

DON'T

ASK

ABOUT

THEM

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Don't ask about them

Félix J. Fojo

UNOS & OTROS



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ABOUT **THEM**

Félix J. Fojo

How are you going to recognize the characters of this story, which is nothing more than a novel, if flesh and blood people don't even know themselves very well, that's why I tell you don't ask about them.

The author

To those who have to start all over again

Deceive the heavens to cross the ocean (Mán tián guó hái)

Book of Qi (Anónimo) (Aproximadamente siglos IV y III ANE)

Time is a triad: the present as we experience it, the past as present memory and the future as a present expectation.

Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430 NE)

1

HAVANA, 1959

The man in the black beret explained to him, with the paused and slowed voice of a teacher, while they enjoyed a pair of stout and pestilent handmade cigars, that killing —executing sounded best, he clarified— was, in the long run, and inexcusable requirement of survival and a duty that history would reward with the eternal gratitude of the masses. In short, a revolutionary task.

“The dead, pibe, generally don’t obstruct the tasks of the living, they don’t argue, they don’t fuck around”, he said. “But above all they teach wayward people that making mistakes has its price”.

“Everything does”, said the clean shaved captain with his half-cubanized southwestern gringo accent that seemed funny to the one in the black beret.

“Yes, Herman, but for the deceased to be really useful to the cause, to the cause of us revolutionaries, they have to be many and their crimes well known”. —He sucked in air, making a strange noise within his asthmatic chest—. “That is the importance of summary trials with prosecutors, a defense, journalists, photographs and television reminders, for the people to get in their thick heads that to defend them, that pleading for their mercy is to be an accomplice in their crimes”. —He sucked in the smoke wrinkling his nose as if the blue vapor were a medicine—. “And with appeals, even if they’re this fast”. —He snapped the thumb and middle fingers of his left hand.

Herman was falling asleep, or better yet, he was stunned.

“Yes, sí... sí”. —He held back a yawn with an obvious effort.

“Batista didn’t learn anything from you Yankees, who created the Nuremberg Trials and going around accusing the losers of being war criminals”.

He coughed and spat, turning his head to one side, a dark spit that he brought out from the deepest part of his battered lungs.

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“Batistians tortured and killed people and then denied it, or said that they died fighting against the police or the army”. —He looked at the time on his wristwatch—. “They made heroes and martyrs, not examples. Understand what I'm saying, Herman?”

“A stupid man. So stupid, fuck!”

There was a distant noise: bars opening and closing, locks and latches, orders in mute, an isolated cry, ominous noises of an old colonial jailhouse at nightfall.

“It's us or them, Herman, and if we want to last, it'd better be them”.

“Yes, sí, better them”. —He kneaded the injured knee that hasn't scar over completely yet, perhaps because of the lack of a good medical treatment and rest.

The one in the black beret looked once more at the luminous sphere of the Swiss watch that El Jefe had given him, probably taken from the personal fortune of some jailed politician for being a thief or from some General of the previous fleeing government.

“Go to your thing, pibe, enough talk for today, in less than an hour those under your command will shoot the 9 o'clock 21-gun salute”.

“Yes, Commander, I'm leaving”.

“Have you had dinner yet?”

“A little bit”. —He grinned reluctantly—. “I prefer to have a strong lunch”.

“Do you have a loose stomach?” —He laughed sarcastically with his crooked mouth, much to his ironic and peculiar style.

The captain rested his hands on the unvarnished rough-hewn wooden bench and stood.

“I'm used to it I guess, I don't know, sir”.

The murmurs continued, the muffled sounds, but now increased in that enormous penitentiary installation that came to life —an irony— just at nightfall.

“Bullshit, you're not an old hag, pibe!” —He made a more or less kind gesture with his hand that never ceased to be an order.

“Go, *chico*, go now”.

The man in the black beret stayed contemplating the gringo, his eyes narrowing with visible interest, doubtful. He was almost a child grown by force and living an adventure that he himself had sought

and that it would make him, no doubt, a man or it would destroy him until it turned him to ashes. Anyways, life will have the last word.

Herman was walking now at a good pace, not looking back, feeling the impassive and hard look of the man in the black beret. He was limping slightly on his right leg, but he was quite agile. He was moving toward the block of galleys where hundreds of crowded interns waited. Waiting for whatever the events, the commanders or chance would have to give them, or even destiny, for those that believed in it.

