

The Woman Who Wanted Bridges

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*No era bueno quererla; por los ojos
le pasaban a veces como nieblas
de otros paisajes....*

*It wasn't good to love her; her eyes
seemed veiled at times by mists
from other lands....*

—Dulce María Loynaz, “La Extranjera,” in *Versos 1920–1938*

I am with Nena, Kaki, and Yoyi the first time I go to Varadero Beach. I feel myself returning to the time of creation as my feet sink into the mythical sand. It is supposed to be softer than satin, softer than the sand of any other beach in the world. Mami and Papi always spoke about the sand at Varadero with a kind of reverence. After leaving Cuba for New York, we spent every Sunday in July and August camping out on Jones Beach. The gritty sand had particles of soot that stuck to your toes, but freedom from communism came at a price, my parents declared. Once they had saved up a little money, they took my brother and me on their search for pristine beaches in Miami and Puerto Rico, but none had sand that compared to the exquisiteness of the sand at Varadero, where they'd spent their three-day honeymoon. Somewhere on that satin sand in Varadero I must have been conceived, for I was born exactly nine months after my parents' honeymoon.

But now it is 1992 and I am in Varadero with Nena, Kaki, and Yoyi. I love calling my new Cuban friends by their diminutive nicknames rather than by their baptismal names, María de los Angeles, Raquel, and Jorge Luis. Until then I hadn't known it was possible to keep being called by your childhood Cuban name in grown-up life. In their company I return to the name I had as a child, the name only my parents still use to call me. I am Ruti again.

Like the child I was when we left Cuba, the child who in old pictures is held by the hand by her Mami and Papi as she wobbles along the wall of the

Malecón, now that I am back in Cuba I still need to be led by the hand. My friends have brought me to the section of the beach next to the old Dupont estate. I would not have known to go there, but Kaki's grandparents had a summer house in this part of the beach and she has memories of her extended family gathering there, all the aunts and uncles and cousins, before they were divided by the Revolution. The moment we arrive I know why Kaki loves that strip of beach. It is wild and deserted and radiant. Spanish developers, she tells me, have their eye on this virginal territory. They want to line it with luxury hotels. When we were there they had not yet deflowered it. They would soon enough.

The three of us make a run for the ocean. Nena splashes into the water in delighted leaps. Yoyi follows. Kaki hangs back, watching me hesitate at the water's edge.

"Aren't you coming?"

"Yes, in a minute," I say. "Go ahead without me. I'll catch up soon."

Kaki glances at me again. "Are you sure?"

I nod and she laughs, "You'll get so hot, you'll have to get in the water."

She slips on her snorkeling gear and dives in. She moves with confident, sleek strokes. Her training long ago as a swimmer with the Olympic team of Cuba still shows. She's comfortable in the ocean, glistening like a fish.

I'm not sure why I take so long to go into the water. Maybe I need to take a moment to breathe, to stand there and feel the sand caressing my feet, to take in the fact that I am in Cuba, that I am in Varadero Beach. I have come prepared with a plastic bag and I bend down to fill it up with sand. A gift for Mami and Papi, though only Mami will accept it. Papi wants nothing from Cuba, not even honeymoon sand.

Kaki is right. The sun is burning and the water looks inviting. With careful steps I make my way into the ocean. The blue-green water is clear, so translucent I can see my feet. I am propelled forward by the waves. My body rises and dips, rises and dips.

Just before I reach the point where I can't touch bottom, I stop. I'm only a little bit afraid. I can sort of swim, as long as I keep my head above water. I've never liked to put my head under water.

Nena and Yoyi are a few steps beyond me and Kaki is much further out, barely visible on the horizon.

"Come over here, it's not that deep," Nena calls to me.

I tell her I'm okay where I am.

"*Te da miedo, Ruti?*" Nena asks.

Nena, who's been traveling to Cuba longer than I have, knows about my fears and she's trying to help me get over them. She and I have flown together to Cuba. She held my hand and steadied me when the plane dove toward the island and I began crying.

