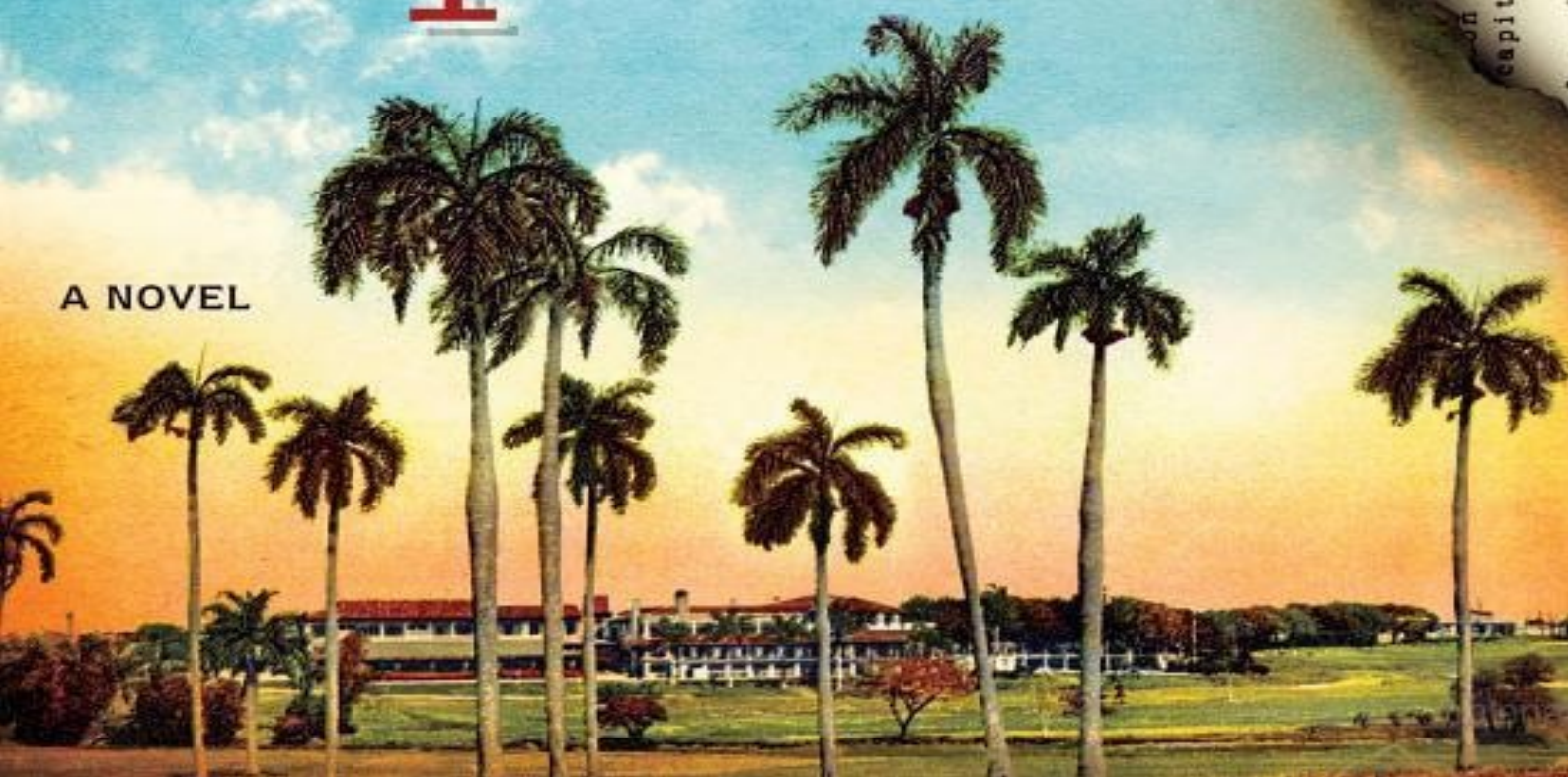


Rachel Kushner

Telex
FROM CUBA

A NOVEL



security
on news reporting
capital's central



TELEX FROM CUBA

A Novel

Rachel Kushner

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I would like to thank Susan Golomb and Nan Graham for their unerring editorial guidance, and Fred and Mary Lou Drost for leaving such a rich legacy and living remarkable lives.

This book is for Jason Smith.

All is order there, and elegance,
pleasure, peace, and opulence.

—“Invitation to the Voyage”



TELEX FROM CUBA

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[**EPILOGUE**](#)

PROLOGUE

Everly Lederer, January 1952

There it was on the globe, a dashed line of darker blue on the lighter blue Atlantic. Words in faint italic script: *Tropic of Cancer*. The adults told her to stop asking what it was, as if the dull reply they gave would satisfy: “A latitude, in this case twenty-three and a half degrees.” She pictured daisy chains of seaweed stretching across the water toward a distant horizon. On the globe were different shades of blue wrapping around the continents in layers. But how could there be geographical zones on the sea, which belongs to no country? Divisions on a surface that is indifferent to rain, to borders, that can hold no object in place? She’d seen an old globe that had one ocean wrapping the Earth, called the World Ocean. In place of the North Pole was a region marked “Heaven.” In place of the South Pole, “Hell.”