Walking through the gloomy corridor, a kind of tunnel excavated with picks and sledgehammers in the living stone three hundred years ago or perhaps more by black slaves who erected that fortification into a massive elevation of cutting and humid limestone rocks, desolate and threatening, right in front of the mouth of the sheltered bag bay that was supposed to guard and protect from the attacks of pirates, corsairs, filibusters, the English, the Dutch, and other slags of the envious and aggressive outer world.

At the other side of the narrow mouth of the port entrance canal, the beautiful city, bright, open, clean and full of sun or stars. Car headlights and flashes of neon light, skyscrapers and the proud malecón, life, joy, beer, rum, music, dance, sex, and now speeches and work. Yes, work, and hope, and faith in something with no definition, or faith in one man, only one, who will know very soon to remain alone to rise in solitude to the heights, and also a lot of what people call the future, somewhat vague and blinding, like the ever-unreachable horizon in the deserts but of which you hold on to in the growing and overflowing tsunami. Something always better than the past and the present, after all, always ahead, in perpetual motion. That nice thing that they crushed at the end of their speeches and rallies: the bright future.

The man in the black beret now looked at the little square of dark sky that the huge surrounding walls allowed him to see. Huge walls stained with the rusty green of ivy growing from the wet junctions of the square stone blocks, upward toward the light, pointing towards a sky they would never reach.

He took in his cigar once more and thought that there, in that fucking citadel that the revolution had put in his way —and in his

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incorruptible hands—, everything was gloomy and ugly, depressing, even the shit of the traveling birds that upholstered the hard, chipped calcareous floor they walked on. As if hope had stayed on the other side of the massive gate, where the sun warmed and life seethed.

And it was true, dammit, from the immense gates in, darkness reigned.

But what did it matter if him and others like him, like the little American, would clear the way for the future. Like gods, or like the god in which he didn't believe in, or pretended he didn't believe in... Oh, of course, the god which he didn't feared!

Fuck those prissy little sluts, those priests eating little shits, those kids with their little bangs and their first communion little vests, fuck them.

Once more, with his sharp, sad eyes he followed the captain once more, while scratching his uncleaned scaly little wisps of beard. He followed him impertinently until the little captain disappeared around the corner of the passage.

A shrill order to attention was heard, then a different one, sharp, in a different voice and a sharper icy tone, if something like that was possible. Orders that came bouncing and bouncing in the echo of the always cold and dripping walls.

The man in the black beret couldn't help it —gladly, he was alone, with no indiscreet witnesses—, a shudder.

He dropped the cigar butt on the floor without bothering to turn to crush it and walked slowly, thoughtful, to his spartan office.

Alone. Alone and willingly steadfast in his struggle with life.

2

HAVANA, 1962

To the rushed marriage —*casorio* the old women named that ritual in Cuba— of Captain Herman Markis and Miss Ana María Santana Donremí —hastily decided a couple of days earlier in an outburst of insane passion in the dimness of a little hotel, those cheap and by the hour hotles that the habaneros called *posadas*— attended only four people.

Only four, no more. The bride and groom, a friend of his —a retired officer of the rebel army suddenly discharged for very obscure reasons who was now serving as a junior officer in a Ministry—,and Gretel, Ana María's sister, a steely and athletic sullen-faced teenager with a heart of gold, who promised herself not to abandon the bride at a time like that even if it meant more screams, tears, humiliations and conflicts for her.

Oh, and the notary, a bald potbellied bow-legged gentleman, a little grotesque but always smiling and kind, dressed in his blue-green militia uniform.

The five of them, a little dazed and crazy for it to end, fulfilled their respective parts in the swift ceremony. The judicial official accelerated the process *macheteando* the reading of the minutes, Herman said yes, Ana María did as well, they exchanged rings that had already belonged to them for a while, Gretel and Herman's friend signed without reading the paper that perfectly could have been a death certificate or an electricity bill and the couple kissed at the notary's request. When kissing, in the mouth, no tongue of course, they both blushed as if being caught, they shook hands and all went back to their personal affairs. Except the amanuensis, who after straightening the portrait of the Martyr that hung on the wall and filing all the papers of the marriage, he had to continue with the next one —that

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was his job and the man was an exemplary worker—, a nice old couple surrounded by a bustling court of neighbors, friends, children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Gretel, already at the bus stop, hugged her sister in a tight, long embrace as if she would never see her again. Then she waved goodbye to the stunned Herman as she climbed up, more like pushed by an avalanche of people, to the bus that would take her back home to her mother and her dark life.

