the event: thirty thousand homes damaged, half a million banana trees

flattened, sixty people wounded. I had no such numbers to testify to the devastation wracking my mind and spirit as I witnessed the collapse of the Cuban Revolution. Everything I had believed, everything that generations of my family had believed, had been torn apart in front of me.

Unlike many children growing up in America, my childhood lullaby was a proletarian incantation from Russia called *Whirlwinds of Danger*. In her off-key voice, my mother would sing, "Whirlwinds of danger are raging around us, overwhelming forces of darkness assail, still in the fight see advancing before us, red flag of victory that yet shall prevail. So onward ye workers, freedom awaits us, over the world and the land and the sea. On with the fight for the cause of humanity, march, march ye workers and the world shall be free!"

My maternal great-grandparents were left-leaning Russian Jews who escaped poverty, pogroms and forced conscription into the czar's army. My grandmother, born in Chicago in 1914, was a "red-diaper baby" raised in a radical Jewish community of activists and writers. She joined the Young Communist League at the age of nine, was first arrested for political protest at thirteen and by twenty had become a labor leader in California's Central Valley. My grandfather, a Polish Jew, was an industrial union organizer on the East Coast who rose to high levels in the Communist Party, U.S.A., and was jailed during McCarthy's witch-hunt. For thirty years, my grandparents were card-carrying, devoted members of the Communist Party, their paychecks came from the Party, and all their friends were fellow travelers. In 1956, when Khrushchev confirmed for the world that Stalin was a monster, my grandparents realized they had been complicit in Stalin's brutality. They had defended him and the Soviet Union blindly, and had attributed all evidence of mass murder to capitalist propaganda. This reality devastated them and along with eighty percent of the Communist Party's members, they resigned.

My mother followed in her parents' footsteps and spent the 1960s and '70s demonstrating against segregation, the Vietnam War, and Salvador Allende's assassination in Chile. Like all good leftists during this era, she was awed by the band of sexy Cuban rebels that had bucked off their masters and built health clinics in the tropical ravines of the island.

Images of Ché Guevara and bearded men brandishing rifles adorned the walls of my childhood home. I recited Cuban Revolutionary anthems, listened to recordings of Fidel's speeches, and idolized the brave Americans who traveled to the island to cut sugar cane during the harvest. Therefore, no one in my family was surprised when I developed an intellectual fascination with the Cuban Revolution in college or when I visited Cuba with solidarity brigades and returned chanting the slogans of the Revolution.

My grandmother, especially, listened patiently while I sang Cuba's praises. She sat in her chair, hands clasped in her lap and mouth pinched shut, as I gushed over free childcare centers where robust toddlers of all shades sang together in perfect harmony. She supported my interest and passion, but she asked probing questions and nudged me to critically consider what I applauded. She suggested that if I thought that Cuba was a perfect society, I should go and live there. And, if I went, she instructed, I had better keep my eyes wide open.

I understood the roots of her skepticism. My grandmother had lived in the Soviet Union in the 1930s and had been dazzled by the Russian Revolution and Joseph Stalin. "When people started disappearing in front of me, I ignored it. I didn't question *anything*," she told me over and over, year after year. In her seventies, she still ached with guilt and remorse from decades of blind allegiance. But Cuba was not the Soviet Union, I argued, and Castro was not Stalin.

I hoped to prove my cynical grandmother wrong, to show her that there was still one example of radical social and political change worth believing in. After graduating from the University of California, Santa Cruz, I accepted a two-year position with Radio Havana Cuba as a broadcast journalist. I aspired to write a book about daily life in Cuba thirty years after the overthrow of Batista and to testify that although Soviet communism failed, Cuban socialism thrived and offered an alternative to the cruelty of capitalism. In my tearful goodbyes at the Los Angeles International Airport in January 1993, I promised my grandmother that I would "keep my eyes open."

I arrived in Cuba at the beginning of the fourth and most difficult year of the "Special Period," Castro's term for the economic crisis that resulted after the Soviet Union's financial support ended. Produce rotted in the fields, Chinese bikes lumbered through Havana's streets, oxen replaced

tractors, diseases absent on the island for thirty years reappeared, an epidemic due to malnutrition blinded thousands, and Cubans were hungry for the first time since Castro had assumed power in 1959. The last Soviet tanker had left the Bay of Havana in June of 1992 and blackouts were a part of daily life. Cuba faced rock bottom prices for sugar on the international market, an economic embargo imposed by the U.S. that caused Cuba to pay more for many imports, and an economy rife with inefficiency. The capital's filthy streets teemed with emaciated dogs, old black men scrounged for food in dumpsters, buildings crumbled, and thousands of cows starved to death.

On the morning after the Storm of the Century cleared, I walked along the Malecón. Two black women dressed all in white, their heads wrapped in scarves, sat on the wall facing the sea, a doll perched in between them. Because of their attire, I knew that the women were initiating into Santería, one of the Afro-Cuban religious traditions. The doll wore a white dress and a blue head wrap; her arms were open, palms facing up. The three figures sat motionless, gazing out at the blue sea. Occasionally one of the women would speak and they would laugh. I wondered what they were doing and was mesmerized by the tranquility they radiated. I wanted to join them, to sit in the sun and contemplate the ocean; I ached to feel a trace of their serenity. I took a photo instead.

Back in the Focsa, I described this scene to my closest friend, a Cuban woman in her fifties who was an expert in the Afro-Cuban religions. She explained that the doll represented Yemayá, the Yoruba goddess of the sea, and that the women were imploring her to calm the waters. "These are the real powers that be," Carmen explained, "the ones who need to be placated and respected. Sometimes all that they ask for is prayers and stillness."

By then the *guerrilleros* were no longer my heroes. The women on the Malecón offered an alternative to men with guns; they suggested a peaceful, non-cerebral way of dealing with chaos and upheaval. But I needed answers. I needed to understand what had happened to the Cuban Revolution, how what began with noble ideals and intentions had produced the disaster in which I was living and working in 1993.