

Antonio Jose PONTE

COMING

For Félix Lizárraga

His roommate headed for Odessa, to take a ship back to Havana from there. Of all the possible return routes, this was the longest. He was trying to prolong his time abroad, counting on the sea voyage to let him find reasons that would justify his going back.

“Maybe I’ll get shipwrecked,” his roommate said, bags already packed. “That could be a piece of luck.”

He was left alone in his room in the student dorm, which emptied out little by little. Finally they were down to a small group of Arabs and Cubans who gave up conversing in Russian to seek solace in their private tongues.

He was sorry not to have gone via Odessa. Spreading his bags open on the empty bed, he began to prepare for his return.

In Russia he had gotten used to some customs that he would miss back there. He’d have less freedom, he was sure about that. In September they’d give him his first job and, one way or another, the life it was his lot to live would begin.

With such prospects, he — like the others — roamed rather aimlessly through the empty buildings of the university. He wondered if he’d ever again feel as sheltered as he had during these five years of study.

The Russian summer now seemed matchless, intensifying his pleasure at being in the sun in short sleeves. He bought a few last-minute gifts and finally, when the moment arrived, he picked up his luggage and tried to look happy. If not happy, content.

“It’s a deportation,” he thought the night before, when he couldn’t get to sleep. “I should be staying in Russia.”

But he hadn’t found the way.

From the first glimpse of the small trees at the airport exit and the slogans in large letters alongside the highway, he had the feeling of being lost in Havana.

“You’re home,” they told him. “Now nothing, or almost nothing, will seem strange.”

The boy he’d been before Russia (when he was studying the Russian language in the preparatory school, and the tour of study abroad awaited him as the culmination of his work) looked out from a table in the living room of his house. He didn’t remember putting that photo there. He was thinner in it and had something that now was surely lost: the beauty of anyone between eighteen and twenty, or the fearlessness that naïveté confers.

In Havana, he was like a recently landed spy. He learned the city’s customs all over again, made friends, but couldn’t find his contact. His mission there was merely to discover a resting place. Then it would be enough to flash a countersign. But to whom?

That's when he knew he was looking for himself.

"Hmpph," he raged inside. "Who needs all that right now?" His goal was to find the young man in the photograph: daring and uncalculating, lacking in suspicion, but, without a doubt, his contact in Havana.

Then he remembered the diary kept by that boy, the one he'd been six or seven years before.

The teacher lived in a first-floor apartment. He stood outside looking at the slate-blue sea. A ship crossed it so slowly as to seem motionless. That was how his roommate would be sailing, in near-motionlessness like that.

A cat was sleeping by the door. He called it by its name and the cat opened its eyes and went inside through the crack of the half-opened door. Somebody echoed the cat's name in a washed-out voice, the voice of his old teacher.

She had been the first fellow passenger from whom he'd asked directions in Russian. They'd taken the same imaginary train, ordered fantastic soups at a table in an invented Moscow restaurant, walked along boulevards in white nights out of books, been blinded by the tiles of Samarkand. . . . She'd been his best language teacher in the preparatory school.

Now, as always, she had a pupil visiting in her parlor. With him, that made two.

"How nice that you've visited at the same time," she said, introducing them.

The pupil's hair fell like a drizzle over his eyes, and he had braces on his teeth. He'd just finished the preparatory course.

"This was my last year," the teacher explained.

The youngster smiled with the plated smile conferred by the braces. He took part in the conversation through smiles like that, spoke only a few times, and shortly decided to leave.

"I pity him," the teacher said. He asked why.

"He'll never go to Russia. You know. . . ."

No more students would be sent to Russia. That was all over.

"It's all over for you, too," he pointed out.

"Yes, but the difference between that boy and me is that I'd already had enough. I needed an excuse to retire." The teacher lit a cigarette. "And the excuse arrived."

"Yes, it's a shame. To spend a whole year preparing for a trip you don't go on."

"You know, sometimes he's reminded me of you," said the teacher after a silence.

"Who?"

She pointed toward the door with the hand holding her cigarette. Surely he too had prepared himself for something that wasn't going to happen.

"Only he comes alone, not with a girlfriend."

Silence rose up between them, the silence of those who approach an uncomfortable subject. Now he'd have to talk about his girlfriend of those days.

"A friend of hers" — the teacher said the whole name of that friend, because her memory was strong enough to hold onto the names of former students — "told me she hadn't returned."

"She hasn't come back so far."

"Although there's still one ship on the way."

“The one from Odessa.”

“And she’s probably not coming on it,” he supposed.