According to the Cuban government, we were both "taken away" from Cuba as child-immigrants. Since we didn't make the decision to leave, we're granted a certain immunity when we return to the island. Nena wants to use that privilege to open a critical dialogue with the Cuban government. *No*

tiene pelos en la lengua, as the expression goes. No hairs clogging her tongue. I watch Nena confront Abel Prieto, at the time the president of the UNEAC, the Writers and Artists Union of Cuba, and now the Minister of Culture. She demands to know why esteemed writers who've recently left Cuba can't be invited back for literary events. She demands to know why Cuban Americans who are equally critical of the Castro government and the hardliners in the Miami exile community are denied the right to return.

She's so brave she scares me. Nena means "little girl" and I feel I need to protect her. Eventually Nena will cease going back to Cuba. She will grow tired of being brave. She, who others know as María de los Angeles Torres, will be done with her journeys of return to Cuba. Home isn't there anymore for her, she will say. But that will be years later.

For now she sees I am scared on that afternoon in Varadero and nudges Yoyi to return closer to the shore with her so I won't be alone. Nena and Yoyi float toward me and then we bob around together in the water like three corks, surrounded by an infinite sky.

Suddenly the water wells up beneath us so forcefully it almost knocks the three of us off kilter. Kaki appears, having soared under the water with such speed we hadn't noticed her approaching. She pulls off her mask and exclaims in her husky voice, "It's a marvelous day to go snorkeling. So many fish. So many colors. Just beautiful."

Kaki hands her mask to Nena and commands, "Go out deeper. Go see the fish."

Nena does as Kaki says and comes back exhilarated. "You're right, Kaki, it's unbelievable."

Yoyi goes next. He's thin as a rail, with the piercing eyes of a character from an El Greco painting and a thick salt-and-pepper beard that seems to weigh him down. As he swims away I worry he'll be swallowed by the sea. He barely speaks, he's a poet and measures his words. When he returns, he says in a low whisper, "*Vale la pena*." It's worth it.

It's my turn but I don't want to go.

"Let's leave it for another time," I say to Kaki.

"But what other time? There is no other time. Go, you won't see anything like this any place else."

I shake my head. "I'm sorry, I can't."

"I promise you won't drown," Kaki says. "I'll go with you. I was a life-guard for many years. I'll be there to save you."

I still say no.

"All you have to do is put your head under the water and open your eyes. Just for a minute."

"I can't. Sorry."

I could feel the sun burning my shoulders and back, but I was also burning with shame about my fears.

"*Lo que te pierdes, Rutica*," Kaki says, in a voice so gentle it shocks me. She liked to call me "Rutica," an even more tender diminutive than "Ruti."

I know I'm missing out on the chance to see something spectacular, something I'll only be able to see once in a lifetime in Cuba.

This feeling of being in Cuba and not being able to take it all in fully will come to haunt me later, on trip after trip after trip.

I can keep returning to Cuba till kingdom come.

But Cuba is lost on me.

Cuba is wasted on me.

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I remember well that afternoon in Varadero Beach with Nena, Kaki, and Yoyi, when my fear kept me from looking underwater at the beauty that was begging to be seen. I remember because I got the worst sunburn in my life and winced from the pain for days afterward. But I also remember because it was there, or I want to think it was there, on that satin sand, that the idea of bridges to Cuba came to me, the idea that Cubans had been torn apart by politics but could be reunited through poetics, the poetics of bridges, of claiming a common language of history, culture, and memory.

I've never been good at politics. From the time I was a young girl I learned to fear politics. It was politics that had divided us as Cubans and it was politics that had led to tears and sadness in my own family when I expressed views that opposed the hardline position of refusing any contact with the contemporary island. The idea of bridges appealed to me because I didn't want to declare my allegiance to one side or another. I wanted to try to understand everybody, the revolutionaries, the exiles, those who stayed, those who left, and those who fell somewhere in between. I also didn't want to distinguish between exiles and immigrants. That's why I started referring to all Cubans living outside the island as forming part of a "Cuban diaspora," drawing on my experience of the Jewish diaspora and using that elastic term long before other cubanologists started using it too.