After the execution of their father, half a year before, which by pure chance it wasn't conducted by Captain Herman Markis—he was admitted at a Military Hospital to have a surgery performed in order to repair his battered knee—the Santana Donremí family had begun the marshy and increasingly steep decline toward crumbling and disintegration.

The deceased—the executed people's enemy, the one in the black beret would rectify—, Rubino Santana, Ex-Lieutenant Colonel of the Army of the Republic, first in his class in the Cadets School of the Constitutional Armed Forces had opposed the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista for ethical and moral reasons, not for being a revolutionary, which he wasn't and didn't have it in him. The somewhat illusory and quixotic opposition had cost him his rank of Staff Officer and a few months of relatively benign military prison in an island jail—it has been written and said that it is Treasure Island, but in time Fidel Castro would change its name to “ ”— nestled in a low gulf and murky waters to the south of the Havana province.

When Castro triumphed, Rubino had been perceived as a kind of hero of honor and integrity, an example of a military man with a proud career, oblivious to the shenanigans and crimes of previous governments. An old soldier to whom the triumphant revolution extended its youthful hands and that's why the former Lieutenant Colonel immediately regained his position in the New Army, not his rank though, for the new masters didn't recognize those stars in an organization where the Supreme Chief proclaimed himself Commander, with capital letter C.

Everything went well, more or less, until Rubino began to allow his discontent to be seen, to mutter or to conspire perhaps—again—,

to try to save the lives of several of his comrades-in-arms, a commendable intention that, obviously, he couldn't reach. And he might also have conspired to explore, with others as naive as him, how to stop the unstoppable tide somehow of pro-Soviet communism that was already present in all institutions, government agencies, industries, schools and in all corners of the country in those turbulent times of the Cold War.

Once more the indelible and transparent Rubino Santana put forth in all the acts and decisions of his life the fucking stupid ethic and moral reasons as his wife, Ana, had recriminated him during a bitter argument, whom had an infallible sense of smell to vent disasters —witch radar, Gretel said—, was desperate and terrified at what was imminent. This had happened just a couple of days before he was detained, never again returning home or to his family.

To make the story short, the former Lieutenant-Colonel was arrested without the slightest resistance and in his own office in the Command of the New Army, interrogated without much violence or enthusiasm —what for, if he denied nothing and accepted everything— for a few days, tried as another Batista «criminal» and summarily executed by a motley firing squad, five hours after the brief trial in the same fortress where Herman Markis carried out his macabre bureaucratic functions, just as he described them when he was in the mood of making jokes.

The wife and mother, Mrs. Ana Donremí, an elegant and a very good looking woman at the beginning of her forties, loved her abruptly deceased husband —until very recently, a vital man and in excellent physical form— with a quiet but powerful passion that always reflected in her happy face and in her firm, although tolerant, motherly manners, except, and that was a very important trait, that she felt in the nape of her neck a nearing misfortune, that thick shadow of misadventure, that black bird of misfortune that she could perceive behind her as an unexpected newcomer.

And so, it was that fateful day of judgment.

Almost no one believed that such a good, chivalrous man like Rubino Santana was to be executed. Some optimists hoped he'd been given perhaps twenty or thirty years of prison, but she, Ana Don-

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remí, smelled death with her witch radar —Gretel never said it in front of her but she took it for granted— and alerted her daughters in time, from the very morning of their father's arrest, to get used to orphanhood.

The man in the black beret defined him very well:

“That stupid bourgeois is so, so, so good that he's better suited to be in heaven keeping company with our fellow St. Peter”.

“They're going to kill him, as sure as I'm Ana Donremí!” —The wife said as she kissed the crossed fingers of her right hand—. Don't even think that these miserable bastards are going to let a man like Rubino Santana live! —No one had ever seen her shouting and upset—. Or haven't you noticed the bastards that are ruling over us?

And she was right, as always, when it was about misfortunes and disasters.

And, as expected, after this sudden fatality, of that sudden terror, Ana Donremí never was what she once had been. The unbridled hatred and with no boundaries to the system, to the government and to the sons of bitches who had left her a widow and orphaned her three children, killed her appetite to live, dried her soul and ate away her sanity and reason.