“How can she manage to stay?”

He shrugged his shoulders, watching the cat go out. He’d come to tell his old teacher so many things, and now he didn’t see any point in talking.

“Please pardon this kind of question,” she said with some insistence, “but when did you see each other last?”

“A year and then some,” he recalled. “We broke up a year or so ago. After that I didn’t get much news about her.”

The teacher didn’t ask about his stay in Russia. Her last course was done.

“In her place I would have done the same,” she said. “I would have stayed.”

“And what prompted you to come back?” her next question would be.

But she stuck to the same point.

“I think — I know it’s nonsense — that she has my phone number, she has my address at this house.... Could she know that I’d like to hear from her?”

“I think so,” he consoled her. “We talked about you, over there. We remembered you.”

The teacher pointed to the cabinet in which she kept the postcards she got, the cards dashed off on the run. Inside the cabinet was a chest, and inside the chest, which had been brought to her by a student who was now a government minister, were the letters and cards.

When he left her house, the ship was so far off it could hardly be seen, and the cat was no longer by the door.

He visited all his favorite old haunts. Some no longer existed, and the others bored him. He looked for friends from back then. They noticed how pale he was and agreed to meet for a day at the beach.

“Except for your color, you’re just the same,” they assured him.

The picture in the living room could have been taken that same day.

He emptied bookshelves, and the old objects got mixed with those brought from Russia. He came to see that as a good omen, a sign of continuity. A few photos of himself with his girlfriend appeared.

He scoured the apartment without finding his old diary.

Maybe someone in his family had recovered it; it could be in his grandparents’ house in the provincial city.

“The provincial city,” he murmured.

That was memory.

His grandparents’ house was smaller than he remembered. It needed paint and masonry work. His grandfather had misunderstood what time he was coming and wasn’t ready for him yet.

“You smell of trains and airplanes,” was his greeting. “You’ve experienced so many things.”

Smell had replaced grandfather’s sight, he was like a blind dog now. His bones and veins seemed to be popping out, leaving the dead skin behind. If he’d hugged him a second time, it was because he was reminded of the other grandson.

“Now your brother would be like you,” he said.

The other grandson was his favorite, even if he tried to keep this from being so.

“He’d be older than me.”

They sat at a table packed with objects. Open books, half-polished forks, flowers cut but not put in water. Things got finished little by little, as strength or memory allowed.

“I’ve looked, and it’s not here,” he explained.

The table top cast doubt on the search.

“But I found this.” As a consolation, he handed him a pile of photos.

His brother, with braces on his teeth.

Some smell must have told the old man that things weren’t going well. He realized right away that he should take the photos back.

“I thought they were of you,” was his excuse. He’d save them, even if he couldn’t tell them apart.

He remembered the pupil visiting his old teacher, the one who wouldn’t be going to Russia. In the pictures, his brother had looked a little like that.

“Did you come just for that diary?” the old man asked suspiciously.

He put a sweater into his grandfather’s hands.

“I came to bring you my present,” he said.

“It’s a good one,” his grandfather assured him while trying it on.

“It looks good on you.”

The distance between the house and sea had lessened. The tree roots were pushing up the terrace floor. Everything lodged in memory got ruined or it shrank. His grandfather had an anachronistic sporty look because the sweater brought back the swimmer he’d once been. Maybe it was a present for a different body, in a different season.

“Aren’t you going in the water?” his grandfather asked.

No, he wouldn’t swim. They walked along the wet sand.

“Have they offered you a job yet?”

“Not yet.”

Then his grandfather asked about her.

“We’re not together any more.”

“That’s too bad.”

His steps were surer on the sand than they had been inside. “Your best days are passing you by,” grandfather announced to grandson.

He looked at him, surprised. What could he know of his life?

“Or maybe not,” the old man took it back.

He made a motion as if throwing something into the sea. The sweater and the motion were too youthful for him. As if the clothing required certain motions from those who wore it.

In the end, the old man weakened, and gave him the photos again.

Back in his apartment a notice from the post office awaited him.

It informed him of the arrival of a package from Russia, but the name of the sender wasn’t on it. Who could still be there, thinking of him? Almost certainly, it had to be her. But he’d have to wait until Monday to be sure.

Putting the photos of his brother with the others, he came upon images of his old girlfriend again.

“Again.”

What was happening to him? Nothing was more like his grandfather’s table top than he himself. He tried to do things but wasn’t able to finish them, he felt he was neither here nor there. Neither in Russia nor in Havana. He was neither his brother nor the pupil he’d met in his teacher’s house, nor even the one in the living room photo.