She selected the color black from a list of topics and wrote her book report, despite feeling that reducing *Treasure Island* to various things colored black was unfaithful to the story, which was not about black, but perhaps how boys need fathers, and how sometimes children are more clever than adults and not prone to the same vices. The Jolly Roger was black, and there was Black Dog, who showed up mysteriously at the Admiral Benbow, demanding rum. There were black nights on the deserted island, creeping around in shadows amid yet more blackness: the black of danger. Also, the “black spots” that pirates handed out—a sort of threat. A death sentence, really. “Who tipped me the black spot?” asked Silver. This death sentence, a stain of wood ash on a leaf of paper. The leaf, torn from a Bible, which now had a hole cut into Revelation. And holes are black as well.

She’d read about Sargasso, a nomadic seaweed city, and hoped they would encounter some. Other things floated on the ocean as well: jetsam, which is what sailors toss overboard to lighten their loads, and flotsam, things caught and pushed out to sea, such as coconuts, which rolled up on the shores of Europe in a time before anyone knew what lay to the west. Maybe coconuts still washed up, but they weren’t eerie and enchanting now that you could buy one at the store. In that earlier time, people displayed them as exotic charms. Or cut them open. A strange white fluid poured out, greasy and foul smelling. Not poisonous, just spoiled from such a long and difficult journey, a fruit thousands of miles from its home under the green fronds of a palm tree.

To get from green to red is easy: they are twins. Thin membranes, like retinæ, attached at the back. Her father saw red as green, and green as red. A permanent condition, he assured her. And there was a red grass native to the Antilles from which you could make green dye.

Now picture red velvet drapes.

Part them.

Beyond is a room with perfect acoustics. In it, a gleaming black piano. She can see her face in its surface, like she’s leaning over a shallow pan of water. She sits down to play—Chopin, a prelude for

saying good-byes, for dreaming in a minor key.

~~Spin the globe slowly, once, and return to where the dashed blue line skims above the island of Cuba.~~

She will cross the Tropic of Cancer and begin her new life.

PART ONE

January 1958

It was the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes that morning. An orange rectangle, the color of hot lava, hovering on the wall of my bedroom. It was from the light, which was streaming through the window in a dusty ray, playing on the wall like a slow and quiet movie. Just this strange, orange light. I was sure that at any moment it would vanish, like when a rainbow appears and immediately starts to fade, and you look where you saw it moments before and it's gone, just the faintest color, and even that faint color you might be imagining from the memory of what you just saw.

I went to the window and looked out. The sky was a hazy violet, like the color of the delicate skin under Mother's eyes, half circles that went dark when she was tired. The sun was a blurred, dark red orb. You could look directly at it through the haze, like a jewel under layers of tissue. I figured we were in for some kind of curious weather. In eastern Cuba, there were mornings I'd wake up and sense immediately that the weather had radically turned. I could see the bay from my window, and if a tropical storm was approaching, the sunrise would spread ribbons of light into the dense clouds piling up on the water's horizon, turning them rose-colored like they were glowing from inside. I loved the feeling of waking up to some drastic change, knowing that when I went downstairs the servants would be rushing around, taking the patio furniture inside and nailing boards over the windows, the air outside warm and gusting, the first giant wave surging in a glassy, green wall and drenching the embankment just beyond our garden. If a storm had already approached, I'd wake up to rain pouring down over the house, my room so dark I had to turn on the bedside lamp just to read the clock. Change was exciting to me, and when I woke up that morning and saw a rectangle of orange light, bright embers, on my bedroom wall, it seemed like something special was about to happen.

It was early, and Mother and Daddy were still asleep. My brother, Del, had been gone for three weeks at that point, ever since we'd returned from our Christmas vacation in Havana. Daddy didn't talk about it openly, but I knew Del was up in the mountains with Raúl's column. I'd never been much for the pool hall in Mayarí, but I started hanging around down there after he disappeared. In Preston it was difficult to get information about the rebels. The Cubans all knew what was going on, but they kept quiet around Americans. The company was putting a lot of pressure on workers to stay away from anyone involved with the rebels. Who's going to talk to the boss's thirteen-year-old son? Down in Mayarí, people got drunk and opened their mouths. The week before, an old campesino grabbed me by the shoulder. He put his face up to mine, so close I could smell his rummy breath. He said something about Del. He said he was still young, but that he would be one of the great ones. A liberator of the people. Like Bolívar.

I could hear Annie making breakfast, opening and shutting drawers. I put on my slippers and went downstairs. It was so dark in the kitchen I could barely see. Annie had latched all the windows and closed the jalousies. I asked why she didn't open the shutters or put on a light.

Servants have their funny ways—superstitions—and you never know what they're up to. Annie didn't like to go out at dusk. If Mother insisted she run some errand, Annie put a scarf over her mouth. She said evil spirits tried to fly into women's mouths at dusk. Annie and our laundress, Darcina, both listened to this cockeyed faith healer Clavelito on radio CMQ. Darcina sometimes cried at night. She said she missed sleeping in a bed with her children. Mother bought her a portable to keep her company and ended up buying one for Annie as well, just to be fair. Mother was big on fairness. Clavelito told folks to set a glass of water on top of the radio, something about his voice blessing the water, and Annie and Darcina both did.