Day after day they had to almost shove her out of the cemetery, where an unmarked tomb, with a little wooden cross nailed to the dry ground and marked with a number and a letter on top in white chalk, lied Rubino's pierced corpse. There were doubts as of which of the dozens of tombs with those that were executed in that secluded, little-visited strip of this immense Havana cemetery was exactly that of her husband. For the day, the night, in fact, of his execution —an important word of the affair according to the man in the black beret—, he wasn't alone. All the alleged conspirators, except the informer, suffered the punishment early that morning, and the undertakers, who didn't care about that mess, were not particularly careful in the matter pertaining to the earthly order of those that weren't longer among us, especially if those bodies that had been shattered by six FAL rifles, thrown in unpolished wooden boxes, had in their lifetimes been enemies of the country and the revolution, a revolution that, moreover, paid their wages and gave schools to their children.

And, to entangle things even further, one disgrace wasn't enough because they never came alone, the eldest son of Rubino and Ana, Máximo Santana Donremí, twenty something years old, had fallen prisoner almost at the same time as his father, although in a different episode, and not by mistake or a big crime but for candor and being a big mouth, more of a *comemierda*, according to the same commissars that threw him behind bars.

Máximo, an engineering student at the *Universidad de La Habana*, was quick to join a counterrevolutionary organization, one of many that, as would be known many years later, had been created by the government itself to attract, like glue to flies, and to neutralize, the probable or dormant enemies of the classes. Enemies that swarmed and swarmed until the very day when the proletariat would finally and absolutely triumph, and then, and only then, would the new man be completely free and wouldn't need commissars, judges, jails or firing squads, but until then...

They condemned him —the declaration of two repentant conspirators was more than enough— in a summary process in which, inexplicably, between more than fifty people, was indicted only one capital sentence, one, which if not a record it was a good average. Máximo was sentenced to twenty years in prison, a bargain, and the boy began to fulfill the sentence just a month after his father's execution, and to make matters worse, in the same prison: that gloomy colonial fortress called La Cabaña

It was there, when visiting his brother to see him for two minutes and bring him a canvas bag with a pair of underpants, a toothbrush, some bars of guava candy, some gofio and a quarter of a liter of condensed milk repackaged in a plastic pot, where Ana María Santana Donremí, the eldest daughter of the late Rubino and Ana, met the Captain Herman Markis, while she was neatly searched by two militia women —a prerequisite before she could see and embrace her brother Máximo— under the watch of Herman who watched with a stern face and military gestures the strict compliance of the prison rules during the restricted schedule of family visits.

It was either love at first sight, or an overwhelming mutual attraction, or the still unknown endorphins, or a shared whim, but whatever

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er it was, was. And how innocuous, obvious, even romantic—a word ridiculed by the new ideology— and beautiful, very beautiful.

And it was, of course, a cataclysm.

A superlative cataclysm.

3

GUANABO BEACH, 1963

Ana Donremí, unexpectedly, got out one day from her somber amazement to make her position clear before the veiled insinuations of emigrating from the island.

She was unequivocal and unappealable: while her son was locked up in a prison and her husband in a pit of that country of vile savagery, she wouldn't move from there, whatever happened. They could all go into exile, to hell, wherever they pleased, but she would accompany to the end, like a shadow, like a soul in pain, the jailers and gravediggers who all the time prowled the two men of her life.

“Go away, fucking leave, and leave me alone with my ordeal!”

She slammed her fist into the wall and when she turned to go back to her room and her world of darkness reaffirmed in a hoarse voice that no one had heard before: “And no one even dare to mention such a thing!”

And she closed the door with a blow that knocked pictures and ornaments down several feet.

Little less was heard from her from that moment forward.

To visit Máximo every once in a while —the visits were spaced out more and more because of the prisoner's rebel position against an institutional way of bowing down to the authorities which they called reeducation— and sit in a canvas chair to watch over her husband's tomb and to chat with him in a very low voice almost every day, were the only known occupations of the widow, which ended in making her a common spectral figure for the employees and the occasional few visitors to the vast necropolis.

Only when a visit to her son was due, Ana Donremí unleashed a frenzied activity in the kitchen, preparing dishes and pots of tasty meals —obtained in the street with a thousand and one sweats and

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jolts by Gretel's ant-like work—, most of which would be seized, examined carefully, thrown away or devoured by the prison guards themselves, fed up with the everlasting white rice, kidney beans, and Russian canned meat given to them generously by the revolution.

The woman ate meagerly or didn't eat at all, slept very little at odds and ends, prayed in solitude or perhaps communicated with Rubino's spirit, who knows, sustained by the help of Gretel, a girl with the sullen look and heart of gold, the only person in that house with a small but relatively stable inflow of money, which was a very modest contribution, of course, given the lack of well-paid jobs for citizens so marked by the political situation of the island, or as was said in those times, not integrated into the revolutionary process.

