

DIARY OF A BUTTERFLY
by Krassimir Damianov

translated from the Bulgarian by Angela Rodel

To my son.
In memoriam

From: eldiariodeunamariposa@yahoo.es
To: carlosduritti@miaminet.net.....
Subject: 1. A CHILD OF NATURE.....

You know how it is there early in the morning in Havana with the bums still asleep against the walls of the buildings; before even the ice wagons come by with ice for the bars? Well, we came across the square from the dock to the Pearl of San Francisco Café to get coffee and there was only one beggar awake in the square and he was getting a drink out of the fountain...

(To Have and Have Not, E. Hemingway)

1.

For a long time I couldn't find myself a girl after you. I kept looking for your type, your height, your elegance, your screams, your eyes, your voice... My eyes often played tricks on me, your slender silhouette would suddenly appear at the end of the street, in the elevator at a store, in the flickering of the streetcar or on the steps in front of the university. I mistook the Vietnamese girls for you – there were lots of them in Sofia at the time – because of your petite figure or I would simply imagine that it could be you with your slanted eyes. Even though you didn't fit with the cold or the slushy snow on those frosty mornings. Once, as I rode home on trolleybus number two, slightly tipsy, at around eleven o'clock at night, I pressed up against a woman in front of me. Unconsciously at first, there were lots of people on the bus, but then – I sensed her like an animal and felt that she sensed me, too – completely deliberately, with the desperation of

a condemned man! Because it was you, your scent of seaweed, your warmth, your body... I missed my stop, one, two, and three more... Finally we ended up alone in the empty trolley, stuck together like Siamese twins, skin prickling, without speaking, without thinking. As I got off the bus behind you I saw that you had a limp, a heavy limp... You stopped, turned around, looked at me with contempt, noticed my shock, and continued wobbling your way along the dark path between the apartment blocks in the unfamiliar neighborhood.

2.

The first letter arrived two months late, not until summer, with my parents. It was a story about an abortion. The murder, without even asking me, of a child that was not yours alone. You had gone to a friend of your father's, a doctor like he was, only a gynecologist. The operation was quick but terrible: after that you bled and felt awful, awful... You pretended to be sick and spent the day in bed with a fever, secretly crying for the unknown creature you had lost and whom you would never have. You thought about me, about it, about you, about the journey you would soon set out on. Why did you do it? Did you not tell me you were pregnant so as not to hold me back? Did you not yet know on that cold morning in the harbor, or did you keep quiet so you would be free to follow your predetermined path?

The next letter already bore a postmark from the U.S. You had gone there with your sister. At the beginning of the summer, if I remember correctly. The money I had saved up from working at the opera – I helped move sets – was no longer of any use to me; a ticket there could not be bought with cash. The currency of exchange was either death on the ploughed-up strip of land along the Turkish border or prison, if you were lucky and the border police spared your life... One of my schoolmates, who was serving his army duty while I was at the university, swore me to secrecy and told me one drunken evening that if any one of a group of would-be defectors – most often East Germans – managed to cross the border, they would kill all the rest so

that nobody would find out that one had gotten away. It's simple arithmetic, he explained, that way, all the trespassers are accounted for. I told him that I'd probably leave alone. And not like a fool. I'd already chosen the "channel" that I would slip through – or so I thought.

First, I'd go visit my aunt and uncle in Strumitsa, Macedonia, where I'd already been once before (lots of people tried to escape from neighboring Yugoslavia and ninety percent of them got sent back from Trieste). For that reason, I had chosen to go in precisely the opposite direction, to the south, I was planning a night swim across Lake Doyran, where my cousin and I had gone swimming five years ago during a carefree vacation. The border divided the lake in two: a Yugoslav half and a Greek half, on whose shores you could see green hills, railroad lines and a black locomotive creeping up the tracks towards you.

4.

The Yankees landed on the moon on July 20, 1969. I was stretched out on a dune on the southern Black Sea coast at a students' sports camp near Ravda, a place of wild sands and gnarled vineyards. I had been lucky enough to end up there because I had a good breaststroke and a passable front crawl. I had gotten the best grades in my life at the expense of my mentally challenged classmates from Group 4 of the sophomore class in Highway Engineering and was enjoying a well-deserved vacation. I could use a little practice, I thought to myself, before swimming across Doyran.

One of the handball girls was lying next to me. The two of us watched the first astronauts, who had just set foot on our natural satellite, still nobody's – all the others, like everything else, had already been divided up between two teams: the Americans and the Soviets. An old TV, placed on a stack of crates in front of the tents, broadcast the announcer's cold and expressionless voice, which reported earthlings' first steps on the lunar surface as if commentating a field hockey match. We were sneaking sips of warm beer, but I wasn't in the mood. The event went

beyond the borders of my understanding of the unity of my tiny universe, which I had been used to reckoning with until then. As Armstrong climbed down the ladder onto the moon on television, in the distance I could see *the real* moon against the backdrop of the dunes with dark poplars and stars. And beneath them, in the waters of the sea, yet another moon, albeit only a reflection. It was too much. I don't know what came over me, but I was seized by the irresistible urge to burst into tears before that triple, schizophrenic reality. I had clasped the girl next to me tightly, my excitement had infected her and she had begun trembling, too, when reflected in her anxious eyes – shut them, I told her, I don't want to see it – yet a fourth one appeared! It wasn't me – the Steppenwolf howled a trio within me:

When I woke up, the music had stopped, we were lying far from the camp, in the vineyard. It had rung out strongly, magnificently even. Because I had just witnessed yet another miracle: I'm hanging, having just awakened, dangling over a well, a true abyss, from whose depths and black waters the stars gaze up at me. Beautiful and terrifying at the same time: the sky and me above it, the girl is asleep, draped across my chest, the only material thing dragging me downwards. I don't fall only because something very powerful has grasped my back, some kind of magnet, there, where our wings should be: the earth.

Terrified, I pressed against her hot, sandy soil with every pore of my naked body, clutching the slender handball player with my last remaining strength. Her name was Petya, i.e. Petra – Piedra in Spanish, rock – for that reason I think that if I had let her go, she would have fallen far, far away into that bottomless night sky of mine, bathed in her own blood. No, I had not devoured her, of course, the *irreparable* had happened to her, as Estefania, my grandmother whose friend had been forced to marry merely because she'd been kissed in public, would put it. I won't marry anyone but you, I swore, even if kissed a thousand times by a thousand women! Yet at the same time I told her about you, about Cuba, about the ocean... I don't know how it

happened, but it was as if your unseen presence helped her overcome her fear, while I, entering her, waited for the earth to split open, for thunder to shake me. The breeze carried the far-off voices from the camp – “The Sailor,” that’s what they called it along the coast, because it helped boats get out to sea. Very soon I would cast off, too, and nothing would be able to stop me.

I didn’t immediately leap into the unknown that summer, however. I put it off until fall, until my parents had left after their vacation in Bulgaria. I hated them! They could’ve at least asked me how I was coping with my two beloved grannies and the miserable allowance that trickled back from Treasure Island. Outraged, proud with my humble savings from the opera, in a sign of protest I took off, without even saying goodbye to them, on a long farewell journey around the country. And with that, instead of coming to an end, everything began.

6.

The last great hitchhike of the 1960s began under conditions unexpectedly different than those anticipated. Shortly after I had come back from the sports camp and had dropped Petya off in her hometown (she told me that she had a sick brother to take care of and could not come with me on my trip around the country), Lena, the sister of my friend Alex’s girlfriend Natasha, arrived from the Russian capital. Rumors about Lena’s exceptional intelligence had crossed the border long before she was introduced to us by Alex’s piano teacher, the mother of the two girls, whose frightened maternal eyes were now fixed on me with alarm. The father also appeared – a professor, chair of the musicology department. He had a healthy, athletic look. He liked the fact that I, too, had a healthy and almost athletic look – minus the beard, of course, that little aberration, and my cut-off shorts, long hair, sandals, and a few other minor details...

“Fine, “ the professor began after a short, probing silence. “We’re not some uptight parents. We know that you don’t like the usual means of transportation. We’re counting on you,

young men” – a pause – “to take good care of our daughters and to let us know how much money you’ll need. We’ll see you at the musicologists’ vacation villa, unless someone would prefer to ride in my Moskvich. Have a nice trip.”

The Moskvich was the socialist Ford, while the vacation villa was on the northern seacoast, five-hundred kilometers and a thousand dangers, cops and surprises away. I didn’t understand why we had to risk it, but Alex had already proposed his plan to his teacher and she, to my great astonishment, had accepted it. No, there was something fishy going on here. “Look here, man, she’s my piano teacher and they’re her daughters, get it? I just *asked for* her permission. If you don’t like, we’re better off not going anywhere!”

I, however, couldn’t recall ever having asked anyone for anything. One whiff of parents and I would disappear. I didn’t like them one bit, your father included. Besides, I was nursing the hope of convincing Petya to come with us. She was pretty, if a bit too serious. We would “accidentally” pass through her town, that was the plan.

“Look, man, don’t spoil everything like you always do, got it? This time it’s enough just to be what you’ve always been.”

“Which is what?”

“A savage, that’s what!”

6.

“Actually”, Lena said, her gaze fixed on the mazut-stained cliff, smelling strongly of seaweed, of saltwater from the sea, as a small crab scuttled down her large, downy thighs, “what happened last night doesn’t mean all that much to me. I’m still living in another world. Sometimes I think I’m even living in another century. You pulled me out of it by force!” She smiled sadly.

“I’m thankful to you,” she went on, “No, don’t get too full of yourself, it was very, very noble of you. And, of course, kind. Sooner or later somebody had to do it. I feel a sense of relief now, but nothing more, mental relief above all, you can’t understand it, because you’re a child of nature, whereas I will again return to my monastery.”

“You mean the Leningrad Conservatory?”

“Not exactly.”

I listened to her. She had unfathomable abysses. She sensed a mystical darkness. She was writing a thesis on some Josquin des Prés guy, a French composer and organist from the seventeenth century.

“From the time of Villon?”

“More or less. Only one century difference. So you like Villon, huh?”

I listened to her lazily, I had no desire to argue; in the hot afternoon before the narrow cave where we were lying, the sun was drying my skin, leaving salty crystals of bitter white powder. It was the third day since we had reached the coast. To my mortification, Lena had washed my dirty underwear and scrubbed the bloodstains from her own. The sea purred meekly in the holes of the abandoned quay as if satisfied by her actions and presence.

“My sister mentioned you write.” Lena grinned. I liked her smile, it made her prettier than she was. “Yet despite that, you are still a child of nature. You do know that there are two kinds of writers, don’t you?”