Annie said she'd closed the shutters on account of the air. There was an awful haze, and it was tickling her nose and making her hoarse. She said it must have been those guajiros burning their trash again. Annie didn't like the campesinos. She was a house servant, and that's a different class.

I sat down in the kitchen with the new issue of *Unifruitco*, our company magazine. It came out bimonthly, meaning the news was always a bit stale. This was January 1958, and on the front page was a photo of my brother and Phillip Mackey posing with a swordfish they'd caught in Nipe Bay, back in October. They'd won first prize in the fall fishing tournament. It was strange to see that photograph now that both of them were gone and my brother no longer cared about things such as fishing tournaments. On the next page was Daddy with Batista and Ambassador Smith on our yacht the *Mollie and Me*. I flipped through the pages while Annie made pastry dough. She cut the dough into circles, put cheese and guava paste into the little circles, folded them over into half moons, and spread them on a baking sheet. Annie's pastelitos de guayaba, warm from the oven, were the most delicious thing in the world. Some of the Americans in Preston didn't allow their servants to cook native. Mother was considerably more open-minded about these things, and she absolutely loved some of the Cuban dishes. Mother didn't cook. She made lists for Annie. Annie would take a huge red snapper and stuff it with potatoes, olives, and celery, then marinate it in butter and lime juice and bake it in the oven. That was my favorite. Six months earlier, in the summer of '57, when I turned thirteen, Annie said she wanted to make me a rum cake for my wedding. Thirteen-year-old boys are not exactly thinking about marriage. Sure I'd fool around with girls, but there wasn't any formal courtship going on. A rum cake will keep for ten or fifteen years, and Annie figured that was enough time for me to grow up and find a wife. She had the guys at the company machine shop make a five-tier tin just for that cake. The tin was painted white with Kimball C. Stites handpainted on top, and handles on the sides for pulling out the cake layers. I don't know what happened to the cake or the tin with my name on it. Lost in the rush of leaving, like so many of our things.

Annie was putting her pastelitos in the oven when I heard Daddy's footsteps pounding down the stairs, and Mother calling after him, "Malcolm! Malcolm, please in God's name be *careful!*"

I ran into the foyer and met Daddy at the bottom of the stairs. He didn't look at me, just charged past like I was invisible, opened the front door, and took the veranda steps two at a time. I followed him, running down the garden path in my pajamas. He went around to the servants' quarters behind the house and pounded on Hilton Hardy's door. Hilton was Daddy's chauffeur.

"Hilton! Wake up!" He pounded on the door again. That was when I noticed Daddy still had on his rumpled pajama shirt underneath his suit jacket.

"Mr. Stites, Mr. Hardy visiting his people in Cayo Mambí," Annie called from the window of the butler's pantry, her voice muffled through the shut jalousies. "He got permission from Mrs. Stites."

Daddy swore out loud and rushed to the garage where Hilton kept the company limousine, a shiny

black Buick. We had two of them—Dynaflows, with the chromed, oval-shaped ventiports along the front fenders. Daddy opened the garage doors and got in the car, but he didn't start it. He got back out and shouted up to the house, "Annie! Where does Hilton keep the keys to this goddamn thing?"

"On a hook in there, Mr. Stites. Mr. Hardy have all the keys on hooks," she called back.

Daddy found the keys, revved the Buick, and backed it out of the garage. I watched from the porch and didn't dare ask what was happening. He roared down the driveway, wheels spitting up gravel, and took a right on La Avenida.

That was the first time in my life I ever saw Daddy behind the wheel of his own car. He always had a driver. Daddy wore a white duck suit every day, perfectly creased, the bejesus starched out of it. A white shirt, white tie, and his panama hat. Every afternoon Hilton Hardy took him on his rounds in the Buick limousine. At each stop a secretary served Daddy a two-cent demitasse of Cuban coffee. They knew exactly what time he was coming and just how he liked his demitasse: a thimble-size shot, no sugar. A "demi demi," he used to say. According to him, he never got sick because his stomach was coated with the stuff. Daddy was old-fashioned. He had his habits and he took his time. He was not a man who rushed.

I remember how the cane cutters lived: in one-room shacks called bohios. Dirt floors, a pot in the middle of the room, no windows, no plumbing, no electricity. The only light was what came through the open doorway and filtered into the cracks between the thatched palm walls. They slept on hammacas. They were squatters, but the company tolerated it because they had to live somewhere during the harvest. The rest of the year—the dead time, they called it—they were desolajos. I don't know what they did. Wandered the countryside looking for work and food, I guess. In the shantytown where the cane cutters lived—it's called a batey—there were naked children running everywhere. None of those people had shoes, and their feet had hard shells of calloused skin around them. They cooked their meals outdoors, on mangrove charcoal. Got their water from a spigot at the edge of the cane fields. They had to carry their water in hand buckets, but the company let them take as much as they wanted. It was certainly a better deal than the mine workers got over in Nicaro. Those people were employees of the U.S. government, and they had to get their water from the river—the Levisa River—where they dumped the tailings from the nickel mine. The Nicaro workers drank from the river, bathed in the river, washed their clothes in the river. If you wash your bike in the Levisa River after it rains, it gets shiny clean. That's a Cuban thing. I don't know why, but it really works. After it rained, everybody was down there, boys and grown men wading into the river in their underwear washing cars and bicycles.