Gretel, at eighteen, carried —without allowing to show anybody her bitterness and her fears— the world's burden, her shattered world, heavy as a huge bag of debris that had suddenly fallen on her back.

She studied math, English, chemistry, physics, calligraphy or whatever to kids in private schools that were still surviving in the environment, but now very close to being absorbed by the governmental educational system; she transcribed, with her good handwriting, documents and letters, nursed her children, in short, she worked through her life and that of her mother, and in a way and not in the magnitude she wanted, that of her imprisoned brother.

Some relatives and a few old friends, less and less, because they were leaving the island without pause, gave a hand, “lent” a few pesos, bought some small food bills for her and her mother or gave her used clothes but in good condition. All this was made with a lot of concealment, always keeping the distance to not be compromised.

The philosophical sentence —the guerrilla philosophy of the man with the black beret—: “the dead teach the living that making mistakes has its price”, was demonstrating its functionality and effectiveness at a very fast pace, making friendship a crime and compassion a mockery. *Tirar una toalla*, that old Cuban rhetorical formula that explained why they gave a hand from time to time even to the most vicious rivals, was visibly out of date.

Ana María, the lady of Captain Markis, also collaborated, but in the most absolute secret. Only Gretel saw her from time to time, per-

haps once or twice a month, in solitary parks and less busy cafes. The two women, like leaves in the wind, frightened, barely holding their will to hug and cry until they were dried up, both caught in the crossfire of repudiation brought to the extreme from Ana Donremí to her daughter: “The one that was my daughter and that I don’t want to know anything about, nothing at all, the whore, the fucking whore that was able to lie down and wallow with the murderer of her father and her brother’s jailer!”

And above all, Markis’ growing difficulties in staying within the ranks of the army —the only home he had ever known in that little Caribbean island until the almost miraculous appearance of Ana María— after marrying the daughter and sister, all in one, of a pair of mortal enemies to the workers and the country.

Herman didn’t even talk or see the man in the black beret anymore, now minister and all-powerful maker of definitive international speeches and radical economic policies. His guerrilla comrades had ascended to far superior positions, closed to him, or they had descended into prison hell, violent death or anonymity. And perhaps the worst: being an American had ceased to have popularity and the glamour of the early days to become a source of suspicion, as one young lieutenant of the militias had once told him, a helpful and highly disciplined mulatto who had mistaken him for a Russian instructor:

“As everyone knows, Comrade Captain, you Soviets are our brothers, unlike the gringos, who are all exploiting capitalists, racists and CIA agents”.

He thought of explaining the truth to the boy but he preferred to keep quiet and let it go, why shake even more what was hopeless?

The beautiful rebel adventure, revolutionary, glorious and resplendent was over for Captain Herman Markis a long time ago. The youthful and solidary idea of helping to liberate a people from a dictator; to become, for that beautiful and smiling island, oppressed by a melodramatic General, into something like a Lafayette or a Pulaski, had turned into the creeping day to day of survival and suspicion. His adventurous and noble truth had served him to look with pride towards the future; his lies were now being more or less useful

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to hide his past and his true self, not with those above who knew him well, but with the subordinates, it was for the better that they didn't know him.

He no longer wielded his old bureaucratic role in that fortress of vampires —among which, he had perhaps unfortunately been the one with the longest fangs— and now he gave infantry training classes to recruits from all over the country who joined the new military service, and tried, if possible, to hide his true nationality, but common sense told him that this farce wasn't going to last long.

Moreover, his physical presence in that army that day by day was growing with officers formed in military schools of countries of Eastern Europe, began to be anachronistic, strange, almost improbable. He thought one day that he resembled an Indian with feathers, bow and arrows, with a horse without a saddle in a movie of Roman gladiators, and that wasn't going to last.

One afternoon, Herman met with Pardo, a tough, mischievous *guajiro* with whom he had shared the chill of the early morning hours and the hens —soups with feathers, they called them— that supposedly died of disease in the already distant times of the heroic guerrilla and tribal brotherhood of their brothers-in-arms, now he was a commander of the armored troops: Major Pardo.

Pardo, after shaking his hand with the firmness of a tanker, snapped at him without mincing words:

“American! *Chico*, are you still in these lands? You must have fallen in love like a madman of some female here, fucking hell! —And putting a big hand on his shoulder he let him now with one of those sly smiles that the Cuban peasants know how to give you advice without proving it—: “I thought you were up north, you boar, who can live there and you don't, it's true that God gives beards to those who don't have a jaw!”