On Monday he recognized the address on the wrapping of the package, the address of a building near the woods in a northern Russian city, far from the city where he’d studied. From that room you could see the first treetops of the forest and the road between the trunks. The cheap curtains were always open. She held in her hands the collection of letters he had sent.

Smiling, she spread the letters out on the bed. The bed in question was a narrow one in which they slept squeezed together.

Here you promised me such-and-such,” she told him. “In this one you called me a treasure for the first time...”

He thought of solitaire, a game that apparently included him, but, in the long run, could not be shared. She tried to wrap herself in words, in a language of love that would serve her as a cloak. He was superfluous there.

She danced around his letters that covered her bed, a crazy joy seeming to inhabit her. In his presence she was revealing a personal and secret rite. The order of the letters implied a vague prediction. In that room near the woods he saw the other side of things.

Now as he gripped the package that had to be holding his letters, he felt the flimsiness of those papers, the flimsiness of her gesture of sending them to Havana. Why, after a year and half without seeing each other, was she sending those letters to him?

He dropped the package among his books and tried to forget about it. He got in touch with her old roommate from that northern city.

“Bring a bathing suit if you want,” the girl suggested. No one seeing her would say she’d come from the cold. Her skin was golden. Strains of music came from somewhere, and the girl asked whether he’d like something to drink.

“*Kakoi kricivi pliash!*” she yelled from the other end of the house.

Apparently she wasn’t yelling at him. The music came from the roof.

“What is it?” he asked about the pink liquid. “Doctored alcohol,” the girl explained. He raised his eyes toward the ceiling, and she pointed up toward the source of the music.

“Friends. There’s so little vacation left...”

After the second or third drink he asked about his old girlfriend. He wanted to know what had happened during the year and a half they hadn’t seen each other.

“It’s a long story, and I don’t know the whole thing.”

“Tell me what you know.”

She took a long swallow.

“It started when you two quarreled. She switched rooms and stopped talking to all

her friends. She went to share a room with a Chinese girl from the Soviet Far East. She always liked to act strange.”

That sounded like an accusation directed at him, and the accusation came soon enough.

“You filled her head with birds. You made her believe things. But why talk about that now,” she added quickly.

They drank in the pink alcohol, and the music. Then she stood to reach for a towel and insisted they go up to the roof.

Up there it was the same group as always.

“Another sunny day on the sands,” one of them said by way of greeting, as the rest saluted him by raising the suntan oil, the bucket of sea water, a pair of sunglasses.

The girl undressed and asked where his bathing suit was.

“I’m not staying,” he explained.

She stared at him for a moment and seemed to be weighing what he’d look like without clothes and with that pale skin.

“You need to,” she announced.

She occupied herself rubbing in oil and iodine, and asked him to cover her back with it.

“She got fat,” she continued the story. “She ate chocolate around the clock and got really fat.”

The sun in his eyes annoyed him.

“She acquired a taste for Indian films and was always in the movies with her chocolates.”

“Do you remember the Indian films?” she asked her friends, and the memory amused them.

“I heard she got to like the taste of chocolate wet with her own tears. A really disgusting mix.”

“I got a package from her, with the same old address,” he said.

The girl with glowing skin looked at him over her sunglasses.

“She wasn’t there when we took off,” she declared.

“That’s all I know.”

“How did she manage to stay?” he asked.

“What good would the recipe do you now?” she said. “Now we’re here.”

The music spoke of love, the sky was clear, and the roof commanded a panoramic view. He looked at her body in the bathing suit.

“Why are you leaving so soon?” the girl asked. Inside the house, before leaving, he found the bottle and helped himself to more of the pink liquid.

He read the letters that he himself had written two or three years before, when they lived in different Russian cities. He didn’t understand what she could see in those papers, some of them written in boredom or annoyance, he knew.

The telephone line diluted the dilute voice of his old Russian teacher even more.

“In one of the letters I found a phrase that isn’t Russian,” he told her. “She said it while she was asleep, maybe you know what it’s about.”

“Would you like to say it for me?”

“Anyik kakara anyik kakalma-ra,” came out of his mouth. On the other end of the line the teacher sounded puzzled.

“I don’t think it’s Russian,” she passed judgment after hearing it for the second time. “Not as far as I know.

She never told you what it meant?”

“She said she didn’t know.”

“Well,” the teacher seemed to be considering this. “The tongue can utter all kinds of foolishness while we’re asleep. Maybe they aren’t exactly words.”

“It sounded like an insult,” he persisted.