Could I call for bridges to Cuba and pretend Fidel Castro didn't exist? I wanted to believe such a thing was possible. The consensus among Cuban exiles was that they didn't want to return to Cuba because of Fidel Castro. Much as they despised him, his name was constantly on their tongues. I wanted to return to Cuba in spite of Fidel Castro. I'd never speak of him. But I was terrified he'd plant himself in my path. Reporters and celebrities visiting Cuba swooned for a chance to have their fifteen minutes of fame with the Comandante. My fear was that I'd be forced to look him in the eye. He was the Medusa who'd gaze at me and turn me to stone.

My dread of a face-to-face encounter with Fidel Castro gradually evolved into a different fear: of finding myself in Cuba on the day he takes his last breath. What would happen then? Would the insane of Mazorra, the madhouse that sits perilously close to the Havana airport, take to the streets and laugh and weep? Would blackouts envelope the island in darkness? And most worrisome of all, would the military roll out their tanks and not let anyone out, by sea or by air?

In the years following that afternoon with Nena, Kaki, and Yoyi, I would literally become a commuter to Cuba, traveling back and forth from Michigan as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do. Yet I always feared I might be trapped inside the island. I went knowing I could leave. I had a ticket out.

During my last moments at the airport in Havana, on every single trip, I still grow dizzy and faint while waiting to be cleared by Cuban army officers who always seem to scrutinize my papers with excruciating care. It's as if I feel a primal need to reenact the trauma of my departure from Cuba every time I return. But I should stop worrying. I've spoken about my fear to our former neighbors, Consuelito, who is my mother's age, and her daughter Christy, who is my age. They still live in the same apartment building where we once lived in Havana. Consuelito and Christy, who have no experience of exile or immigration or any kind of travel outside the island, say not to worry, they'll make sure I always make it back safely. To this day, they recite the rosary for me every time I'm leaving Cuba. And Christy always says the same parting words to me, "*No te preocupes, Ruti, vamos a rezar por tí, para que llegues bien.*"

So now you know: I, a woman who's afraid of putting her head under water, wanted bridges. I, a woman who selected the bridge as the metaphor for her quest to bring Cubans together, find that I'm petrified of bridges. I can't drive over a bridge without trembling. Even as a passenger, crossing a bridge like the Verrazano that seems to go on forever, I hold my breath and pray I'll reach the other side.

The fact is I have a lot of fears, all of them contradictory.

I love the ocean but, as you already know, I'm also deathly afraid of it.

I'm afraid of the dark, yet I'm happiest late at night.

I'm afraid of flying, yet I travel constantly. At least twice a month, I'm on a plane going somewhere.

The thing I most feared was traveling to Cuba. Yet after that afternoon in Varadero Beach I vowed to keep returning to Cuba and not need anybody to hold my hand. The repeating island became part of my life. I went back over and over. I found a voice in Spanish and wrote poetry that Ediciones Vigía published in beautiful artisanal editions. I learned the stories of the Jews who had stayed, each of them offering a window onto a parallel life that might have been mine. I was still afraid, but I learned to ignore the ghosts that followed me everywhere I went in Cuba.

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Nena had told me that Kaki was a cousin of the artist Ana Mendieta, who had fallen to her death, or been pushed to her death, from a thirty-fourth-story apartment in New York City in 1985. Through an issue of *Sulfur*, a magazine published in Michigan, I had learned of Ana Mendieta's ethereal work, in which she used her own body to leave traces of her presence on earth, water, fire, and sand (she too had gathered sand from Varadero to bring

back to the United States). After our afternoon in Varadero, we returned to Havana and I wanted to ask Kaki about her cousin, Ana Mendieta, ask how she remembered her, but I didn't dare.