That's why on a sunny Sunday with a light breeze he took his wife to the beach of Guanabo, on the outskirts of Havana, and while he caressed her tenderly, with the warm water of the Strait of Florida up to their chests and as far as possible from other human beings, he suddenly said:

“Ana María, listen to me, we're going to leave this place anyway

we can, so that our children, those we are avoiding now, are born in a decent place”.

She tried to look at him and the sun in front of her made her close her eyes, which increased the pair of fine tears that would come.

“I’ll go, Herman, wherever you take me, wherever you want to go, anywhere. —There was not only resolution in her words but even an immense relief—. But what do we do, my love, with my sister and my mother?”

From the warm and soft sand came the distant murmur of a battery radio with the twist, The Four Seasons, Elvis, The Beach Boys, Frankie Avalon, he couldn’t tell. Cubans loved American music almost as much as theirs, and they used the beaches and a certain loneliness to listen to Floridian stations abolished and persecuted in the country.

Herman ran the fingers of both his hands over her face and almost burst out crying too, perhaps from relief that he had finally made that decision and a little impotence at what he knew to be inevitable.

“We take your sister with us”.

Ana smiled with a vast and tired bitterness.

“Gretel will never leave, Herman”. —She put her hands on his hard shoulders—. “She will never leave my mother and brother”.

He was silent for a long second. Extremely long. He took a deep breath.

The music became more audible with a change of direction in the wind, it was the Zafiros, a very good Cuban group that imitated the Platters.

“You’ve heard of Commander Morgan”.

She nodded with a sadness he had never seen before.

“I directed his execution”. —He rinsed his mouth with sea water and spat—. “An American chosen to murder another American, and I did, do you understand?”

She nodded again, she pouted and pressed herself closer to him.

“For a sense of duty, out of fear, for being stupid, because my boss ordered me, for being an asshole, a coward, a fag, for whatever it was, there is no remedy for it Ana, and then, like a gunshot, you entered in my life”.

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She pressed her forehead against his, now he was crying.

“How long do you think it will take them to wipe me out?”

He hugged her tightly and as he always had, he felt that pleasant, quick erection that no other woman had provoked.

The music became dimmer now, far away.

Sweeter, even.

“Not only me, Ana María, wipe both of us out, to eliminate us so that there isn't even the memory of that”. —He was whispering in her ear, though there was no one in more than fifty or sixty yards, only the soft, warm, relaxing movement of wind-curved waves.

“Both of us, Ana María, both of us”.

He squeezed her until it hurt.

“I know, I always knew”. —She superficially scratched his back with her fingernails.

“Removing us from the picture they'll make us invisible, as if we had never existed”. —She gave him a flying, compulsive kiss—. “But if they need it one day, they will then say that the Americans killed each other, do you understand?”

She nodded, almost imperceptibly.

The music disappeared and the whisper of water remained as the only sound when the owner of the battery radio walked away through the sand.

“We've been here long enough, Ana”.

“So, what will happen to them?”

“I'll see what I can do, Ana”.

“Will you?”

“We'll see Ana, we'll see”.

4

KEY WEST, 1963

“My name is Rafael, Captain Markis”. —He let time float for a few seconds, as the manuals specified, but it came naturally to him—. “How did you manage to get here?”

“I think you know”. —He said it without irony—. “We stole a motor boat between four former officers of the Cuban army”. —He opened his hands frankly—. “We took it from a fishing cooperative that is in a place called Puerto Esperanza, a fishing village north of the province of Pinar del Río, as close as we could find to Florida”.

Rafael, an unmistakable Cuban and obviously an officer of some US intelligence service seemed to nod.

“Actually, three former officers, Captain, you were still active”.

“True, but I don’t think I am anymore”.

The Cuban ignored the comment.

“How did you come to an agreement? Taking into account the security control over there and the fear of possible betrayals”.

Herman took his time to answer.

“I understand the doubts you may have, sir”. —Herman knew perfectly well that he was talking to a professional.

“Forget my doubts, Captain, it’s a question that falls out of the woods, doesn’t it?”

“Everyone, the four of us, fought hard against Batista and we became friends in the times when friendship was valued, then things happened to us all, unpleasant things that disappointed us about that”. —Herman shook his head in a slight denial—. “We came to the same conclusion by different paths, and once you get there, what else can you do?”

The Cuban, quite slowly, lit an unfiltered cigarette and offered one to Herman. He leaned forward and lit it with a cheap canary yellow