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TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

I came to know of Uva de Aragón in a rather ironic way. Although she has lived most of her adult life in Florida, it was not in the United States that I learned about her works but fittingly while on a trip to Cuba, where I came across the anthology *Estatuas de Sal* (Statues of Salt). Since the volume promised short stories by contemporary Cuban women writers, I logically assumed that De Aragón resided in Cuba. I was wrong, but at the moment I didn't realize the symbolic significance of my mistake. Later on it would become clear: here was a writer who no longer lived on the Island, and yet she wasn't perceived as an outsider. Instead, the anthology counted her among Cuba's contemporary writers. It presented her merely as a Cuban—not a Cuban-American and not an exile, and understandably so. De Aragón is a writer that defies our attempts to segregate Cubans and Cuban-Americans. As you read the volume you have in your hands right now, you will see why that's important to understand. I however wouldn't draw that conclusion for myself for some time. Instead, I read her contribution to the anthology—“*No puedo más*” (“I Can't Do This Any More”)—and filed her work away.

Sometime later I was preparing a course on Cuban literature in translation when I came across another short story of hers, this time in English—“Not the Truth, Not a Lie.”¹ I was immediately impressed by the dramatic quality of the story in which two young lovers—one black and one white, one poor and the other rich—are unable to fulfill their love due to the socio-political circumstances in which they live. Like a Cuban Romeo and Juliet, their love is more powerful than the constraints others have placed on them. Another story, “Roundtrip,” made an interesting companion piece for my students and illustrated the uniqueness of the author's voice and mindset.² What became clear in

¹ *Cuba: A Traveler's Literary Companion*, Ann Louise Bardach, ed. (Berkeley: Whereabouts Press, 2002), 176–182.

² *Voice of the Turtle*, Peter Bush, ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1977), 209–215.

CHAPTER ONE

Reunion in Miami

“IT TOOK YOU A HALF A YEAR TO SAVE FOR THOSE JEANS. If I were you, rather than wearing those, I’d wear something that’s in bad shape, the worst thing I had.”

“Are you nuts?”

“Of course not, Menchu, but look, I’m sure your sister is going to buy you a ton of stuff. Know what else? If I were you, I’d take an empty suitcase with me.”

“*Chica*, you do have a screw loose. Look, I’m not going to Miami just so my sister can buy me stuff.”

“So why are you going then? Don’t tell me you’re thinking of going and staying!”

“For heaven’s sake, Maruja! Do you think I am going to abandon Mamá?”

“So, if it weren’t for her, you mean you’d stay?”

“No, of course not. I decided a long time ago that I’d never leave Cuba.”

“That’s more like it, *compañera*! We can’t sell out for Yankee dollars. As the saying goes, “Socialism or Death!”

“Come on, it’s a little bit too early in the morning for slogans, don’t you think? I haven’t even had my coffee yet...”

“Don’t get upset, you know I’m only kidding. The truth is that it scares me to death that you might leave me too. You’re the last friend I have left...”

“Fine, but don’t you go and get all emotional on me or I might have second thoughts. If you only knew... Part of me is dying to go, but at the same time I’m so scared. Who knows? Laurita and I might not even get along... We’ve led such different lives. If someone had told us as kids that we were going to be separated when we were 18 and that we wouldn’t see each other for almost forty years...! After being so close growing up! Imagine, being twins and all... Mamá would dress us alike. No one could tell us apart. Only Mamá.”

“That’s something considering that these days Mariana gets you

CHAPTER TWO

Cubans, Go Home!

WHAT I WILL ALWAYS REMEMBER ABOUT HAVANA IS THE LIGHT. When I try to play back in my mind that 13th of July of 1959, I close my eyes, and I see a blinding light that hurts my eyes. We're riding in the station wagon. Robertico and I are sitting in the very back. Since the rear seat faces backwards and the window is so wide, we have a good view of the city that we'll leave in a few hours. Papá is driving with Mamá at his side. Menchu and Pedritín ride in the middle seat with our luggage. The midday sun makes the colors turn more vivid, almost as if the buildings and streets, and even the air itself, were illuminated by a blazing fire. Steam—seemingly made up of red, blue, and yellow dots—rises from the pavement.

We were married yesterday. The ceremony took place in the Vedado Parish. I know that it made Robertico sad that his parents weren't there. We had a small reception at home. Everything was very simple. It wasn't the big event that Mamá and Papá would have wanted for the marriage of one of their daughters. It wasn't what I had dreamed of either. But given the circumstances, it was best not to make a big deal of it. Papá even suggested that Robertico shouldn't use both of his surnames on the invitations. Not Fernández-Luaces but just plain Fernández. But he absolutely put his foot down! I love it when he gets mad! I like listening to his voice, so much that sometimes I get lost in it and in the words. I love each one of his gestures, even the way he frowns. Almost all of my classmates came to the wedding. It was hard not being able to tell them that Robertico and I weren't going to go to Varadero the next day on our honeymoon as we had planned but to the United States, and that the trip would probably be for a lot longer than two weeks. I think that we might be back by September and I'll be able to attend the university. Actually, I have asked Menchu to register for me when she fills out her paperwork. She can forge my signature perfectly, just as I can hers.

CAPÍTULO DOS

Cubans, Go Home!

LO QUE SIEMPRE RECUERDO DE LA HABANA ES LA LUZ. Cuando trato de reconstruir aquel 13 de julio de 1959, cierro los ojos y veo una luz cegadora que me hiere los ojos. Vamos en el *pisicorre*. Robertico y yo nos sentamos en el último asiento. Como está colocado al revés y el cristal de atrás es amplio, así contemplamos mejor la ciudad que dentro de pocas horas vamos a dejar. Papá va al timón con Mamá a su lado. En el asiento del centro, con nuestras maletas, Menchu y Pedritín. Hay un sol vertical que hace que todos los colores se tornen más brillantes, como si una especie de fuego animara por dentro edificios y calles, y hasta el mismo aire, un vapor denso que emana del asfalto y parece contener punticos amarillos, azules y rojos.

Ayer nos casamos. La ceremonia fue en la Parroquia del Vedado. Yo sé que Robertico estaba triste por la ausencia de sus padres. El brindis lo hicimos en casa. Todo muy sencillo. No era lo que Mami y Papi hubieran querido para la boda de una de sus hijas. Ni lo que yo había soñado. Pero era mejor no llamar la atención. Papá hasta sugirió que en las invitaciones Robertico no usara su apellido compuesto, Fernández-Luaces, sino Fernández, a secas. ¡Con qué vehemencia se negó! ¡Cómo me gusta cuando se enoja...! Disfruto oyendo su voz hasta tal punto que me pierdo en ella y a veces no distingo las palabras. Amo cada uno de sus gestos, el movimiento de sus manos, la forma en que frunce el ceño. Vinieron casi todas mis compañeras a la boda. Lo difícil fue no poder decirles que al día siguiente Robertico y yo no nos íbamos de luna de miel a Varadero, como habíamos dicho, sino a Estados Unidos, y que el viaje podría ser mucho más largo que las dos semanas previstas. Yo pienso que para septiembre volveremos y podré matricularme en la universidad. Es más, le he pedido a Menchu que cuando ella haga su solicitud de ingreso, haga la mía también. Mi hermana sabe imitar mi firma perfectamente... Y yo la de ella, claro.

La noche de bodas fue... no sé... distinta a lo que me imaginaba. Me