“Here’s what we’ll do,” she agreed. “Let me write the phrase down and I promise to look into it.”

An empty glass dangled from one of her hands. He pointed at the telephone, also dangling off the hook.

“I was calling you.”

He was invited to have a drink.

“Help yourself,” she said, and when he was in the kitchen she yelled for him to bring the bottle to the living room.

It took him a while to find a clean glass.

“This color,” he said.

“What’s wrong with it?”

“It looks like shampoo.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

He poured some pink alcohol for each of them.

“Will it bother you if I hang up the phone?” he asked.

“Why did you come? To wait for a phone call?”

The golden hand hung up the receiver.

“What happened to your friends?”

“Once in a while they remember they have homes. Take off your shoes if you want.”

He dropped his shoes on the floor and stretched his legs.

He wasn’t wearing socks. Thanks to the alcohol his head began to clear. She began caressing his feet.

“You’re so white,” she said in a whisper. “Anybody would say you’ve just come from Russia.”

She started to laugh. The phone rang suddenly and she quickly scooped it up.

“Hang it up,” he asked quietly.

The golden skin, once she was undressed, had regions that were pale, the white of Russia on her skin.

“Anyik kakara anyik kakalma-ra,” he intoned.

The girl broke out laughing on the bed and wrapped herself in the covers.

“What kind of tongue twister is that?” asked her voice from inside her wrapping.

He said he’d heard it in an Indian film.

“Where?”

“In an Indian film.”

She sat up.

“It’s obvious that you never got anywhere near a theater where they showed even the sorriest Indian film.”

Suspecting that the spirit of her old roommate now haunted her bedroom, she scanned the four walls.

“You can’t just accept things the way they are, is that it?” she said. “Stop asking questions as if she’d died or been kidnapped. Buried in a movie theater with her tears and her chocolate, what could be better? That’s what she decided to do.”

He walked toward the door.

“I’m going to find my glass.”

“The Indian films,” she confided when he got back, “were always dubbed in Russian.”

“A beautiful axiom,” he remarked, getting under the covers too.

In the Russian whiteness of her skin he found a dark triangle, and in the dark triangle, an entrance. For a good while she called to him as if he were far away, as if she couldn’t find him.

“Where does one come from, when one comes?” she asked the ceiling later on.

Where does one come from when one comes?

He was returning again to Havana. He’d been visiting a provincial hospital, where his roommate from Russia was sick. It was a small ward with few beds. Sitting in the visitor’s chair he listened to his roommate talk about the last days in Odessa. His mouth moved as if someone were tugging at the corners.

“I saw her there,” he insisted.

He looked at the cover of a book on the small metal table.

“What’s it about?”

“Spies,” the patient said. “A plot about a white slavery network.”

He put the book back down on the table.

“She still had a pretty face, but she was a whale.”

“In Thailand?”

He pointed at the book. The patient took some time to move one of his limbs.

“All right,” he said. “Let’s talk about something else.”

“How did you end up like this?” he asked to change the subject.

“It’s the same story I’m trying to tell you. Her story.”

“So tell it. Go ahead. Are you sure it was her?”

“Her clothes made her seem Arabic, or something like that. Maybe it was the earrings or the eye makeup. She’d put it on so thick that if she blinked she’d never be able to open her eyes again.”

“And where did you see her?”

“In the shipping office. She said I was wrong, that I had her mixed up with someone else. And she was so fat, it could have been true.. .. Then I saw her in the doorway of a café and I was sure it was her. But when I said her name she denied it. She didn’t admit to understanding Spanish.”

While trying to change position, he couldn’t speak, concentrating all his forces on

the movement.

“I thought she’d gone crazy,” he picked up the story. “That she didn’t know who she was, where she’d come from, and where she had to go back to.”

“Maybe she was trying to delay things a little, the way you did,” he interrupted.

“No, it wasn’t that. I think she was trying to pass for a foreigner, so as not to have to come back.”

The spy novel lost one of its covers as it fell to the floor.

“I took her by the arm at the café door, and then a bunch of guys were all over me.”

“What kind of guys?”

“A gang of Arabs.”

Judging by his hospitalization, it had been a serious beating.

“So I came home by plane.”

“But what was she up to, in all this?”

He began to imagine her caught in a web of white slavers. “What do I know? In the middle of the fight she started yelling at me.”

“What did she yell? Do you remember?” The sick friend closed his eyes. “Anyik kakara anyik kakalma-ra?” He opened them to stare at his visitor. “What?”