“Really?”

“Good and bad.”

“Ha ha. Very clever.”

We'd set off along the route that ran south of the Balkan Mountains – “A land like a human palm!” as a poet from that very same time¹ would have exclaimed –together with Al and Natasha or in couples, lucky or luckless, from car to car, from truck to truck, each more beat up than the last, only to regroup in the recesses of the Sredna Gora chain, which divides the southern plains from the high valleys... We would meet up again at night, the four of us usually slept piled together like sheep, entwined in the natural curves our bodies presented, huddled in all of our clothes; before dawn it got cold in the villages high in the mountains that split the country in two and gave their name to the peninsula, today only a symbol of disorder: The Balkans. It was strange that someone during that carefree summer could have had *unfathomable abysses* – I wonder what they were.

We lost Alex and Natasha in the middle of the trip and like the dove from a Spanish poem I loved, instead of heading north we went south. The first evening we were left alone to sleep by a Turkish graveyard, we suddenly felt uncomfortable. After gathering our sleeping bags together on the inflatable mattress, we lay there in silence. “Are you asleep?” Lena asked before dawn. “I’m not made of stone, you know.” “Neither am I,” I replied. We burst out laughing. “Tell me about her, your Cuban Dulcinea, come on, I already know all about you.” Me, too, I said and started telling her in that way I had – once and yet again, and while I had her (it was her first time, too), I soundlessly whispered your named, ashamed and frightened that something bad would happen, it was like a sacrilege, I know, but nothing happened, on the contrary, only the voice of the screech owl made our hair stand on end. It called from the cemetery, where the phosphorous of the faithful shimmered between the standing stones, which bulldozers would rip out ten years later so as to leave the terrain anonymous and obliterate the foreign inscriptions on the gravestones. But not our memories, no...

¹ Georgi Dzhagarov (1925-1995) – a communist poet and chairman of the State Council.

Tell me, she said as dawn broke, even though she was tired, tell me one more time. And I told her, I told her about the triple moon, about the inverted sky, about the danger of sleeping out in the open, things that had often happened to me. Well, it's pretty, she said, even though it's nothing new, descriptions of the inverted sky can be found even among the ancients, but I think here you've gotten a bit carried away. OK, now lie back and close your eyes, she said – then she turned around over me – now open them again and look up! And she kissed me on the forehead. When I opened them, I let out a yelp of surprise: her short hair looked like a beard, her nose – still like a nose, but squashed, a mouth was missing above the smooth chin and that was the scariest part: under the nose and eyes there were just a thick pair of mustaches: her eyebrows.

“I'm the one who thought that up, not Aristotle,” she said proudly. “When we were little, I used to scare my sister like that.”

I don't know, but somehow I think that we're connected by some cordless telephone that I've lost the number to. I know you are there, on the other end. Interconnected vessels: what happens to me also happens to you. Is that how it is?

7.

Three letters were waiting for me in Sofia. In them, you told me about New York, impressed by its wonders: the buildings, the cold, the subway. But above all, the people. I tried to imagine them – people of all colors and races. You among them on your way to the hospital where you'd found a job. You studied for med school at night, a career ten years in the making, the hardest, but also the most prestigious. I was proud of you. I showed your picture to both my grandmothers. “Are they all so black, dearie? Aren't there any a bit lighter for our boy here?” Estefania, my paternal grandmother, would gripe. I felt like strangling her. And Bulgarians say they aren't racist! “She's pretty alright, she looks like an Egyptian statue,” Caliope, my other

grandmother, would comment. “But she’s not for you, child,” she would sigh. “You’ll ruin her life.”

The photos provoked dismay among my friends. No one had seen a real mulatto before. A born beauty, you don’t deserve her, Alex marveled, filled with magnanimous envy. OK, fine, she was ten centimeters short of perfection according to the classical Greek canons... But if it weren’t for that imperfection, she wouldn’t be in New York, but in Hollywood!... When is she coming, Costa asked, his eyes shining, although a real man wouldn’t show the whole world a picture of his girlfriend in her bathing suit. Yeah right, just because she wasn’t scrawny like his girl, who always went around in long pants so as not to show her legs like the Queen of Sheba. I didn’t say this out loud; I’d been knocked out twice – by this very Costa both the first and second times during street tournaments... Thus the prospect of your delicate presence in the homeland of temperate racists was not exactly clear. On the other hand, you never invited me directly in any of your letters. “You’ve got to see the people’s faces in the subway” or “you’ll see that here nobody asks to see your I.D. in the middle of the night” were more likely rhetorical phrases, rather than invitations. How and on what would we live? What language would I write in? All serious questions. Years would pass before I could beat Conrad’s record, he’d started off a Pole, but *Nostramo* was an exception. Besides, I had sunk so far into magical realism that I was not up for the States at all, instead I was feverishly piecing together an unusual and completely made-up life which the two of us had supposedly lived out together in the tropics.

Just the two of us? An entire world was welling up, ready to burst forth, *my world!* And you weren’t the only one there anymore, there was a whole gang: the junkie Alina (hope your sister will forgive me for the coincidence between the names), who had a monkey on her back, if you know what I mean – withdrawal. A blind mulatto whose concert you took me to and who sang very picturesquely about a tree above a precipice, with many colors and faces that he would

never see. Lots of lesbians and gays. That faggot Boy, who casually suggested, as we were getting dressed after a dive in Mariel, the twisted bastard, that we kill some time with a friendly fuck – can you imagine? (“Without any fagging around – just man to man!”) Or Marucha, a beautiful creature, a friend of your sister’s, who became the mistress of the old French farts who lived on the second floor of the house in Nautico. Marucha, who was always singing: “Con tu blan-ca palideeee!” I woke up one day at home and listened: the same song!... Mercedes, my mother’s nurse, whom I slept with before I met you, I never told you that, she was the only one and she looked so much like a rabbit that I transformed her into one in a story, a she-rabbit. Hans, a German from the Baader-Meinhof terrorist gang, now he was the real thing, they were looking for him all over Europe, while he was hiding out in Cuba. Another dangerous character, Zoher or Zohair, an Algerian with only one leg, one arm, one eye, and – begging your pardon – only one ass cheek; he’d frittered away the missing parts in various local wars and conflicts in North Africa. Havana in his day was bursting with anarchists, Trotskyists, Maoists, all kinds of dangerous dudes who had fled from justice and injustice around the world... and I’d put my finger on them *all* in my writing – literally all of them! – regardless of origins, nationality and race!

I was their sole lawful master. *I* pulled the strings in many other lives, even in that of the singer Silvio Rodriguez, who was transformed by me into a consumptive youth – he was that skinny – when he sang on the steps in front of the university once upon a time. Lina, my cousin’s pregnant wife, my first reader, who had come to spend a few weeks with Estafania before giving birth, was shocked at the stories I had entrusted to her. They’re full of grammatical errors, she barely managed to say before her contractions began (the child was born completely normal except for the fact that until his fifth year he was afraid of being sucked down the drain in the sink). And that whole world, that universe, didn’t speak English. So, did I really need to sacrifice it?...

One day I found a bottle of vinegar in front of the door of our apartment in Sofia. I tripped over it and the liquid spilled on the stairs, the bottle had been open. No, it wasn't voodoo, I blushed in shame like never before, realizing who had set it there... The visitor had come very early, he (or she) had crossed the entire city just to humiliate me, since vinegar was the only ridiculous vaginal wash that I'd known of then, the only contraceptive, I personally had bought it for Petya on the first of the few nights we spent in her apartment. It meant farewell and was a brutal reminder: I had completely forgotten about her after that summer. I had spent my time with Lena until she left for Leningrad, locked in enjoyable arguments, reading books or listening to music (Bach, Mahler, Bach, Weber, Bach, Hindemith, Bach!), without going to see Petya or even calling to ask how she was. After Lena left, I rushed to find the handball player at the gym, she went white when she saw me. "What's the matter?" I tried to hold her hands in mine, they were cold. "Is something wrong?" "No, it's nothing, really, I'm fine already." She didn't want to go anywhere, so we simply sat for a while in silence in the student coffee shop. Several days later, one Friday, I found the bottle.

9.

When I listen to Natasha playing piano at home – it's different from the concerts at the end of the year: lots of people, lots of fancy clothes, you have to watch where you step and what you say, you mustn't make a peep or clap (God forbid, anything but that!) between the separate movements of the concertos – it's like I'm in the sky. I feel like kissing her or catching up with her mid-flight and kissing her there, I imagine all kinds of things when she plays! She's like a weasel. Faster and livelier than my friend Alex, slightly stooped in her chair, like lightning in her attacks, even though she doesn't have his hands, which are almost like those of Sviatoslav Richter, he's only one centimeter short (well, there must be a reason for that, right?). I prefer her as a performer, I also like her when she speaks to me (I assume she relaxes around me, since I'm

a child of nature and not of music) and when she unwittingly touches me on the hand, I get goose bumps all over. For this reason I think I understand Natasha's problem: wherever she goes, she gets mixed up in messes of an emotional nature. She's like a sponge: she absorbs men's desires. Or more likely the opposite: she stirs up desires, I don't know, perhaps special waves with an irresistible scent. This is why my poor friend has problems (the more precise word is "cuckold's horns") as numerous as Natasha's visits with Matsa, her friend way back from kindergarten, who lives across the street and works at CDS, the central department store. To top it all off, she tells the poor guy everything. Afterwards they analyze what happened, cry, go to bed together and that keeps them going until the next time.

This time, however, takes the cake: the poor girl has fallen victim to unprecedented provocation! The evil Matsa has a boyfriend who in turn has a friend, but from State Security.² "And what did he tell you?" Alex yells from the other room. "What did he tell you, that son of a bitch!"

It's Christmas, we're at the piano teacher's house, Lena's gone, as are the parents – they're in Moscow. Only Vasilisa and her boyfriend Mladomir, a Decadent poet, he's meeting us for the first time. They introduce us and we feign indifference, while Alex screams from the room next door. All of us, of course, pretend that we haven't heard anything from the bedroom.

"Señorita," the victim sobs, "You... You said 'no,' which consequently means 'yes'..."

"Come on, now, did you hear that?!" Alex hollers at us more loudly still. "So that's what he told you? And you did what?..."

"I..."

"What about you!"

"Well, what could I do? Imagine yourself in my place!"

² State Security was the Bulgarian secret police during the communist era.