The American kids on La Avenida weren't supposed to go beyond the gates of Preston, down to the cane cutters' batey. I think it was a company policy. Inside the gates was okay. Beyond the gates you were looking for trouble. But Hatch Allain's son Curtis Junior and I went down there all the time. We were boys, and curious. We sneaked into native dances. Curtis liked Cuban girls. That was a thing—some of the American kids only dated Cubans. Phillip Mackey and Everly Lederer's sister Steve from over in Nicaro were both like that, and they both got shipped off to boarding school in the States. Though in Phillip's case it wasn't just girls but the trouble he and my brother got into together helping the rebels. The Cuban girls never gave poor Curtis the chance to get in any trouble. He was dirty and his ears stuck out, and the girls just didn't like him. I tried to tell him that you have to be a little aloof, a little bit take-it-or-leave-it, even if it isn't how you really feel, but Curtis just didn't get it.

It was Daddy's idea to give the cane cutters plots of land so they could feed themselves, grow

yucca and sweet potatoes. He believed in self-sufficiency. He brought over Rev. Crim, who ran United Fruit's agricultural school. The cane cutters' kids were mostly illiterate. They studied practical things like farming, housekeeping, Methodist values. Daddy was conscientious about offering education, but he wouldn't have taken urchins up off the street like my mother wanted to do. My mother was a real liberal. She fed people at the back door. She would have had them inside the house if my father didn't put limits on her. If there was a child out in the batey who was ill or crippled or retarded, or had some sort of disease, Mother sent someone to pick him or her up and take the child to the company hospital. Christmastime, she went out into the countryside on her horse with gifts and toys. She wanted to go alone, but my father wouldn't allow it. A United Fruit security guard rode along behind her. I guess they were more like police officers than guards; they carried guns and guamparas—that's like a machete, with a big, flat blade for slapping people. My mother rode her horse all over the countryside. She once brought the *National Geographic* folks on a tour, and they took a lot of pictures. That is still the finest magazine to me. When my mother rode up, the Cubans streamed out of their houses and gathered around her. They loved her. They wanted to touch her. She had that effect.

When Daddy first laid eyes on her, he was visiting his brother up near Crawfordsville, Indiana. Mother had run out of gas. Daddy saw her walking along the side of the road and he said here came this angel. Mother had been a May Queen, and she was president of Kappa Kappa Gamma at DePaul. I had to return her sorority pin when she died. Harlan Sanders—that's Colonel Sanders—he was from Indiana, and always in love with Mother. We were his guests at the Sanders Motor Court once, on our way to Cumberland Falls. You could tell he had that fatal thing for Mother. His hands shook and his face turned red when he greeted us. I think Daddy was amused. He didn't mind showing her off. Mother was a beautiful woman, and she took fine care of herself. Never washed her face with soap, only cold cream, and she was health-conscious. She had the servants making yogurt back when it was still a very unusual thing to eat. Every night she sat at her desk and brushed her hair a hundred times before she went to bed. You notice those things as a boy. Twice or three times a year Daddy would take us to Miami to shop for Mother's clothes. He'd arrange for a private room at Burdine's. He, Del, and I would sit with Mother as the models came out in various things. If we liked what the model wore, Mother tried it on and came out and took a spin. If we agreed that it looked nice, Daddy bought it. Mother said she would never wear anything that her men didn't approve of. At first I didn't want to spend the afternoon in a fitting room. But then I got to liking the ritual of it, and how nice Mother dressed herself. When Del started palling around with Phillip Mackey, Del grew less interested in family things and stopped coming with us to Miami. It wasn't as fun going without him, but it made Mother happy that I was there, and I took pride in helping her choose outfits, in being the son she could depend on. Later, when I was at military school, we dressed up for dances and functions and I knew how to put myself together because of Mother. I cared about these things. Mother said elegance was taking a plain outfit and accenting it with one flashy detail—a tie, maybe. I still think of her when I get dressed up.

Dirt shacks, no running water—the way those people lived, it's just how life was to me. I was a child. Mother didn't like it, but Daddy reminded her that the company paid them higher wages than any Cuban-owned sugar operation. Mother thought it was just terrible the way the Cuban plantation owners did business. It broke her heart, the idea of a race of people exploiting their own kind. The cane cutters were all Jamaicans, of course—not a single one of them was Cuban—but I knew what she meant. Native people taking advantage of other native people, brown against black, that kind of thing. She was proud of Daddy, proud of the fact that the United Fruit Company upheld a certain standard, paid better wages than they had to, just to be decent. She said she hoped it would influence the Cubans to treat their own kind a bit better.