Kaki intimidated me. She kept her hair crew cut short, accentuating the strength of her jaw. She didn't mince words. If she thought you were a fool, she told you so. She smoked Populares, which gave her the husky voice, and she had the tough stare of a boxer ready to pounce at the first sign of trouble. She was a *revolucionaria*, alright. But not a *fidelista*, she declared. She didn't intend to leave Cuba because of Him. Cuba was bigger than Him, much bigger than Him. She planned to stay until *el último capítulo*, until the last chapter was written by History. Nobody was going to push her out or silence her. She had a lot of attitude, as they say. When she raised her voice just a little, Yoyi would wilt. That's why, even though she'd understood my fear of the ocean, even though she'd called me Rutica, I was afraid of how she'd respond if I asked about Ana.

Somehow I got up the courage. It was late at night and we were at Kaki's house in Playa, an elegant house that had belonged to her mother's family, filled with art on the walls and books on the shelves. A bottle of rum was opened and shared among us, to forget that the refrigerator was empty. It was the moment of *el derrumbe*. Things had fallen apart, the last utopian ideals were unravelling. Blackouts and hunger, hunger and blackouts, day after day.

To hold on to their dignity, Kaki and Yoyi refused to succumb to the boredom of whining about *el tema*. That was the only thing everybody else wanted to talk about. Still, in the midst of conversation, Kaki and Yoyi let it slip that they appeased their growling stomachs by sipping water each morning sweetened with a spoonful of sugar. But they didn't think the grind of daily life was worth talking about and soon went back to discussing literature, art, music.

Kaki was astounded at my ignorance of Cuban history and culture. I didn't know anthropology had already been done in Cuba by Cubans of the caliber of Fernando Ortiz, Lydia Cabrera, and Manuel Moreno Fraginals. I hadn't yet read the works of the Cuban literary masters, José Lezama Lima and Virgilio Piñera. I wasn't familiar with the songs of Pablo Milanés. No one had told me that the lyrics of "Guantanamo" were verses written by our independence leader José Martí, a poet of delicate frame who tried hopelessly to become a warrior. Kaki laughed and shook her head. "*Ay, Rutica, pero tú no sabes nada.*" She was right. I didn't know anything. But the idea of bridges to Cuba had been floating around in my head and I guess I'd decided it was time to see if Kaki would laugh at that too.

I'm not sure how I phrased my question. I have a lot of respect for the spirits of the dead and I didn't want to invoke Ana's spirit in vain. I think I asked, "Kaki, would you consider writing something about Ana, your cousin? There's a magazine at Michigan, I want to put together a collection, something about bridges to Cuba." She looked back at me with her boxer's

stare. And I thought to myself, What had I done? Why had I opened my mouth? I wanted to disappear into the night, as inconsequential as a moth.

Kaki stood up and walked over to a chest of drawers, an antique of carved wood. She opened one of the drawers and pulled out a few yellowed pages. "Here," she said, and handed me the pages. "I wrote this and never published it. It's about Ana. Maybe you can use it."

It was called "Silueta" and I read it immediately, breathlessly. "Years later you returned . . . You came with your Art, and we waited for you in the lobby of the hotel . . . You left and you came back several times. You were still the same little girl, passionate and argumentative. But now your soul was hard, as if covered with calluses . . . One day the news reached us: your silhouette had been carved, forever, indelibly, into a New York street."

This writing was a discovery for me. It was the bridge in the other direction, Kaki, writing from the island about her cousin and the impact of Ana's return on her, the one who stayed behind, the one who was there to receive Ana when she came back.

"Kaki, I must have this," I said. I held on to the pages tightly, preparing to fight to keep them.

Her gaze softened. "So you like it?"

"Yes. I like it a lot."

"You can have it. Use it for your *puentes a Cuba*."