“Alex...” I try to calm him down as he insists, like my grandmother, on finding out supposedly irreparable things. We’re all depressed by such iron-clad logic and even more depressed by the news that Matsa’s boyfriend is coming in fifteen minutes to pick up Natasha. The enemies are right over there, in the building across the street: we can even make out their hateful faces. One of them comes out into the street.

“Which one is from State Security? I’ll kill him!” My friend asks in a whisper.

Everyone: “No, Natasha! Don’t go!”

But the doorbell is already ringing... I toss a quick glance around. The result of a simple count to three is not very encouraging: Costa’s not here, one of my front teeth is fake, and Alex, although he boasts of “iron hands,” is made of feathers everywhere else. Which leaves only the quiet kid with the cantaloupe face, hmm, *the poet!* And at that moment, Milagros, Cantaloupe Face, the Knight of the Mournful Countenance, steps towards me and whispers to me excitedly: “If I have to pick – not that I’m hesitating – I think I’m on your side.”

10.

Many years would pass...

“Know what?” I say to Cantaloupe Face sometimes – now and again we like to clean the Augean Stables of our friendship, as it has passed through so many squeeze chutes (he loved borrowings from Greek mythology), “I’ll never forget how you acted then, motherfucker! You looked like a scarecrow!”

“I know. And don’t call me motherfucker.”

“Fine, I won’t. But just think what would’ve happened if I’d started laughing right then? After Alex – unrecognizable, serious – opened the door and in an unexpectedly cold voice asked that they respect the peace and quiet of our Comrade Professor’s home, who at any moment would return from an emergency meeting of the Central Committee, and whose daughter was

now occupied with cooking dinner (for fuck's sake, while I wandering around in our comrade's very own slippers!). Yes, what would have happened, if I had broken the silence and burst out laughing when you got up to recite the goofiest poems, I had ever heard, your very own. *The monkey is climbing up the thermometer*. Remember?"

"I would've just gotten up and left."

"The world is a yellow watermelon and I am one of its black seeds."

"One of its white seeds."

"Aha. One of the barren ones. Now I get it, forgive me."

"Don't worry about it. And don't call me motherfucker."

"Okay, fine, then what should I call you?"

And I tell him a joke: "O Great White Bear, why have you given all the children in the tribe poetic names: Fierce Northern Wolf, Brave Gray Falcon, Linx Eyes, but you called me Little Dog's Ass! Please change mine, please, please!"

"Okay, Okay! Just stop your whining, Shit-Stained Spring Morning!"

11.

Precisely on December 31st, one of my front teeth fell out.

It was fake, screwed onto the living root that was left after a scuffle in my far-off youth, as dark as the Middle Ages. Made from my grandfather Miguel's bridge (a posthumous trophy) and one of the two Turkish liras inherited from a great-uncle who had killed a Turkish child while they were playing around with a rifle, fled from Macedonia and later made a fortune in Bulgaria. More or less all the gold I brought with me to and from Cuba. It was in my mouth when the Cuban customs agents seized that stupid diamond ring of Cristina's, which I had shoved in my pocket without declaring it and which to my great surprise turned out not to be fake...

Be that as it may, the precious decoration that I had so carefully kept in my mouth had already started coming loose on Christmas and on the last day of the year it remained definitely stuck in a chunk of homemade sausage. Horrified, I ran over to the mirror and saw those desecrated posters of the singer Emil Dimitrov, our erstwhile Julio Iglesias, to which glasses and a moustache had been added or a tooth or two blacked out (my case). It was absolutely disheartening.

I only then understood what “black bile” had meant in the book Lena had given me as a farewell during October. According to Aristotle it is that special substance secreted by artists, musicians and writers in particular, which spreads through the veins and reaches the brain, where it causes the loss of a sense of reality and the search for a new, invented one. I couldn’t see, however, what force could possibly inspire me to go toothless to Alex’s New Year’s fiesta, where the whole neighborhood knew me.

Sent out by institutions to delight children’s souls, thousands of bells, each more out of tune than the next, on hundreds of Father Frosts’ sleighs were already ringing in the air. They were accompanied by Snow Whites in short skirts as a consolation to the daddies, along with dwarves and dwarfettes of every age and size. The usual city drunks, still in possession of their five senses, were already crowding around the huge barrels of cheap mulled wine set out in front of stores. The Central Department Store, the mosque, the Covered Market with its shop-windows, the cathedral, even the tower with its red star atop the party headquarters, everything beautiful and ugly, eternal and ephemeral, which I would one day have to leave behind, gleamed and laughed, equally joyful with millions of smiling lights, wasting millions of kilowatts, while I roamed the streets, closed-mouthed in toothless despair.

I remembered ushering out the previous year in Havana. How different everything had been! Having eaten our twelve grapes,³ we splashed around in the black waters of the sea, or more precisely – the ocean: me, you, my parents, your sisters, my little sister, Kamen, Assen. And all my teeth were in place, but for how long, since only a month later perhaps... (*Quizás?... Quizás?...Quizás?*) Feel the rhythm? No, it's not Nat King Cole, but my footsteps in the wintry city.

Lena had also abandoned me. She had returned to her mysterious abysses on the banks of the River Neva with her hormonal problems solved; finally back with her darlings once again: Mahler, Bach, Weber, Bach, Hindemith, Bach. And Mozart? No, my dear sir – Cesar Franck!

Before leaving, she gave me another book to read as well, in Russian, of course: *François Rabelais and His World*. By some Mikhail Bakhtin. Not the most promising title. While reading it, however, for the first time I seriously began to think that I'd gotten on the wrong train of time. It turns out that there had been better epochs, when once a year everything was permitted: the lowliest plebian became king, and the king a plebian, the local police pelted crowds with wagonloads of shit instead of spraying them with tear gas, and everybody busted a gut laughing since shit, or so the belief went, brings good luck... Whoever could walk on his hands did, all sorts of insults aimed at institutions were allowed, nobody owed anybody anything for the duration of twenty-four hours, men were proud of their unfaithful wives, adorning themselves with cuckold's horns once a year, while money-lenders forgave their debtors' interest. The desire to fart, curse and talk nonsense in the rulers' faces was considered the participants' legal right, blasphemy was obligatory, and all authority was cast aside. It was the transcendent magic and the divine providence of the Sacred Medieval Carnival, which turned everything

³ New Year's revelers in Spain and the former Spanish colonies, including Cuba, consume twelve grapes at midnight—one grape for each stroke of the clock.

upside down once a year! Only thus could the most holy, noble and spiritual manage to pass through the sterling silver test of the material-bodily lower stratum, like the prophet Jonah passing through the belly of the whale who had swallowed him. Why, the author doesn't clarify, but he reaches the conclusion that people, without realizing it, continues to pay homage to it even today. From habit (or from heritage) they say "fuck off," "go to hell" and "screw your faith," while all the curses they let fly are nothing more than various verbal forms of turning the exalted into the *material-bodily* for reevaluation, not because they don't know how to fill five minutes with silence, but also due to the fact that they feel joylessly loved, led and governed in expectation of a carnival that never comes...

12.

Hidden in the withered raspberry bushes in the backyard of Alex's parents' house, I was sadly pondering all this as I watched the party through the wide crack in the wall, a memento from moving Alex's grand piano. Inside my mouth I was licking the lack of my beloved tooth: which was lying lifeless in my pocket following several attempts to glue it back in with chewing gum. And it was a good party, all my old friends from before I left with my parents for Cuba were there, and not those momma's boys with their whiny girlfriends from the conservatory. Natasha was with her parents in Moscow, so this time Alex had placed his bets on the neighborhood. Mile (now deceased) was there, a truck driver and brilliant trumpet player who had lost his teeth in work camps and prison; he would beat Mitsi (his wife) when drunk and would swear as they dragged him off that when the Chinese arrive, they would gouge out his executioners' eyes! Pisan or Cat Eye (alive), the neighborhood's leading man. Tsape (whereabouts unknown), a biker, tinsmith and loser. Lazar, housepainter and chronic alcoholic (alive), our class' straight-A student. Bobby, his cousin (economist, deceased). Angel, artist and

bricklayer in Madrid (chronic alcoholic and deceased) with his future wife Tatyana, a dressmaker who would one day take us to Spain (alive). Annie, her sister, ping-pong champion (wanted in Madrid for debt and fraud). Toto, Alex's younger brother, (ditched his brilliant academic career, chronic alcoholic, but alive), Alejandro Duhtev, Espiritusanto, future topographer and guitarist in Oslo (died of cancer a few years back, my dearest Alejo). Dot, a fan of Alex's music and masculinity (a babushka with grandkids, alive), her cousin Chubby Cheeks (a hairdresser and sweet little heifer back then) – Oh, wait a moment! And who is that next to her? Yes, you there, inside!... How the hell did you sneak in? Get out, get out of there, you good-for-nothing! Out! What do you want with the poor girl, anyway?... Alas, she is already reaching her hand towards his *material-bodily lower stratum* as a warm female tongue penetrates the gap left by the lost front tooth.

“So I was thinking...” I told her, because it turns out that it's me – “I was thinking... why don't we duck under the piano for a bit! Have you ever done it under a baby grand?”

At four in the morning I sat up to go to the bathroom and banged my head on the resonator. I stayed there to listen. Oh, it was magical – the music of pain! On the way back I glanced out the window and what did I see: snow! Dear God! The first pure, virgin snow, which was pouring from the sky and leaving the garden with its pear trees, laundry lines, withered raspberry bushes, cold sky, everything, the whole universe buried in wondrous peace!

“Hey, you're not thinking of leaving me alone here under the piano!” I heard a voice from below. So I took the big fluffy pillow that was rolling on the floor and lightly hit her on the head. Just enough to shut her up... Then I saw my black footsteps on the white sidewalk: hmm, they were getting farther away! How strange. I lost sight of my self at the corner, while she was crying, and my forehead, pressed against the glass, was burning with cold... I didn't do anything

to her, I swear, despite what they said afterwards, that I was a misogynist, a sadist, I'm not, I just whacked her lightly: the pillow was downy and covered her like a sweet morning kiss.

"I guess the toothless look works for you," Alex said in the morning. "You look like a pirate."

"Don't you want to look like one, too?"

I didn't say it, I was listening to the radio: New York was buried under an unprecedented blizzard, the report said. The power went out (capitalism in its final phase), during those two minutes and thirty seconds of darkness, there were one hundred and seventy-six murders, one thousand eight-hundred and three robberies at knifepoint and one thousand two hundred and fifty-four at gunpoint. Seven bank robberies. One unsuccessful coup attempt. And lots and lots of Road Traffic Collisions (RTC). I hoped that nothing bad had happened to you in that hell, it was simply the first snowfall you had ever seen in your life.