I knew something terrible had happened, watching Daddy take off like that, still wearing his pajama shirt. I ran back in to get dressed and heard Mother on the phone with Mr. LaDue, apologizing for calling so early. “Mr. Stites wanted me to call and inform you that there’s a fire in the cane fields,” she said. Of course it was a fire. Nothing else could have made that strange, orange light. “He wanted me to tell you he’s gone out there.” Even in a crisis, Mother was formal, always proper and composed. She was like that up to the very end. And it wasn’t easy for her, believe me. To lose everything. And not just the house, our whole world, but to have her oldest son up there with those people.

Mother was in the kitchen talking to Annie, and I figured it was best to keep quiet and slip out without her noticing. Our house was next to the seawall, at the very end of La Avenida, across the street from my school, the Preston Academy for American Children. I opened the gate and headed right, toward the town square. La Avenida was the managers’ row, with a locked gate and guards at the entrance. There was a pecking order in Preston, and we were at the end of the row, in the biggest house, with our own private guards, one in the daytime and one at night. The night guards were called *serenos*, and one sat on our steps until dawn. It was still early—barely 6:00 A.M.—and the street was peaceful and quiet. The only sound I heard was Mrs. LaDue’s peacocks. Each house on La Avenida had an arbor at the front gate with bougainvillea, and beyond each gate, exquisite gardens. The company gardeners kept those places immaculate. A breeze was ruffling the bougainvillea, and bright pink leaves were blowing along the sidewalk. The new *Unifruitco*, rolled up with a rubber band, was sitting on every porch. I passed the swimming pool, where the week before we’d had a big poolside cookout for the Cabot Lodges, who were down visiting. Henry Cabot Lodge was an older fellow, but he’d been on the swim team at Harvard, and he was going off the high dive with us kids, doing flips and jackknives. The Cabot Lodges had returned to Boston a few days earlier. Now the pool was deserted and quiet. I noticed something settling on the surface of the water, a grayish film. It was as if something were floating down from the air.

The guard station was at the end of the avenue. I waved to the guard and kept going. From the town square, where company headquarters and Daddy’s office were, I could see the mill off to the right. During the harvest, the mill ran on a twenty-four-hour schedule, lit up like a Christmas tree. Crushers going, cane syrup boiling, centrifugals humming. I expected to see steam drifting from the mill’s two giant chimneys, but they were both cold. Cars loaded with cut cane were sitting on the tracks just outside the mill, waiting to be rolled in and emptied into the crushers. You can’t cut cane and leave it sitting—it turns acidic and dries out. The entire extraction process was designed for that not to happen.

The smell of boiling cane syrup—the *meladura*, it’s called—used to fill the air in Preston. It was a warm, malty smell. I loved that smell. I can smell it right now. There was a different smell in the air that morning, not exactly familiar. I headed toward the rail crossing. I figured the flagman might know what was happening and where to find Daddy. Beyond the tennis courts were the golf course, the polo fields, then nothing but cane for miles and miles. A yellowish mutt, one of those scrawny little Cuban dogs, trotted along beside me. As I got closer to the fields, that peculiar smell was getting stronger. The dog was zigzagging and putting his nose up to sniff. The air smelled like burned sugar, tangy, black carbon smell, like when one of Annie’s pies bubbled over and dripped onto the bottom of the oven.

There was no flagman at the crossing, which seemed odd. Three tracks converged, and cars were always coming in. A railroad car half-filled with freshly hacked cane sat there, abandoned like someone had suddenly decided to stop working. I stepped over the ties and took the access road past the row of workers’ shanties. The workers usually had cook fires going out there in the morning, for

boiling sweet potatoes that they ate while they worked in the fields. But there was no one around. Maybe it's idiotic, but I remember thinking, *If there are no cook fires, how did the cane catch fire?*

From the access road I saw a plume of black smoke going up. My next thought was that we had been bombed. The week before, Batista had dropped white phosphorus over the Sierra Cristal, the mountains above us where the rebels were hiding. The smoke drifted over Preston, and the next day we had rain, and the rainwater covered the town with greasy soot. Rain fell in the mountains, too, but the fires up there kept burning. Water won't put out white phosphorus; it loves moisture. The fires burned for days, killing animals and a few of the guajiros who lived up there. Guajiros, that's one thing. Americans is another. Batista wouldn't have bombed us. We were practically the only support he had left in eastern Cuba.

I saw Daddy pull up in the black Buick, about a quarter mile down the road. He had Hatch and Rudy Allain riding with him. Hatch was the plantation boss. His brother, Rudy, was the guy who fixed all the mill machinery and irrigation equipment. The fire was in the southern part of our fields. As we got closer, heat baked my face and the front of my clothes. I heard the dry, licking sound of flames. Through waves of heat I could see Daddy talking to Rudy, and old Mr. LaDue running toward them from the other direction. A couple of lower management guys came hauling up the road in a company truck. Rudy yelled something to Daddy. I was close now, but I couldn't hear what he said. There was a burst that sounded like an explosion. Cane is volatile, especially when it's ready for cutting. Black smoke was filtering up so fast it looked like water running backward. Daddy picked up a cane cutter's machete and headed toward the narrow break between two burning fields. He ran right in and disappeared in the smoke and flames.