“Did she yell Anyik kakara anyik kakalma-ra?” The patient smiled through stretched lips. “No. She just called my mother names.” He broke out laughing too.

“You were the one they wanted to beat up,” the patient teased him. “You were lucky not to be in Odessa that day.”

He told his friend what had happened with the golden body.

“You should have done that long ago,” the patient assured him.

“There was a way to stay, but we didn’t know how,” he said.

“I’d had enough.”

Was that because of Russia, or because of the beating?

“Let go of your nostalgia,” his friend said sharply. “That wasn’t so marvelous either.” He walked out of the hospital into unknown streets and waited for a night train back to Havana. On the train he fell asleep, and woke up because they had stopped in the middle of the countryside with the engine silenced.

Where do we come from when we come?

He heard some cries that came closer. When they were closer still, he discovered that they made a kind of song. He could hear a current that passed near the train, a current that sounded like a strong river flowing by.

They were cattle being moved during the night, urged onward by the song. As the weak light from the train began to distinguish them, he could just make out hindquarters of cattle and shadows on horseback as they passed.

What the men were singing were the names of the cows. It seemed to him that no song could be better. He got off the train to watch the group of cowboys and cattle recede into the flat land. He heard the whistle of a freight train. A mass of iron passed by them along one flank.

His train signaled that at last it too would get moving, and for the first time he was

sure of having come back. He didn't know where from, or what for. He let the train go, and stayed there alone in the countryside. As happens only in the countryside, the night was absolute. There was no light anywhere, and he thought that, if he hurried, he could catch up with the cattle herd.

IN THE COLD OF THE MALECON

"He chopped the meat into small pieces.

Too small."

"Like his apartment," the mother commented. "Yes.... And you want to know what I thought, seeing him cut the meat in the kitchen of the tiny apartment?"

She could imagine.

"I thought how strange that we've had a son." Because they behaved like those old married couples, very attached to one another, who could never have children and in old age each becomes the child of the other.

"It would've been stranger not to have one."

"He was slicing the green bananas into rounds and then removing the skin from each round. You never did it that way."

"No"

She made a pretense of high spirits.

"But the apartment, describe it. What's it like?" The father began to place all the rooms of the apartment within the room where they were sitting.

"It could all fit in here," he said finally.

"So then he hasn't managed to get away from us," the mother thought.

"And tell me if he ate the meat."

The meat was a present they'd sent him.

"He cooked some of the small pieces and we ate them, and during the meal he talked about his work."

"He told you he'll have to move farther away, right?"

"How'd you guess?"

"It's a pretext of his."

"Could be, yes."

"He needs pretexts to defend himself from us," the mother said aloud.

"Did you see things that weren't his? I mean: does he live alone?"

"There was nobody else with us, no. There was one thing that seemed odd to me."

"What?"

"He didn't want the meat to lose the blood in cooking. He ate it very rare."

"And you?"

"Me? The same as always."

The mother nodded

"While you were eating you asked him to take you to see the whores."

"After we had just finished eating. The pieces of meat were hard to stick a fork into.

He asked me what I felt like doing. We had three hours before my train left and could take advantage of the time.”

“Go on. Go on.”

“Near his apartment are some movie theaters. Or we could walk around a little.... Then I told him I’d like to see the whores again.”

“See them again?” The mother burst out laughing. “They can’t be the same ones, they’d be wrecks by now.”

The father laughed too.

“Of course.”

“He knows where to find them,” the mother mused aloud.

“He said we could go but that it was a bad night to walk along the Malecón. We might not find any.”

“Why a bad night?”

“The surf. The waves crash over the top of the wall of the Malecón. You can’t stay there without getting splashed.”

“But finally you did find some.”

“After a lot of walking. They were on the edge of the sidewalk, being careful of the waves and looking at the cars passing by.”

“And they didn’t look at you?”

The father suddenly felt ridiculous.

“At me? I’m old.”

“At him.”

“One woman looked at him for a moment. Just a moment, that’s all. Like when you mistake someone in the street and realize the mistake immediately.”

“And then?”

“She went back to looking at the street so she wouldn’t miss any cars.”

“Keep going.”

“And that was all. We went back to his apartment to have coffee. I really liked the coffee, it gave me a lift. I asked him if he’d seen how that woman had looked at him.”

“Yes.”

“And In spite of how strange it was being his father, it felt right, the two of us in the nice warmth of his apartment, the two of us there and those women outside in the cold of the Malecón.”

There the story ended. The two old people were silent for a while.

“Tell me again,” the mother asked.

“What do you want me to tell you?”

“The way she looked at him, the woman you found.”