From: eldiariodeunamariposa@yahoo.es
To: carlosduritti@miaminet.net.....
Subject: 3. THE GREEN COAT.....

During my summer absence, other things had happened as well. Some of them completely irreparable: I'm talking about the nuptial plague that spread through Sofia with the speed of a tsunami. It was terrible, the unwed were dropping like flies, but I couldn't figure out who was wielding the swatter. Group 4 of the junior class in highway engineering, famous for its mentally challenged members and to which I had the misfortune of belonging, offered up three victims. Two of the fallen married each other. This reduced the number of weddings and for this last one I played the role of best man. Of course, this meant I had to buy them a present, something that

didn't fit into my plans: not that I'm a cheapskate, although "like breeds like" (and I did live with grandmothers, after all!).

The girl whom this wedding required me to pair up with beside the bride and groom was neither lame, nor crossed-eyed, nor severe and uptight as one might expect I would deserve, but instead was the most beautiful and exquisite creature I had ever seen – she turned out to be the sister of the girl from my group. Thus, when Alex saw Bonnie – after the ceremony I took her out for coffee at the Strawberry Bar and called him, get down here right away, motherfucker – he was dumbstruck. Taking advantage of her trip to the ladies' room, he confided in a husky and excited voice: "*My friend!* I'm speechless! I didn't think you were capable of snagging a girl like that. I mean, she looks like a movie star! Like a heroine from Dostoyevsky!" I think he meant Chekhov, since Bonnie exuded the softness of the lady with the dog, and not the author of *The Devils*, whose women were without exception fatal and destructive...

But I let that pass for the time being; in my absence he had suffered his fair share of misfortunes. The most amusing being his expulsion from the student brigade for organizing a strike to protest the bad food and the detachment commander, who was the daughter of a personal enemy of Natasha's father from the Union of Musical Activists. I had invited him especially to show my new acquaintance a real student hero, and also so he could tell her the story about how he'd given the gypsies from the village lessons in proper pronunciation. I was already doubled over with laughter, the guests from the wedding were literally howling, even the waiter stretched his leech-thin moustache into something like a smile. For a while, Bonnie futilely wrinkled up her pretty forehead, squeezed her mouth closed, her eyes glittering with the effort to remain serious until finally she couldn't contain herself and burst out in tears of laughter...

Otherwise only two things vaguely disturbed me about my new girlfriend: first, that she had a slightly crooked front tooth, which jutted forward a bit, just the slightest bit, it was even

attractive – simply one little defective pearl, which was why she didn't laugh, but rather smiled with her mouth closed; and the other was that her real name wasn't Bonnie like the girl from the eponymous Scottish ballad, nor did she "lie over the ocean" as you did, nor was she merely Bonna like Alex's grandmother, I could've swallowed that, but not put together with her surname, Kocheva, which in Bulgarian – no matter which language the word *koch* or "ram" came from – brought to mind only one thing: a male sheep (*Morrueco* or *carnero* in Spanish, according to your little illustrated Larousse). "How awful!" Mladi laughed. "Seriously?! Ha ha!"

I revived my long neglected Sofia-Plovdiv hitchhiking route at full steam. One-hundred and fifty kilometers one-way, three hundred round-trip. I had it worked out to such perfection that autumn that I would take up my post at dawn on the outskirts of Sofia, arrive in Plovdiv at 9 a.m. with some sleepy truck, pick up Bonnie at home, at ten we would happily set out for Sofia in a foreign Mercedes, spend our afternoons with my friends – she liked writers, artists, musicians, something that should've tipped me off from the start – and at around seven I'd escort her back to Plovdiv in a passing Moskvich and if I was lucky I'd arrive back home in the middle of the night with some garbage truck. A fun, happy life, heretofore unknown! Winged.

After more than a month of going back and forth on the highways like a shuttle, I reeked of gasoline to the point where Caliope began to suspect that I had ditched my studies and gotten a job at a gas station, yet I still hadn't so much as laid a finger on her, on Bonnie, until I finally read my latest story to her in my room one day. It was about a completely bald guy, one of those who doesn't even have eyebrows, who suddenly loses his wig in an icy stadium after a harsh body check. The poor kid, as I recall, was sitting in the middle of the rink, not knowing where to hide as couples, holding hands and in love, danced around him. Bonnie was intensely silent the whole time, I didn't dare glance at her, but from her hushed breathing I realized how moved she was and when I finished she asked me to close my eyes. I closed them and opened my mouth,

only to be very surprised when instead of the taste of chocolate or candy, I felt something small, damp and fluffy on my forehead.

It was a kiss, Milagros! It was my first literary honorarium, so I gently took Bonnie into my arms and began to lower her softly towards the dark blue bedspread, yet another one of Caliope's masterpieces, while *also* covering her with kisses, not devouring her with them as in the past... For the first time since that happy day in the old fortress at the mouth of the Port Mariel, dating back to the Spaniards, I undressed a woman as if one might brush pollen off a butterfly the dust of the ages from an ancient manuscript or free a painting from layers of old vanish. When I saw her beautiful young body in the blue waters of Caliope's cotton bedspread, her bashful and slightly nervous smile, Bonnie's smile – "Open your mouth, don't be ashamed, my little shark," I wanted to scream, "show me your tooth!" – I realized that goodness was infectious. I sensed that my days as the neighborhood swinger were over; once kissed, it was time for the frog to turn into a serious, normal prince, every young maiden's dream.

"Oh!" Bonnie whispered through her tears, realizing where things were headed. "Please, not now, listen. It's my first time and I want it to be really beautiful and not on these dirty sheets, forgive me..."

I wasn't really expecting it, and I don't mean the bed, which, of course, was beneath contempt. What I mean is "the irreparable." I'm not sentimental, but for the first time I felt flattered by such circumstances. I spent the whole night curled up next to her like a baby, licking her hands like a poodle, promising that I would never cause her any pain until she herself was ready and that I would never, never ever take advantage of her! That's right, I felt like a new person, one of the millions and millions of fools in this world who manage to find the patience for normal intimate relations, to have a home and a family some day, a beloved creature to wait for him during the long nights of soldiering, which were not so very far away... I was also

thinking about my father; well, he couldn't interrogate me this time, looming over the bed as he had in Nautico: "Tell me what your intentions towards this girl are!" What intentions could I possibly have had at age twenty, was he nuts? Oh, how well he understood that I *understood* the fear in his eyes, the eyes of a hypocritical temperate racist!

4.

On the day of the big New Year's party organized by the mentally challenged members of Group 4 – Highway Engineering, I went over to Alex's to have a talk. It was very important that everything happened such that our stopping over at the old house for the few hours that remained after the party and before Bonnie's train did not look premeditated. The crack in the wall – covered up with a painting of mine, the fireplace lit, and a recording of Jean Michel Jarre in action...

"Yes, indeed, one awaits the altar, the other the ax,⁴" he hissed from the door.

"What's wrong? Did Natasha poison your New Year's turkey? Is she pregnant?"

"I wish. They're going to expel me from the Komsomol, man!"

At first I thought he was kidding.

"Well, so what? One more honest non-partisan."

"Don't you get it?" He looked at me tiredly.

"No."

"If you don't get it, then how will they ever get it!"

"Fuck them! Why don't you just screw your bearded lady of a Komsomol secretary! I'm sure," I declared, "that is her hidden agenda. What could Natasha's father possibly have done to hers to make them go after you like that?"

⁴ A Bulgarian proverb.

“Well, things you have no clue about. And as a rule... I don’t share your methods for advancing within society. So keep them to yourself, *my dear friend!*” He sighed.

“Fine.” Now I was getting angry, too. “But then don’t call me that. I have a name.”

By five I was home. At six Bonnie arrived from Plovdiv in a fantastic long coat, May green in color, which swept over the mosaic in the entryway like a queen’s train. I must admit that her wide-brimmed hat, also green, disconcerted even me a bit.

“Is that your girlfriend who just got out of the taxi?” My mother asked.

“I think so. Why?”

“Nothing. She’s effective.”

That’s all she could think to say! In our whole damn family the cult of mediocrity had been honed to perfection. Estefania: your grandfather was quieter than a mouse and shorter than a stump, but look at you! Caliope: separation is to love what wind is to fire: it fans the flames, but also puts them out (a quote from a candy wrapper from her day). So she’s effective. I remember asking her one day in Havana, as we were strolling around at sunset: “Mom, what have you built over all these years? You are an architect, right? Will you leave some building, something that won’t be forgotten? Nope, nothing, just panel-block apartments. So what’s the point of a humble life?” This was during the time when we were still speaking.

“There’s always some point, if only that in these ugly blocks brilliant people like you will grow up,” she said.

No, she wasn’t being facetious. That’s why I felt so bad about the green coat remark: it was *a bit* longer than all the others on the street!

5.

When we arrived at the fiesta, nobody was there yet. I sensed, however, that Bonnie was restless: there was no one to show her new outfit to. Talk about a problem! So when the Tooth

showed up – we called him that because he had a gold one; okay, it couldn't compare with Bonnie's gem – she pounced on him at the door and cried: "Come on, we've got time, take us to the Grand Hotel Balkan for a coffee!" I forgot to mention that the Tooth – a fair-haired charmer, as elegant and refined as a dance teacher, whose father-in-law was director of a brewery – also owned a used car, a Volkswagen. I didn't envy him for it (although what student in Sofia during the 70s had their own car?), let alone for his powerful wife, nor for the countless beers we had downed at their place; two things had impressed me about his house: pictures with huge fish from Mongolia, where he had lived with his parents, and the first stereo system I had ever seen in my life, upon which I listened to the *St. John Passion* by Johann Sebastian Bach.

"To the Grand Hotel?" I said in amazement. "Can you really imagine me there?"

The Tooth, whose worldly refinement, if a bit sissyish, could not be denied, held out the keys with a smile. (He knew very well that I couldn't drive, the bastard!)

"Go on without me," I said. "I'm busy."

And I turned back to my salad.

"Please, please!" Bonnie was hopping on one foot like a little girl. "Don't ditch me! Come with us. Come on!"

Dear God in heaven, if I'd known what was coming, I would've gone. Of course I would've gone. To the Tropicana (where I never set foot), to Moulin Rouge, Tiffany's, the moon... Something, *someone* should have warned me: my mother, *you*, my slacker guardian angel, my goddamn internal voice. But no, I said "no," you guys go ahead!

Two hours later, around the table, the jokes had already begun:

"Where is White Fang? Little Green Riding Hood? The Big Bad Wolf?"