In Daddy's office at company headquarters there was a big map of Oriente. Oriente was where we lived, and it was Cuba's largest, poorest, blackest province. It has the best climate and most fertile land for growing sugarcane. Castro has it all divided up now, I don't know why; another cockeyed thing like changing the name of our town, Preston, to "Guatemala"—which makes no sense at all. Back then the entire eastern half of the island was all one province, Oriente. On the map in Daddy's office, United Fruit's property was marked in green. Practically the whole map was green—330,000 acres of arable land—with one small area of gray that wasn't ours marked "owned by others." People have no idea, the scale of things. Fourteen thousand cane cutters. Eight hundred fifty railcars. Our own machine shops, to repair every part in the mill. Our own airstrip. Two company DC-3s, a Lockheed Lodestar and Daddy's Cessna Bobcat, which he used for hedgehopping—surveying land or popping over to Banes, the other company mill town thirty miles away. We had our own fleet of sugar boats that went back and forth to Boston. You could sit in the Pan-American Club, which had a bank of panoramic windows perched out over the water like the prow of an ocean liner, and watch the boats coming in and being loaded with bags of raw sugar. During cutting season, our mill processed fifteen million pounds of sugar a day.

The cane cutters were always paid their wages at the end of the season. Before the terrible thing that happened to him, Mr. Flamm, the paymaster, calculated their earnings in a giant ledger book. The workers lined up along the road, and Mr. Flamm unzipped a green leather moneybag and doled out pesos. The moneybag had a big lock on it at the end of the zipper, and the company logo embossed on the front. As each worker received his pay, Mr. Flamm crossed him off the list. He had the workers sign next to their names that they'd received their earnings in full. These guys were mostly from Jamaica. They spoke the king's English, but practically none of them could sign their name. They were supposed to just put a check next to it instead. Some of them didn't have last names, just

nicknames. Hatch Allain stood by to make sure there was no monkey business. It was all handled in cash. ~~They were paid straight cash, minus whatever they'd charged at the company store, the almacén.~~ If they'd drawn off their pay, it was recorded in the ledger book. The company let them draw off their wages so they could eat before payday. None of them owned cars or mules, and they had to do the shopping in Preston. For a while, the company paid them at the end of each workday, but Daddy said it was better to hold off and pay them at the end of the season. The reason was that some of those guys who came over from Jamaica to cut the cane found out they didn't like it so much. They deserted. They never paid the company for their boat passage from Kingston. Cutting cane is brutal, brutal work. It's some of the hardest work in the world. Bending over all day long under broiling sun, hitting the cane with a flat-blade machete. Leaves so sharp they'll slice you to ribbons. People get sunstroke; there were heart attacks in our fields. They have to work fast because the sugar starts to turn. The acidity content rises and it ferments if the cane sits for more than a few hours. The workers cut the cane and stripped it of leaves. Tied it into bundles and loaded the bundles onto oxcarts, and from oxcarts onto cane cars, which were shunted straight into the mill for processing. It was an eighteen-hour workday with maybe four hours of sleep. Those guys were up before dawn, and after dark they worked by the light of oil pots. If you pay people at the very end of cutting season, they stick around and finish the job.

The cane cutters in Preston hadn't always been Jamaican. Up through the forties, the company hired mostly Haitians. Every year Daddy went by ship to Cap-Haïtien to bring a bunch of them over to Cuba for cutting season. He had a gentleman over there, an absolutely elegant Frenchman named M. Bloussé, who contracted for so many workers to come over and cut our cane. I was just a little teeny kid, but I remember one of those ships, a double-stacked tramp steamer, docked in the Preston bay and packed with them, black arms hanging out the open sides. They unloaded those guys from the ship and transported them in open railcars. They might have been cane cars, come to think of it. The cane cars are just cages, with oval-shaped iron bars that bow out like a whale's rib cage, to hold cane stalks. They trundled the Haitians out to a compound, kind of a pen, and dosed them with salts. The doctor from the company hospital would go and have a look at them, Dr. Romero, who gave health certificates for servants—every servant had to have a certificate or they couldn't work in your home. The men were examined and left in the pen for several days to make sure they didn't have any communicable diseases, ophthalmia, or what have you. There was some nasty stuff on those ships. That one can make you blind.

When I was boy we had iceboxes, and the ice came in a burlap sugar sack surrounded by sawdust to keep it from melting. Every day a little horse came down La Avenida pulling a cart, and the iceman delivered our hundred-pound block of ice. After payday, and just before they shipped the cane cutters back to Haiti on those double-deckers, the Haitians would go down to Mayarí and buy trunks and fill them with things to take home, gaudy silk shirts in red or yellow, trinkets, bottles of Cuban rum, that sort of thing. One fellow bought a trunk, then went and got himself a hundred-pound block of ice. Without telling anybody, this guy put the ice in his trunk and carried it with him onto the ship. When they docked in Le Cap he wanted to kill the captain because he said the captain stole his ice.

We'd had cane fires before. When I was six, lightning hit, and several hundred acres burned. The company roused the workers, and they had almost a thousand guys out there hacking into the breaks with machetes to widen them and prevent the fire from jumping the road. They backburned so that when the fire got to the break there was nothing left to fuel it. Cane fires are notoriously difficult to put out. That morning, I could see flames spreading out across the southern part of our fields.

couldn't imagine how they would get the fire under control, even with every last worker out there helping.