* * *

Raquel Mendieta Costa, who I knew as Kaki, let me publish her piece, "Silhouette," in *Bridges to Cuba*. Afterward I invited her to the University of Michigan for the "Bridges to Cuba" conference, held in 1994. Much as we wanted to take pride in our bridges, we were in the midst of the *balseiro* crisis. Cubans were plunging into the sea on flimsy rafts in a desperate effort to get to Miami while Fidel Castro allowed the floodgates to be opened. There was no bridge for the countless numbers who drowned and ended up buried in ocean graves.

Kaki was one of two Cubans from the island who'd come, all expenses paid, to be a bridge to the thirty or so of "us" who were "here" and could pay for our own travel. We wore fashionable black leather jackets as the autumn weather turned wintry. Our island guests stayed warm in borrowed parkas that were ready to be donated to the Salvation Army. Throughout the conference, they zipped up their parkas and went outside by themselves to smoke. None of "us" who were "here" had any need for tobacco.

I didn't know that Kaki wasn't planning to return to Cuba. Kaki had decided to use the bridge that I was offering in a way I hadn't counted on, to become one of "us" over "here." She kept her secret from me very well. I didn't get wind of her plans until after the end of the conference. Maybe she thought I'd have an existential crisis, or maybe she just wanted to keep up the illusion a little longer that the bridge really reached all the way to Cuba.

But later I learned that she'd broken with the island in two hugely dramatic ways: she split up with Yoyi, leaving him behind in Cuba, and once in the United States, she came out as a lesbian, entering into a relationship with a Cuban-American artist.

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Jorge Luis Arcos, who I know as Yoyi, didn't attend the conference, but he participated in the book, *Bridges to Cuba*. His contribution was a letter-poem, "Epistle to José Luis Ferrer," addressed to a close friend who left Havana for Miami just before I met him and Kaki. In the poem, Yoyi shares scattered thoughts and quotations from books he's reading with José Luis, every so often breaking the flow of his narrative by inserting the refrain, "Diaspora, like death, interrupts all conversation." This reiterated line serves to remind the reader of the impossibility of maintaining a conversation with a friend who is absent.

Not even Yoyi could have imagined that one day, just over a decade later, he too would leave Cuba and write a letter-poem to say goodbye to Enrique Saíenz, a friend who was staying, a friend that now he was leaving behind. No, that wasn't imaginable then, back in that moment in the early 1990s when Yoyi was unwilling to forgive those of us who'd left the island. We were the killers, we in the diaspora who dwelled in absence, we who left nothing but death in our wake.

Yoyi was still in Cuba, steadfastly in Cuba, and he wrote of a present moment that seemed enchanted, telling José Luis how he passed the time with Kaki: "In the shade of flowering mangoes or beneath inconceivable stars, Kaki and I play checkers, play Parcheesi, play Chinese checkers, roll and smoke a cigarette, drink coffee, herb tea, bitter orange, sometimes a bottle of homebrewed wine." There was happiness, vanishing happiness in Yoyi's letter: "This summer, in Varadero, we picked up many shells!" In the next line, sad again, he enclosed in a parenthesis words that would later be prophetic: "little bones in the sand."

* * *

Kaki stayed and really did try to become one of "us." She taught part-time in Chicago and then became a graduate student in literature at Stanford. She'd been a history professor in Cuba, but to be a professor "here" she had to get the degree from the United States of America. She called upon me to write a letter of recommendation, which I did gladly, but with embarrassment, remembering how huge was my ignorance of Cuban history and culture compared to her vast knowledge. It wouldn't be long, I thought, before Kaki made a big splash in the academic world—soaring up from beneath, forcefully, as she had done years before, in the ocean, in Varadero.

And then one day I was with Ester Shapiro Rok and Alan West-Durán in Boston, both of whom had been part of *Bridges to Cuba*, and the phone

rang. It was Nena in Chicago telling us Kaki had taken her life in a public park in San Francisco. She had bought a gun, put it in her mouth, and blown her brains out. She was 49 years old.