Idiots. I sat in the corner and downed a gulp of ouzo, *anis* in Spanish.

An hour later, the bottle half empty, they still weren't back. The stupid jokes gave way to fear: a lot of snow had fallen these past few days and at ten o' clock at night the streets turned into hockey rinks. We called the hotel – no answer. They've long since gone to bed and fallen asleep, you'll see tomorrow, someone whispered and everybody laughed. At the hotel?... No, man, at his father-in-law's villa! As if I wasn't there. Did they really hate me that much? So why were they doing it? Because I did their homework for them and explained to them what a vector was? Or because I let them copy from me on exams? I don't know. Outwardly I was calm, I downed my ouzo in one gulp – in shots – just like they'd taught me on the Soviet ship I traveled back on from Havana, but inside I was seething, seething... “That goddamn Mongolian fish! That blonde faggot! You'll pay for this, and pay dearly, you fucking pretty boy!” I whispered. While another voice inside me, different and from very deep down did not ask: and what does he really have to do with any of this?

“Whore!” I jumped up and smashed my glass on the floor. I'd seen people overturn whole tables piled with food and everything else, only to pay their bill as if nothing had happened, but I didn't go to that extreme, although not for lack of desire. I simply asked for a new glass, so I didn't understand why they all jumped up on the heels of the hostess, Bonnie's sister:

“When did you manage to get plastered? Stop drinking or you can leave right now!”

“So I'm the drunk one, am I?” I said. “Me? If you're kicking me out, I'll leave on my own!”

I slammed the door under their nostrils so hard that the whole building must have rattled. All twelve floors! And twelve angry neighbors popped out from every floor with twelve forked tongues like a twelve-headed dragon! Well, it was then that I realized that I had to run, that I was seriously drunk and even more seriously threatened and that all of this was a mean, dirty conspiracy, a huge complot against me! I'm not sure how, but I managed to escape from the

building in one piece, I ran about twenty meters and crashed down into the snow, right in the middle of the tracks that the most recent pedestrians had made. It was past eleven o' clock and nobody was passing by this way any more. Only the ravens came down to see if I was still alive or if they could already pluck out my eyeballs.

What silence!...

A half-hour later, already falling ever so slightly asleep, I heard a car door open in the distance. The Tooth got out first, followed by Bonnie, they carefully set off down the icy sidewalk. The two approached the place where I was sprawled out. I struggled to force some sound from my mouth, but failed. I tried to move a hand, a foot, but couldn't, I was as stiff as a board. "Bonnie... Bonnie... Bon...!" I whispered with the last remnants of voice, but nothing came out of my throat except snow, cigarette butts, dried leaves, and three winter partridges as she approached. Then all of a sudden the green coat covered half the night like a fan.

It's beyond belief, but she kept on walking...

Bullshit: she stepped over me. She stepped over me like a stump!

Lots of time passed. It was difficult to get up, but I managed it. My body obeyed and I got up, I'm not sure according to which law of physics. I went three or four blocks, getting my bearings thanks to the wires of trolleybus No. 2, there where I'd seen you limping, everything was white and you couldn't tell the street from the sidewalk. I went up the elevator, opened the door, rushed into my room and grabbed the small hunting ax out of my closet, the one Costa and I had took turns standing guard against bears with during a hiking trip in the Pirin Mountains last summer. I put on my father's sheepskin jacket, hung the ax on a looped shoelace, piercing the lining in the armpit of the coat with a pen, and ran back. Only Estefania woke up and hollered something after me in terror and in less than fifteen minutes following at a brisk pace the tracks I

had left, I reached the apartment block I had been thrown out of. The door to the entryway was unlocked. Well, all the worse for them!

The staircase smelled of vomit and piss. When I got out of the elevator and stopped on the dirty threshold, I could catch the scent of loathsome provincial students even from there. I waited for a moment, holding my breath. I rang the bell. Who is it, they asked. Me. They opened up. “Hey, where’ve you been? God, just look at you! What happened, did you skin a fox?” – they asked, meaning had I puked? They stunk of blood sausage, cheap wine and garlic. I suddenly pulled out the ax and started waving it around. They all screamed. Then Bonnie’s sister, who was right in front of me blocking my way, fell to the floor in a dead faint and I think that was what saved her. And all of a sudden – how strange – I was watching myself from the outside with the ax in my hand. Years later, I would read in a book of dubious reliability that this was the “exteriorization of the spirit” (if we accept that the spirit exists), and at the same time – in front of my eyes, or in front of the eyes of that guy down there – the repelling white surface of their even more repellent kitchen cupboards. At that moment Bonnie came out of the bathroom. Her sister was already lying on the floor and I took another swing, my hand was already sweeping downward when something or someone (but what, who?) ricocheted the little ax toward the cupboard and the door split in two with a crash. I realized what I was doing, threw the weapon out the window in horror, the glass shattered and I bolted down the stairs.

A revolution broke out behind me.

6.

I awoke with the cruel certainty that I had killed.

And immediately after that – the wild desire for it not to be true. Yes, it was a movie; we were coming out of the theater with Alex and he, with that annoying habit of his, rushed to share his own damn opinion while I was still inside, in the film, like now, where was I?

I was at the Edge of the World. The attic where Alex's new girlfriend lived. I lay sprawled out on her roommate's bed for two or three days with a high fever, sweating, but I soon recovered, I was left only with a slight cough and pain in my chest. Not that I had the courage to look the others in the eye. Polly brought me medicine, Mladi came to see me every day and tried not to mention the subject. Alex no longer tried to hide his mistress, we even slept together one night – Nina and I in her bed, he and the Slipper in the other. On the third day I had intercourse with Nina. When I suggested to her with a certain awkwardness that it might not be a bad idea to free ourselves of our pent-up negative energy, she gently told me that we already had freed ourselves of it on the first night, when she had found me amidst the trash bins. I felt disgusted – it turns out that my body had its own independent life and it could do whatever it wanted with me! “Krassi, gimme your cock” – the general's voice whispered softly in the darkness, but even with that affectionate ingenuousness (how old was she anyway?), being between her thighs, I couldn't get the green coat out of my mind, nor how, almost touching my forehead like a matador's cape, it had passed over me with a quick *veronica*. I saw it constantly before my eyes: the green coat, I heard its hissing wherever I was: ssssst!

I stayed on the Edge for a week. At home, they weren't surprised. They had gotten used to my disappearances. I told them I'd been at a cabin with Alex. My cough didn't go away, however, so Polly took me to the Regional Hospital, where she was doing her internship. They didn't find much of anything. A slight shadow. Perhaps the same spot your father had discovered after I coughed up blood in Mariel. I didn't want to admit it, but I was afraid it might have something to do with my own father's illness. I hadn't gone to see him at the TB sanatorium for more than a month. We hardly talked the last time, he was recovering, but he was no longer the daredevil he had once been, he become more and more gloomy, why should I worry the old

octopus, when deep down in my very own reefs I actually wanted to be infected, to die... At one point the Tooth approached me. I was sufficiently resigned to listen to him calmly.

“You had shaved your beard,” he said, “so I didn’t recognize you at first. But then again, I don’t think you remembered who we were either. I left you two to sort it out and went back to the party. That was a mistake.”

“Definitely. Where had you been that whole time?”

“Sorry, I didn’t know she was your girlfriend, I’ve known her since she was a kid. But I’m also under no obligation to give you any explanations, right? But it’s not what you’re thinking.” He gave a crooked smile.

He just might have been telling the truth, Ivan the Tooth never did come to class. He would show up at the end of the semester, so there’s a good chance he didn’t know about Bonnie and me, he knew her only as the little sister. But he could also be lying. Now, however, for the first time after all those years, I realize that I had forgotten that little detail about shaving. I can’t imagine how I could’ve forgotten, but once I’d halved that one-liter bottle of ouzo, I went into the bathroom: I wanted to punish Bonnie, she really liked my beard and I shaved it, scraped it off my face. And it was a nice beard, soft, and as soon as I came out like a sliced-up egg, everybody burst out laughing. That explained something, but not everything. Ssssst!

7.

Although I was somewhat recovered, the first signs of spring brought a new evil – the *interhaunch*. This came from the mouth of an eighty-year-old professor (not one of Bakhtin’s), whom Mladi was interviewing for some historical study. “That demon is to blame for everything in the world, young man!” the old man had frightened him by yelling out the door. “The whip between our legs!”... So, when I sensed its springtime call, I decided to get everything over with once and for all – to abandon my former life, my studies, my favorite books, which had clouded

my mind to the point of raising a weapon, my dear parents, whom I'd only wasted my time on and following the fine example of my Uncle Miná, Caliope's brother, a truth-seeking veterinarian who constantly moved from village to village – here he spotted alleged swindles with meat, there abuses with salami (truth does not exist where salami is concerned) – to take my place among the people on some national construction site. In one of those “smithies of men” that so much was written about in the newspapers.

The way there passed through millennial Plovdiv, metaphorically and literally (the site was located in the Rhodope Mountains, the cradle and shroud of Orpheus) and besides Mladi, no one else was supposed to know of my plans, at least not until I had arrived. We parted in the recently opened Columbia Café, where I often went to meet Latin American students and brush up on my Spanish. He was supposed to help me sell all my beloved books, without making any attempt to stop me. He had understood what this was about – sacrifice. A hecatomb. Near the antique shop where we sold them, in the window of the Agricultural Bookstore in the “pests” section, I glimpsed a curious title: *The Diary of a Butterfly*. I liked it. But then – nothing more, I simply registered it visually.

Bonnie lived close to the Central Train Station, under one of the millennial city's famous seven hills (in reality five: one demolished and two combined), the first time I had called on her since my unsuccessful attempt at murder. I had only sent her despairing letters, to which she had not responded.

“I can't live without you, I love you!” I moaned.

I felt someone killing himself inside me.

She smiled sadly. “So why didn't you tell me that before?”

“I meant to tell you that night. It was going to be your present from Father Frost.”

“Yes, and look what happened...”

“Bonnie, I know it’s terrible, but... what more undeniable proof of my love could you want?”

“But that kind of love...” she hesitated, “is all blown out of proportion.”

“Whose proportions? Yours?”

“No, no, yours. Don’t look at me like that.”

My mother used to tell me how as a child I was so loving that when I saw other kids, I would run towards them in delight – happy, fat, arms open wide for a hug – and knock them to the ground! Out of love. I think that for the first time I realized how little I had grown up...

“Was Milagros afraid of you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then why do you want to trade a horse for a chicken?” She smiled even more sadly, no longer hiding her small defect. “I didn’t imagine our relationship being so...” Bonnie couldn’t find the right word.