Rudy was talking to Mr. LaDue and some other guys when I came running up. I'd never cut a break, but I grabbed a machete that was leaning against the little shed where poor Mr. Flamm—may he rest in peace—used to pay the workers. Mr. Flamm was a delicate little guy in wire-framed glasses and they'd built him the shed so he wouldn't have to stand in the sun as he doled out wages to the cane cutters. The machete was heavy. I couldn't have swung it worth a damn, but I was willing to try. I started heading toward the break where Daddy had gone in. Rudy grabbed me by the shoulders and blocked my way. "Hold on, son," he said. "We don't need you burning yourself up in that field." Just then, two guys pulled up in a truck and yelled to Rudy that they couldn't get the main valve open. Rudy said to come with him. We ran over and hopped into one of the trucks. He drove us down the access road a ways and parked. There was a spigot there, the opening to the main irrigation line. Rudy bent down and started loosening the bolt on the spigot with a wrench. He took the bolt off and turned the valve wheel counterclockwise. Nothing happened. No water came out. He spun the wheel. It was all the way open.

"Goddamnit." He threw his wrench on the ground. The air was thick with smoke, and one of Rudy's eyes was red and irritated. His other eye was glass. I started coughing and inched my shirt up over my mouth.

He spun the open wheel again. "We're shit out of luck, K.C."

More guys were arriving, fellows from company headquarters. Daddy's secretary, Mr. Suarez, was with them—he might have been the only Cuban in the bunch. They had machetes, and scarves tied around their mouths. They went in at the break near the busted main valve. There were no cane cutters out there. No mill workers, either. Just management—agriculture guys and pencil pushers from the offices.

"The batey is a ghost town," Hatch Allain, the plantation boss, yelled, walking toward us. "I've got the guards knocking on doors, getting people up around town. We should have at least a hundred guys out here soon."

The heat from the flames pressed against my face like I was getting a sunburn. I kept coughing, although I had the shirt up over my mouth. How Daddy could stand it in the thick of the fire is beyond me.

Mr. LaDue came down the road, and Rudy called to him that the valve was busted and there wasn't any water. Mr. LaDue looked even older than usual. His face was half-shaved. He had shaving cream on his neck.

"If we don't get the fire stopped at the access road, the whole town is going up," he told Rudy.

As more men appeared, Rudy and Hatch were yelling instructions, where to go into the cane fields and how deep to cut. I wanted to help out. I said, "Rudy, Hatch, put me to work." But Rudy said I should go home and have my mother call Mr. Smith, the American ambassador. What Ambassador Smith could do about a cane fire was beyond me, but I did what he said.

The cloud of smoke from the fire was shifting out over the bay. It looked like a massive black ocean liner moving across the sky. Ash was flaking down over the town as I ran back to the house to give Mother Rudy's message. It was like falling snow, lacy gray flakes that sifted through the air and wafted back up on the hot drafts from the blaze. Maybe it was more like fake snow in a snow dome than real snow. It just whirled around, a circular blizzard of cane ash.

Mr. Bloussé, who contracted the workers from Haiti, came to visit us once in Preston. He was dashing

like a movie star, blond hair pomaded and shiny, a silk ascot tied around his neck. He wore French tailored shirts with black onyx cuff links and military jodhpurs. A servant stood behind him, a young Haitian boy who was quiet as a mouse, a curious boy. Mr. Bloussé would snap his fingers and say something to the boy in French, and the boy would scamper off to run some errand. I figured he spoke only French or some version of it, a native patois, but on one occasion Mr. Bloussé's little Haitian boy spoke to me in English. Mr. Bloussé was in the parlor with Daddy, and the boy stopped me in the hall and asked if we had any books he could look at. This boy carried luggage and shined Mr. Bloussé's shoes. He stood patiently in the hall like he didn't have a thought in his head. And yet apparently he was able to read, and in *English*. I gave him some magazines to look at, and asked him how he learned. He said Mr. Bloussé taught him. That it was part of his training. I don't know what sort of training. Later, that same boy ended up working for the Lederer family in Nicaro. One of the Lederer daughters, Everly, the redhead, used to follow him around. It was the same boy, but he was a grown-up by then—just one more Haitian servant in Nicaro, except he had this curious history, which I knew about.

Mr. Bloussé brought Luxenil lace for Mother, and for Daddy a bottle of expensive cognac. He and Daddy drank and smoked cigars late every night. Daddy collected liquors from all over the world. On a mahogany cart he had miniature glass bears from Russia filled with kümmel, and bottles of yellow and green Chartreuse—the yellow glowed; it looked like it had a lightbulb shining up through the glass from underneath. He had orgeat and syrupy white crème de menthe in cut-crystal decanters, Spanish cider, and pear brandy that had a whole pear floating in the bottle. That one was from Portugal. The bottle was clear and the fruit loomed up like a fish under the surface of a pond. The younger guys in management came over to sit in the parlor, drink cognac, and visit with Mr. Bloussé. He'd been in the French Foreign Legion, he'd traveled all over the world. Zanzibar, you name it. Everybody admired him. He was wealthy, with a magnificent estate in Cap-Haïtien. I remember him talking about his three daughters. They were just old enough to get married, maybe seventeen or eighteen. Some of the guys in management wanted to set up meetings with Mr. Bloussé, to court the daughters. I imagined them as tropical French princesses, pretty girls in elaborate costumes, handmaid servants fanning them with palm fronds in a courtyard.