The summer before, Kaki had returned to Cuba. She sank into a deep depression when she realized she was no longer part of the island, that her home there was gone. She had left her house to her only child, a son who'd married and sold her precious art and books in order to support himself and his wife. Had Kaki died because she'd lost Cuba and despaired of ever finding a real home in the United States? Had the martyrology of the Revolution and its proclamation of *patria o muerte*, sanctifying those who died for the country, scarred her psyche? Had she chosen to die outside of Cuba to demonstrate that the Revolution had failed her? Or had she died because of the withering of the passionate relationship that had led her to leave Cuba? Was she so brokenhearted she couldn't continue living?

Everyone thought they knew why Kaki had killed herself. But in truth all of us who knew her had no idea she was contemplating suicide. No one saw she was in danger. No one saw that she, the lifeguard, she, the prize swimmer, was drowning, and in need of a helping hand.

Kaki, who knew the history of Cuba better than anyone, knew that the freedom to die was the one true freedom we Cubans had always claimed as our birthright. She had died for Cuba, outside of Cuba. She knew that suicide was a path out of suffering that Taino Indians in Cuba chose in the early days of the conquest and that African slaves later also chose in the days of the colony. It is no accident that in Santería, or Regla de Ocha, as practitioners call the African religion that miraculously survived the brutality of slavery in Cuba, the dead must be called by name, one by one, before any ritual can begin. The deity of Olokkún, the one *orisha* closest to the Jewish concept of divinity because it can't be represented in images, being utterly unknowable to the human mind, lives at the bottom of the sea, watching over the multitudes who died in the crossing to the island and now die leaving the island.

Kaki had chosen to die on November 2, All Souls' Day, a sacred day in the Catholic calendar, when the living remember the departed in their prayers. She'd chosen to die asking for our prayers—all the prayers that we Cubans, an irreverent people who come from everywhere and have ended up absolutely everywhere, can possibly recite for her.

And that is why, even though I know I am not the person who should be telling this story, I am offering these words as a Kaddish for Kaki, a prayer for the peace of her soul. If the island reeks of death, then let us not forget that the Jews added their own grain of sand to the enormous beach that is the island of Cuba. Jews are a people who say Kaddish for the dead endlessly, who remember the dead for all time, and when they came to Cuba in the early twentieth century seeking refuge, they left their own obsession with death all over the landscape of Cuba, building cemeteries in tropical towns and villages that they filled with Stars of David that grew salty with the ocean breezes.

I wanted to extend a bridge to Kaki, but in the end it is this Kaddish I must offer, this uncertain prayer. I know I'm not responsible for Kaki's death, but I never forget that she came to the United States because of my bridge. She gave me her story about her cousin, Ana Mendieta, whose death she mourned, not knowing that she was foretelling her own death.

Kaki had died because she wasn't supposed to stay in the United States. She was supposed to return to Cuba, so that I could keep extending my bridge to her. But she had wanted to be part of "us" here. And "we" had welcomed her. She wasn't supposed to die. She was supposed to make good. She was supposed to take the "opportunity" offered her by the United States of America and become a "golden exile" like all the rest of us Cubans who shine with the luster of our success and fortune.

But no, Kaki had chosen to die. She had chosen to die in the year 1999, the end of the century. Kaki wanted to die turning her back on what the new century held for her, held for Cuba, held for humanity. Kaki burned the bridge. Eventually the ashes of that bridge, along with the ashes of her body, would make their way back to Cuba, to be scattered in that same ocean in Varadero where we had swum. In that same ocean brimming with the most breathtakingly beautiful fish that can only be seen by those who aren't afraid.

NOTE

Quotations from Raquel (Kaki) Mendieta Costa, "Silhouette," p. 75; and Jorge Luis Arcos, "Epistle to José Luis Ferrer (From Havana to Miami)," pp. 180–181; in Ruth Behar, ed., *Bridges to Cuba/Puentes a Cuba* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995). For background, see Louis A. Pérez, Jr., *To Die in Cuba: Suicide and Society* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).