She had already said it: disproportionate. We sat for a while longer. We ate “princesses” – grilled sandwiches with ground beef, onion, red pepper and egg – and I never saw her again. The last thing she did for me was find me a cheap hotel.

“Why did you ditch me in the snow? Didn’t you recognize me?” I asked as I left, almost choking on the words. “Why?”

“You came towards me. You were rambling incoherently in some foreign language,” she said through tears. “I got scared when you fell and ran to get Ivan for help. But when I couldn’t find him, I ran to get the others. By that time you were already gone...”

That was her version. It didn’t sound so implausible. But what did it matter now how it sounded? What did matter was that we were once again alone. Me... and you.

At six in the morning there was a knock on the door – telegram. Come back right away your mother is very sick stop Alex. That’s the last thing I needed! How had he found me? And while I ran towards the train station, I realized for the first time in my life how terribly much I loved her. I gradually calmed down on the train – the first local train at 7:01 which I assume still travels on the same schedule even today – I heard her voice in the thudding of the sleepers, the train was lying in fog and they at times disappeared into the open fields, at times echoed threateningly in the dark holes of the tunnels. I felt fear, but now a sweet and calm fear, not that of the hour of the sharks, on the contrary, it seemed as if everything was heading towards its predestined end. The telegraph poles were swooping low, falling outside the window as if hewn down before flying backwards. I was the only passenger, hypnotized by the monotonous noise, finally alone after everything that had happened to me, I was melting away into well-deserved and limitless solitude. If I slashed my wrists with the razor I had taken out of the open bag beside me, only horrifying immortality would have gushed out of them...

On the platform of a small, completely empty station, whose geometrical hopelessness momentarily reminded me of a surrealist painting, De Chirico, a man appeared, running. Why are you running, the local trains never leave on time! With ear flaps and a basket, he peeked through the windows of the empty compartments as he ran as if looking for something. The nearer he got to mine, the more uneasy I became, because I realized what it was; he passed me by, I hid behind the dirty curtain the first time, but he reached the end of the train and came back with an even edgier expression, until he finally found what he was looking for: me. I heard the noise of his roughly shod boots, his boorish blustering down the hallway, his loathsome breathing, I prayed for him to pass by. But no, first, he opened the door, then he dropped his repulsive basket on the floor and asked hypocritically:

“Is this seat free?”

The whole train was free, Milagros! The entire fucking empty train!

“Geez!” The newcomer stunk of homemade wine, his blue eyes gleamed with happiness, steam rose from his ridiculous hat. “There’s not a living soul around!”

And he sat down across from me.

I went to the toilet, looked at myself in the mirror for a while, such as I was – a pathetic, pale-faced intellectual with a razor in hand – and laughed, I laughed and laughed until I cried! I shaved, washed my face and returned to the compartment more serious now, I took out my small notebook and started to write. He talked, I wrote, nodding without listening to him... “The Diary of a Butterfly” I wrote on the first page. No, it wasn’t a bad title for a novel in three parts. Larva, pupa, imago: Lightness, Darkness, Freedom...

I didn’t know then that I would be writing it my whole life...

From: MariaDicaprio@gmail.us.....
To: eldiariodeunamariposa@yahoo.es
Subject: **11. PORT MARIEL**.....

I’ve started this letter twice. The first time hiding the pain, not paying attention to it. Typical me. My father always said that I should have been an actress. I probably would’ve made a good one. The second time was different. I just let go and the first thing I wrote was that you’d ditched me like a dog – pregnant, no less. I let the pain speak and drove the knife into you. But I didn’t mean to hurt you. That wasn’t what I was feeling back in ’69. I never felt hatred. I felt pity for you and for myself. And so I started over a third time – this letter. After you read it, rip it into two, into three, into thirty-three pieces. A piece for each year, because it’ll be the only one you get.

Everything was subconscious, I see that now very clearly – it was love with no holds barred. Is that what the girl with the green coat called “disproportionate”? It called to me and I followed you. I followed you to the sea, under the sun, to the library, to the concert hall and I was happy. I remember

sitting down on the couch to think when I was only eight years old – I already had an internal life – but yet in the moment that decided my fate I wasn't thinking at all, for the first time I experienced the feeling that would haunt me my whole life, it was like a loss of innocence... That's how I see things now, back then I thought you would come back, you kept telling me you'd come back and I wanted to believe you, I tried to shore up my belief. But who could say whether they'd let you come back... Afterwards I regretted not telling you, but it was already too late – part of my heart died, I killed it.

We left Cuba on June 19, 1969...

When your letters arrived in America, I thought I would die. I was already living in New Jersey with my godmother. I shut myself up in my room and read and cried all day. Everyone in the house realized what I was going through and had no idea what to do. My older sister, Carmen, felt really guilty because she was the one who had convinced me, pushed me towards escape. She truly suffered with me and with your letters. I didn't know how I could ever see you again. Later you were getting ready to go to Spain, but I couldn't leave the country. I was a political immigrant, an alien, a little monster with no rights whatsoever. And you had no way of leaving yours, as you kept writing to me, it was a country you still believed in. What a delusion! If I had gone to Bulgaria, a communist state, so that we could be together, it would have meant going back to prison. I was in despair, I couldn't stand the thought that we were separated. We just didn't have any luck. It was impossible, impossible!...

That first New Year's in New York that you talked about was very sad. My mother and father weren't with us, you weren't there, I don't know who I missed more. I wanted to talk to you, to see you, to touch you, I was very lonely. And I continued to be lonely... I felt emptier than a glass vase. All that was left of me was the shell.

I think it was around '73 when the amnesia started. My consciousness decided to erase all memories of you. What kind of darkness was lurking within me to make me forget you? What thoughts and sorrows were destroying me?... I'll never know. What I do know now, however, is that I have no recollection of your face, your kisses, your scent. I don't remember the places we went together or Port

Mariel with the little ferryboat, the old fortress, the schools of fish that seemed to flow around us, their bodies tracing the outline of a powerful magnetic field. How beautiful it sounds. But I remember Mariel from 1980, when my mother phoned from Havana.

Two weeks before she called, we had learned from the newspapers that on April 1, several Cubans had crashed a bus through the fence of the Peruvian Embassy. Fidel was furious that they were given political asylum and decided to teach the Peruvians a lesson by withdrawing all the embassy's security guards. Less than forty-eight hours later, there were more than ten thousand Cubans inside!... Without food, without water, without toilets, struggling just to breathe. News about the incident flooded the international press. Fidel risked losing face before the entire world. For this reason, he allowed 1,500 of the people who were already inside the embassy to leave for Costa Rica. And so their eye-witness reports about the horrors inside reached the outside world.

Then he opened Port Mariel. The Mariel I remember.

He said: whoever wants to leave can leave. The state newspaper *Granma* and megaphones on the streets announced that he was offering this opportunity. In this way, he got rid of many political dissidents who were causing trouble for him. He also got rid of criminals, prostitutes, the mentally ill, and people sick with highly contagious diseases. He opened the port on April 21st and closed it on September 26th. More than 120,000 people managed to reach Key West. How many drowned is anyone's guess. According to some estimates, the number of people who lost their lives in the Gulf of Mexico trying to escape from Cuba during that time reached 100,000. I should have been one of them.

Two months before mom called me, I had a dream. That, dreaming, is something like a family business for us. She, for example, as a maid at Havana Libre, had dreamed on the eve of the Bay of Pigs invasion that some half-pig, half-human creatures were coming out of the blood-filled sea and writhing in agony on the beach. The next day the armed forces slaughtered those who had arrived by sea to topple Fidel's regime. Almost all of them were killed. I also had a dream before Mariel, except that I dreamed I was flying and that I flew all the way to Cuba. Almost the whole countryside was flooded, no less than twenty-six inches of water covered everything. I circled above it until I discovered something like a plain,

the only dry place. And there I saw a group of people waiting. They were my mother, my brother and other people I didn't know. I called to them, swooped down over the plain and told them to follow me. Only my father was not with them. I looked for him and couldn't find him until I flexed my wings and soared upwards again. They all followed me and we flew together, like a flock of birds.

At that time I wasn't yet engaged to Phil (I find it funny how you thought he must be some handsome black man, when in fact he is Italian and already bald). We had had a falling out in '78, but stayed good friends. He offered to accompany me to Cuba. I thanked him, but said it was my job: being Italian, he had a hot temper and had no idea what communism or the complete lack of human rights meant, besides that I didn't know how long everything would take. He owned two businesses at the time: one produced fuse boxes and the other was a bar. I don't know how he did it, but he hardly ever slept. He gave me a thousand dollars for the trip. I put in a request for vacation at work and got ready for Cuba. At the time I was renting a little apartment, a studio in Upper Manhattan. I was living alone and had just had a falling out with my most recent boyfriend, Howard, as well. He was a redhead with blue eyes, he couldn't stay out in the sun for long. And like most redheads, he liked to pick fights (he was a Jew). So I got rid of the both of them.

When I got to Miami, I didn't have anywhere to stay. My godmother had moved down there, but I didn't want to stay with her. There was no room. My sister Alina had a friend named Eddie Cuza – he was a fashion designer. He developed dresses and created patterns for a high-class label. He had a spare room so I settled into his apartment on Flagler Street. He was gay, and both very cheerful and sad at the same time. One day he decided to work at home. First, he heated up some water and put some dye in it to color the silk for the dresses. Then he took my measurements and sewed me a tight-fitting white dress. The result was incredible. He created a pattern so they could reproduce it for the store. They sold 500 of them as wedding dresses – just imagine, all inspired by me, nobody's bride! I met other gays and political activists at his house who had already escaped through Mariel. One fifty-year-old señor whom I believe Fidel personally loaded into a boat. I never asked him, but it didn't seem like he had wanted to leave. They had made him go. He had been a set designer at the Tropicana. It's hard to explain elderly people's desire

to come here unless they were being persecuted. That gentleman told me stories about gays that would make your hair stand on end. He described how they would lock them in holes with rats to torture them. Most gays had different fates, all filled with suffering and deprivation, but the thing that united them was their self-destructiveness. They had no idea how brutal their new homeland could be. I talked to them and tried to give them courage and comfort. I told them that there were opportunities here and that they would be fine. That they had to be strong, very strong; the fear and panic in their eyes was unforgettable.