"Yes, I'm aware that His Excellency is in Havana, but my husband feels he ought to know," Mother said to someone at the embassy.

"Call the fire department? Yes, ma'am."

"Well, I'm not sure *why* he wanted me to call, but there must have been some reason. If you could forward the message, that this is Evelyn Stites, calling on behalf of Malcolm Stites, and we've got quite a blaze on our hands."

"Yes, ma'am, we've called the fire department."

Mother was too polite to tell the embassy receptionist that this was United Fruit territory, and we were the fire department.

After she made the call, Mother started crying and held on to me and wouldn't let go. Crying was something Daddy didn't tolerate. I knew this was her chance to get it out. I didn't tell her what Mother LaDue had said about the town going up in flames. I didn't need to. Through the window we could both see Ho, our gardener, aiming his hose up to wet the roof and the sides of the house.

By noon, the smoke coming from the cane fields was so thick it blotted out the sun. It was the middle of the day and we had the dregs of twilight, like it was nine o'clock on a summer night. Mother and Annie and the other servants were rushing around putting damp towels up against the windows.

sashes and under the doors. Ambassador Smith's secretary, or maybe his secretary's secretary, called to say she was still trying but had not yet located His Excellency. Ambassador Smith was never in his office when Daddy needed him. If the workers went on strike, or there was some misunderstanding with Batista's people about export dues, Daddy called and the ambassador took his sweet time dealing with it, busy playing golf at the yacht club or hosting a charity ball. He was a real high society New England type, Yale University, all of that. The Havana Yacht Club was so exclusive that they blackballed the president of Cuba. Batista was a mulatto from Banes, the other United Fruit town. His father had worked for us as a cane cutter. Batista had worked for us, too, for the company railroad. He started out as an assistant to a chauffeur on a company line car—that's an automobile with flange wheels, it runs on the track—and was eventually promoted to flagman.

I was in the parlor listening to the radio, to see if I could find out what was happening in the mountains. It hadn't occurred to me that the fire was deliberately set, but my instinct had been to tune in the rebels' wireless broadcast, Radio Rebelde. It was on the twenty-meter band, at 5:00 and 9:00 P.M. every night, and came in perfectly clear. Daddy didn't allow it, but I listened when he wasn't around, thinking maybe I could find out something about my brother. They talked about Raúl's column, and this and that victory, and the horrific phosphorus bombings in the mountains, and once I heard something about "brave foreigners" helping the cause. But no one ever mentioned Del by name. It seems surprising in retrospect that they missed such a whopping opportunity for propaganda. The oldest son of enemy number one, the head of La United, had joined the cause, and they aren't using it.

When the fellows from Preston and Nicaro were kidnapped a few months later—in the summer of that year, 1958—the rebels invited a photojournalist from *Life* to go up to the Sierra Maestra and visit their camp. From the magazine pictures it looked like those guys were having one hell of a party up there, kidnapers and hostages drinking rum and smoking cigars, goofing off and lying around barefoot in hammocks. Mr. Lederer from Nicaro posed with a rebel's hip holster, a drawn gun, and the caption said the Cubans had nicknamed him "Desperado." What sort of kidnapping is that? The rebels managed to look like real heroes—romantic-type revolutionaries—right there in the pages of *Life* magazine. It would have been quite a scandal that they had an American boy on their side. And not just any boy, but a poster child for American "imperialismo"—Delmore Stites, son of Malcolm Stites, manager of the United Fruit Company's Cuba Division.

I fiddled with the radio set and finally got Rebelde. It sounded like they'd closed down the highway east of Camagüey. They had a reputation for overstating their advances, and I didn't really believe it. I heard the parlor door open and quickly switched off the broadcast. A man covered with soot was standing in the doorway. He looked like a chimney sweep, charred from head to toe. The hair on his head was burned off in patches. It was Daddy. His eyebrows were gone. So was his mustache. He had a banged-up gas can in his hand, a green and yellow company can like the ones in Rudy's machine shop. He stood there and didn't say a word, just tossed the gas can on the parlor floor. It bounced on the wood, empty. Daddy never wore anything but the white ducks. He was the picture of a United Fruit man, tall and intimidating in his perfectly pressed suit. And here he was, his white pants filthy, jacket gone. Wearing his pajama shirt, the sleeves rolled up, burned patches on his hands and arms that were the color of raw steak.

The dented gas can lay on the parlor floor, its cap missing. Daddy stood over it in his burned and soot-smearing clothes. He looked too dirty to sit down on his own furniture.

"Found this out there in the fields," he said.

I couldn't tell if I was supposed to respond or keep quiet. I knew what it meant. Someone set the fire. If the cane operation was anybody's, it was Daddy's. The idea that people would want to destroy it, it was like they wanted to destroy him. And us.

"It's disgusting what these people are willing to do." He started coughing. "Those son of

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