Like I said, I didn't have much money. My friend from work, Dorothy, started passing a petition around the hospital and managed to raise five hundred dollars and she sent them to me in Miami. The doctors, the staff, my coworkers, they all helped me! This made me really happy. One acquaintance of my godmother's knew some guy who was also getting ready to go to Cuba. I went to see him and he said he was ready to leave in two days. I gave him the five hundred dollars. But then suddenly the motor didn't work, then something else went wrong. I didn't know what to do. I could only cry, because I realized I'd been tricked. But there was no point in crying – that sorts of thing happened everywhere.

Then my cousin Rhonda who also worked at the hospital, put me in touch with someone in Key West. This señor's name was Andrés and the next day when we went to the harbor to talk to the fishermen and check out their boats, it was obvious he knew what he was doing. He wanted to make sure they were in good shape and also take a look at their keels. He said it was important. He liked one twenty-eight-footer, wide and with a flat keel. The captain was a husky blond from somewhere down south. Nice, and highly religious, I figured – he had named his boat after a verse from the Holy Scripture: *Acts 5:12*. I looked it up in the Bible and saw that it talked about miracles, crowds and the mentally ill. I should have remembered that before getting into the boat! That night Andrés and I slept in his boat, and he told me his story.

He had left Cuba at the age of eighteen. He had worked hard and scraped the money together to buy a small apartment. He wanted to go get his mother from Cuba. He had bought furniture and fixed the place up. He had prepared all her paperwork, but two weeks before receiving her authorization, she had passed away in Camaguey. That man, otherwise so strong, started crying and couldn't stop. I went over to

him. I had to hug him, because my heart was about to explode. He finally calmed down in my arms. He said he would help me go get my mother.

In Mariel I had to fill out a list with the people I was requesting. I wrote down the names of my father, my mother, my brother, my Aunt Ida and my godmother Alicia's niece. That would use up all the money I had left besides what I needed for gas on the way back, which was far from cheap. Alicia would pay for her niece.

Days passed. We had to wait for a reply from the Cuban authorities. And from the military police who controlled the bay. There was a government ship anchored there. I think they also sold food on board. I didn't even look towards the restaurant. I didn't have any money and suspected that it was outrageously expensive. I bought my lunch and dinner from some stalls on land where they sold pork and rice with sauce, almost always the exact same dish. Bland and disgusting. It looked like a pile of dog food! But I would always gobble it up anyway...

Despite my small size, I usually eat four times a day. At work they would tease me because I often brought food from home. I liked my own cooking and am a picky eater. They called me the Tasmanian Devil, like the cartoon character that would eat everything in his path, since I can also chow through all sorts of stuff when I'm hungry, because I've always had low blood pressure, even back in your day, that's just how I am.... But the lack of food was nothing compared to the lack of toilets. It was terrible! I had to take a water-taxi every time to go to the restrooms on the ship, and you always had to wait in line for hours for the bathroom. There was no privacy whatsoever. Anyway...

The men fed me, the owners of the other boats; Alex, who had a luxurious yacht, made me fruit shakes. He also taught me to drink café au lait. I had never been a coffee drinker, I didn't like the taste. He would cook and invite me to lunch sometimes. He had supplies delivered from Miami. Rumor had it that his income wasn't exactly legal (drugs), but that was only hearsay, I don't know if it was true, I didn't have time to look into it. One nice day I put on my bathing suit and took a swim in the bay. I had shaved and I got an infection. (You say that we swam there naked once upon a time, how sad: when I was there, the water was already so polluted that I had to call the port doctor.) Thank god it was a woman. She gave

me a topical antibiotic and I got better quickly, which left me with only one problem: the men. They really wanted to know exactly what had been wrong with me.

The government finally sent an answer, I think it was five or six weeks after our arrival, I'm not sure. I couldn't believe it: they told me that I had to take thirty-one people in my boat! If I didn't, they wouldn't release any of my people, one for every three passengers loaded by the government! I replied that it was physically impossible for the boat to hold thirty people. It was very small. The officer's response was that if I didn't take them all, my father could not leave Cuba.

In the morning I got in the huge line in Mariel and finally got in to see the commandant in the afternoon. I announced that my father was seventy years old and would be left all alone in such a case. So why don't you stay here with him, the commander said and I just stared at him. Thirty-one people in a twenty-eight-foot boat means less than a foot per person. Do you want us to drown? Now it was his turn to stare. He got rid of one, leaving me with thirty, and despite the fact that I hated him at that moment, I do believe he helped us survive... I made a new list that included my aunt and her two-year-old child and a whole bunch of neighbors, to make the best of the $x+3x=30$ formula. The truth was that it didn't cross my mind then that I would have to pay the captain for them when we got back.

While we waited our turn, lots of things happened. The boats cast their anchors and tied themselves together in groups in the bay, where you once dove for spiny lobsters. I think the only thing left there now are sharks. Human sharks. Our group included Andrés' boat, my boat, an American yacht, whose owners made friends with my captain, Alex's luxurious yacht and a few other boats that sometimes tied on to us. There was also one belonging to a guy by the name of Tony, who began visiting us regularly. He was a photographer who had lived in Nautico, as you had, and I suspect he knew me from there – the world was smaller than a handkerchief! He had come to Cuba alone to hawk supplies, gold, everything. Buying and selling. But I also think he was an American spy, because he always took my picture against the backdrop of the Cuban navy vessel or the Russian ships were always sailing in and out of the bay. Perhaps I'm a little suspicious of him because one day as I was sitting on Alex's boat, I realized I had to go back to mine for some reason, so I got up and took off, skipping from boat to boat.

That was dangerous, because the decks were always wet and slippery, you could easily fall and break a bone or a tooth. Tony took off after me and, taking advantage of my cautious movements, soon caught up with me. As I was teetering in one of the unstable boats, he came up behind me and rubbed his thing against my ass. I couldn't move! When I got back to Alex's yacht, they were all already sitting together (including Tony). I asked Andrés to lend me his knife. The men looked at each other – and refused to give it to me. Later when we were alone, Andrés asked me what had happened. Nothing, I said. The next morning, Tony untied his boat and left. I never saw him again.

One day they announced that a small storm was coming. Andrés was afraid to stay tied to the other boats. He said that the boats could ram into each other and get damaged. He preferred to take his into the bay until the storm died down. I went with him. It was very exciting. The sea would throw its nose in the air and the boat would fall and hit the water hard. A fine, warm drizzle was coming down. It was beautiful and not very dangerous. I asked him to teach me to sail. He agreed and started to show me. I grabbed the rudder and steered for quite a while, even during the storm. That first lesson turned out to be invaluable. When it was over, I stood up in the boat, closed my eyes, it was heavenly. What a moment! Later Andrés mentioned that he thought I would be scared. Who me, scared? Thank God he entrusted me with the boat then, it saved our lives.

Sometimes we would sit around and talk about politics, about life. The men were very conservative and irrationally anti-communist like most Cubans. I always try to see things as less black and white. I chose my words carefully, but Andrés still pulled me aside once and told me to watch what I said. Word had gotten around that some of the things I'd said sounded downright communist. I shouldn't forget that I was among Cubans. If they'd only known that I had been in love with a child of communists for years!

First, the authorities gave a shrimp trawler called *The Blue Rooster* permission to set sail. I don't know how many people were on board, at least 250 or 300, the government had packed that ship full up... I went to watch the passengers getting on board. A huge line of people passed before my eyes. Each with his own heartache. A middle-aged woman pushing a wheelchair with another elderly woman in it, that

could be her mother, I thought to myself, her hair is completely white. They got on board and that sight was enough for me. My nerves were frayed as it was. I went back to the boat and laid down to rest. It was only 7:30 in the evening, but I fell asleep and had another dream. In it I saw the little old lady standing up amidst the berths, screaming in terror, as bloody water flowed from her clothes. I woke up in a panic: she had been torn apart by sharks! Her white hair was bleeding, the right side of her head and face, her hand were missing... It was past ten o' clock.

I got off the boat and heard the men yelling. They were jostling, clinging one to one another and crying. *The Blue Rooster* was sinking and the drowning passengers' screams could be heard over the CB. We could all hear what was going on. But the fucking Cuban navy would not allow the boats out to save them! If someone set out in a boat, they threatened to shoot at him. The Cuban coastguard had fast Polish patrol boats equipped with machine guns. *The Blue Rooster* sank. And everyone died.

* * *

The government finally gave me permission to set sail. They allowed everyone on my list to leave except for Silvia's brother. He would have to wait. A whole twenty years! They also put two madmen in my boat. Everyone they shoved off on me had been instructed under threat to say they were from the Peruvian Embassy, so everyone outside would see what kinds of riff-raff and parasites had been inside. There were even some comical cases: two guys who didn't have anyone to pick them up and whom the government had refused to let go ended up in prison after they got drunk and raised hell in their neighborhood, in despair over having to stay in Cuba. But from prison they were shipped directly to Mariel with a group of extremely dangerous criminals. Counting them, we were exactly thirty. When the police brought my people, they looked scared to death. I hadn't seen my mom since 1969 at eleven o'clock in the morning. It was September 8, 1980.

We set sail on September 8 at two o' clock in the afternoon, after they allowed us to weigh anchor. We'd been sailing for less than an hour when we saw a big flotilla of boats drifting ahead of us. We were still in Cuban waters. A Cuban patrol boat approached with its machine guns aimed at us and ordered us to stop. They didn't offer any explanations. Too bad, since the weather was perfect for sailing, no wind or

waves. It was absolutely calm and hot, but they made us stop. I don't think we even bothered trying to drop anchor – there was no bottom. And that was really bad, because boats like that wobble a lot when they're not anchored. So we wobbled, lashed together, without a wave in sight, as if the ocean itself was breathing. We didn't have any extra food or water, let alone sanitary amenities. The trip usually took eight and a half hours, that's why we hadn't taken anything. The toilet wasn't a real toilet and was almost never used except for peeing. We passed out water, but we didn't even have enough cups for everybody. Later, a little Cuban boat arrived and handed out water and some slop to eat. But almost nobody ate, because the boat was wobbling and almost everyone got sick and started throwing up. We spent the whole night adrift. My captain radioed his colleagues to confirm that everyone else was also being detained in Cuban territory.

The weather turned bad. The waves came up. They were small at first, then eight-footers and it started raining and thundering. The sun went down, but at least there was a moon so you could still see. The naval officers ordered all the boats to leave the area simultaneously. They started ramming into each other, all these boats! It was then that I realized that they had rounded us up for a specific purpose: they had known about the storm and were waiting. They forced us to leave right as it began. The waves were already fifteen feet high, they swelled quickly in the open sea. Thunder and lightning started filling the sky. Water flooded the boats, only the Americans' yacht was high and sturdy, more than fifteen feet tall. Water would have a tough time getting in there, even in a storm like this one. Mine was small. A motor boat for sight-seeing. One of the crazies, a huge guy, starting screaming and yelling to no one in particular. He planted himself in the middle of the boat and kept saying over and over: send a helicopter, send a helicopter!... I went right up to him and told him that not a single one was free, so he should just take his seat. He started to panic. The cabin is surely the most depressing place to be during a storm, it makes me want to throw up, but I convinced him to go inside and got him to sit down. I went to my bag and took out Andrés' knife and made sure it was handy, I didn't know if I would need it. The only thing we could hear over the radio was *Mayday, Mayday*, and downing people's screams. That's the radio code for help, like SOS. Lightning hit the antenna and the radio went dead. By this time almost everyone

was puking and that sour stench mixed with our own. I didn't throw up, neither did mom or my Aunt Ida. My brother was in such bad shape that my mother gave him a pill and put him to sleep. He doesn't remember anything. I do think, though, that if we'd had to swim, she had done the right thing – he wouldn't have felt a thing.

At one fatal moment some of the boats turned back towards the Cuban shore. They were begging for help, hoping to hide in the shelter of the protected bays above Mariel. I'm not sure what happened to the others, but when we got close they started shooting at us from the shore. We didn't know where it was coming from or who was doing the shooting. First into the air, then at the boats. Murderers, there's no other word for it. We were no longer Cubans, we were scum, but they would rather we drowned and made us go back out to sea...

At the same time, the storm grew stronger and the motor gave out. The captain tried to fix it, but failed. He asked the big yacht to tow us. He took a thick rope and tied it to the boat. He stepped on the prow, which was slippery, awash in waves, and tried to throw the rope. He asked whether anyone knew how to steer a boat. No one dared speak up. I was really afraid that he would fall, since the boat was lurching every which way with no one to steer so finally I grabbed the rudder. The waves were tossing us into the air and slamming us back down. As tiny as I am, I had to hold us parallel to the big boat and try to steer ours closer so he could throw the rope. I lied and said I knew how. Nobody knew and at that moment I knew less than anyone else. The waves were already twenty feet high. We climbed up one and fell, hurled by another one towards the next. If I got too close we could hit the other boat and then we were dead. After lots of tries, the captain finally managed to toss them the rope, they grabbed it and we were tied together. The yacht was towing us and at first everything seemed fine, but the force of the waves snapped the rope. What could we do but try yet again and again, until we finally got tied back on? The captain had gotten hurt during all those tries and I had no choice but to stay on the stern, grasping the

rudder. For hours. Alicia's niece lost it and went into hysterics. When the Americans' yacht passed us, she lifted up her baby and tried to throw it to them. She tried to throw it from one boat to another in the middle of a storm! I raced over and managed to catch the child almost in mid-air, I ordered her to sit down and told her that her kid would stay with us and handed it to my mother. We did not entrust her with it again until the end of the trip.

I think I had to steer the boat three times that night. I had zero experience with sailing, Andrés had only showed me something that once. I am thankful that he entrusted his boat to me, even though the weather was bad. There were two other dangerous moments: one twenty-foot wave hit us from the side, throwing the boat high into the air – almost immediately another twenty-two-footer slammed into us from the other side. The two of them almost crushed the boat. Silvia and Carlos, my mom's next-door neighbors from Havana, tossed almost everything out of it. Everything. Including my mom's canning jars and loaves of bread with gold coins hidden inside them. Instead of bailing the water out, they decided use this quick way of reducing the weight. Which also reduced my mother's saving and her inheritance from my Jamaican grandmother, whom I look like (she was from Jamaica, not Tahiti). I think the fact that they forwarded your letters to me was due in part to their guilty conscience, my mother never forgave them...

Later we saw a little boat with three men in it desperately rowing near us. Rowing in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico during a storm! My captain tossed them a rope and tied them to us. So we were three boats in row: the American yacht towing us, our boat, and the little rowboat. We tried to keep going, but the weather was hellish and the yacht's motor was powerful enough to tow us all. We couldn't help them. They untied the rope themselves. I'll never forget it. They cut it. If I were them, I would've started screaming – these MEN didn't say a word! I'm sure they drowned. I didn't notice, nor do I remember, the name of the little boat that saved our lives.

It took us forty hours to reach Key West. Andrés came looking for us in a pick-up. He told me that my sisters were beside themselves. They had known that we'd left Cuba, they'd gotten the radiogram, but we hadn't turned up anywhere. Not just us, but everything last survivor arriving was in terrible shape. People with broken bones and chipped teeth, they scooped them out of the water with baskets like fish. They tossed them onto the shore and hurried back to save the other ones drowning in the sea. There were lots of dead bodies sealed up in plastic bags being loaded onto trucks...

When everything was over, my sisters told me that Howard had been looking high and low for me. The redhead. But I already knew that, because he'd been calling to me in my mind. On that same cordless phone, because unlike you, he hadn't lost the number. I called him on the real phone to tell him I was fine now and to leave me alone. I also had to pay the captain. In fact, I ended up owing him lots, because the money I had wasn't enough to cover everybody. I told him that Fidel Castro would pay for the rest, or better yet, God, although I got the feeling that he had another type of currency in mind. But you know me, I've always been a smarty-pants, smarter than most men, so I snapped at him: "So who steered during the storm? What would you have done without me, huh?!" And so he let me go. I think he was a good person. After all these years, I still think about how much money he must've lost on my beloved creatures, on the crazies, the spies, the criminals, the neighbors. I would never have been able to pay him for everybody, not even with my soul itself. I would've taken the whole island with me if I could, but although my name is Milagros, I didn't possess the abilities nor the means to support any more people.

We suffered yet another misfortune, yet more unbelievable. We got lice! I don't know if it was from the prisoners or from the camp where they held my people for a day, which was worse than a concentration camp, but we really in bad shape... I bought special shampoo for everybody

and we all used it, but I was still worry. I didn't want to put that poison on my head again in case we weren't home-free, so I came up with another plan. I found a barbershop for colored folks (that don't call them Negroes in this country anymore), where they could straighten our hair with a hot comb – that would kill off everything for sure. So we went, even though it was far from cheap. The woman stared at us like we were crazy. She knew something was up, but couldn't figure out what. And that hot comb burned so badly that my sisters just about killed me afterwards. But we didn't have to use the poison again and we left for New York.

I had no choice but to call Howard and he insisted on picking us up at the airport. A fatal mistake. We went to my place and started fighting immediately. We'd already broken up three or four times, I'd already lost count. The last time had been when he'd taken me to his parents' house on Long Island, his father had hated me at first sight. He was a controlling personality and looked younger than his son, brilliant! Maybe that was why Howard was such an unhappy person. I knew that he never had been and never would be happy. When he was six his father had set him on top of a pretty high wall and told him: jump, I'll catch you before you hit the ground. Howard was afraid because the wall was high, but he jumped anyway and his father just let him fall. Afterwards he told Howard: "I did that so you'll never trust anyone about anything, not even me!"

So why do you think he was looking for me after Mariel? To recharge his batteries. He could smell the changes in me from miles away. Our relationship was saprophytic, so naturally he'd come to eat. Howard absorbed all my emotional energy. We would listen to music together like with you or we would dream – I'd have half the dream, he'd have the other half. He and Phil absolutely hated each other. After I'd broken up with Phil, I felt so hurt that I immediately went out with Howard. What a mistake! Phil tried to split us up and had nothing but bad things to say about his rival. Howard was even worse, he called Phil

“Fish,” because Phil liked fishing and said that he looked like a black bass. Now I’m laughing like an idiot, but back then I couldn’t stand it... One day Howard told me that he’d had a dream the night before that while driving a truck, he’d plowed right through Phil’s chest. That same day Phil called me from work to ask what all this voodoo was about: some truck in the workshop had started moving on its own and just about ran him over. I don’t know, I said. When I told Howard about it, he just laughed and gave me an answer that I didn’t like one bit. He told me that with the energetic capacity and the mental connection we had established, we could go really far in life. He didn’t have a good heart, that poor redheaded creature...

After Mariel, I really had changed. I became a different person. Because nothing wakes you up more than the presence of death. I told this to Howard, too. That I would never again let him make mashed potatoes out of me. He went green, but didn’t say anything. This was around the time when I introduced him to my mother for the first time, my sisters already hated him enough. I was cooking some meal in the apartment: a room with a fold-out couch, my piano, a dining room, a bathroom and a kitchen. Howard had gone to Manhattan specially to get some special Black Forest cake. It was made only at one German pastry shop, a very fancy one. The cake had cherries and was chocolate, it was really good. And really expensive as well. Alina’s husband couldn’t wait to try it, but Howard pulled me aside and hissed through his teeth that I should not cut the cake under any circumstances before the special coffee he had brought was ready. It was irritating with him for meddling in my kitchen, so I went and cut a piece for Eloy and gave it to him. When Howard saw this, he got up, went to the kitchen, filled up the sink and dropped the cake into it, mashing it up in the water with his hands. My niece, who was still little at the time, saw this and tearfully came to tell me.

I'd never seen anything like it. Such hatred! I asked my relatives to leave. I shut the door behind them and looked Howard in the eye. I told him very quietly and very calmly: "You know that big knife I have in the kitchen (he had given it to me), I have the urge to grab it, stick it into your chest and stab it all the way up and all the way down. I think it's time for you to go!"

A few months after that I met an Argentinean guy I really liked! My Australian friend introduced us. His father worked at their embassy. He was as delicate as a flower, yet masculine at the same time. I also looked beautiful, I was wearing a bright red dress. I no longer remembered your face or your smell, but my sisters told me that he looked like you. We talked the whole night after my brother's birthday party. We played piano, talked about books, the fusion was unbelievable. I was seeing earthquakes and volcanoes, and beyond them the peaks of unknown landscapes. But I also suddenly caught sight of a yawning chasm in front of me and got scared. Something bottomless and lifeless. I considered the fact that this young man was very sensitive, he was intelligent and genteel. But I also considered the fact that since he was of Italian descent, he was actually European. I panicked. When my girlfriend called me to say that he wanted to take me out, I told her I didn't want to. I think it was the only time I've shown fear since Mariel. I knew that if I experienced the kind of fusion I had with you and lost it again, I would not survive. Not a second time. Never again. The first time I'd gotten amnesia, the second would've made me catatonic. And so I held back...

That's all. What more could I tell you? Good luck with the book. Did you think I haven't kept that in mind? Farewell, my poor friend! Until the next life!
