

An Excerpt from the novel:

Cuban Quartermoon

by Ann Putnam



Central Havana: Friday Afternoon

It was just the two of us now, making our way through the late afternoon streets of Central Havana. Nancy had left her daughter behind. Under this heavy, gauzy sky everything took on a bleached, dry feeling. It had the close, musty smell of unremembered rain. Some late afternoon high cloudiness had drifted in from the sea and tamped everything down into a sleepy, unguarded dream. I was glad we were going to the mountains tomorrow. I could hardly breathe.

“This is Santeria country. All santeria here,” Nancy said. “I know what you’re thinking. Where’s all the color? Even the sky. But just wait. In the tropics, things are always changing. Anyway, in Santeria country all the color is inside. You will not be disappointed in color.”

She was watching the house numbers closely now. She said an address is hard to find here. She must find one doorway out of a hundred doorways. To me every street and cross street looked the same. If she disappeared I would be lost forever. There was nothing to mark my way—no curve of the Malecon, no scent of the sea or lighthouse where El Morro guards the harbor, no Paseo Prado and the bower of green, no Gran Teratro, no Ambos Mundos or Cathedral Square, nothing but this impenetrable heart of the city, block after despairing block.

There was no architectural extravagance here, not like Old Havana, where even the worst of the ruins held however precariously to a proud, Old World elegance. Here, the apartments jugged edge on edge into repeated rows of narrow doorways and dark, forbidding alley ways. And only now and then the surprise of coming suddenly to a doorway occupied by a shirtless old man with slow and watchful eyes sitting on the

doorstep, elbows on his knees, or an old woman in a faded blue dress standing against the door jam, following us with her cautionary, narrowing gaze, a white bell of warning—don't go there!

There were no extravagant balconies here for the valiant display of laundry, proud flags saluting the glory of a former life, and no wide balconies with wrought iron railings for people to lean on as they looked out over the city and gathered up the threads of the day. Only despairing little cupolas offering a sliver of shade to the solitary black, narrow-shuttered window below. Everything seemed faded and beaten into submission. Even the sky seemed drained of color.

“You need to know that I will be translating, okay? I'll hear what you say. What the *babalawo* says also. You will say important things without knowing it, and I will hear them.”

I nodded. It was all right. I was some place safe. “There isn't anything you couldn't hear,” I said. I never said anything by accident. I always kept things close to the bone.

“You know how much it will be different from what you think? It's like this. In Cuba everything is always changing. By day everything is one thing and by night it's another. By day it's Santa Barbara but at midnight, you know, it's Chango. Everything is complicated here. Nothing is simple like it looks. You know what I'm saying?”

She seemed chastened. We've gone off the tour, I thought suddenly. We have gotten off the bus and taken that dark, side street. Please let's go there. I want to see what's *there*.

“It's what I want,” I said. I was edging toward something that had beckoned me in Old Havana. I had given something over to it but did not know what. I didn't know enough to be afraid.

“Do you understand?” she said. “The minute you set foot in his house you will see the night things. But it's secret and we must be careful. There can be danger. I don't know if I can explain it well enough.”

I knew about day things and night things. I would bring the day things. I would keep the night things safely tucked inside. My fortune told, my palms read, or tealeaves or tarot cards, it didn't matter, I thought, just no chicken blood, no crazy chicken blood.

Only a cleansing, a healing of wounds, as Nancy had promised. But I didn't understand a thing. I only knew that whatever it was, I was going toward it now.

"I have to make a phone call," Nancy said suddenly, pointing to the phone booth across the street. "Stay here and wait for me." She went to cross the street then turned back. "I know this looks like cops and robbers or James Bond or something. But I am being very careful with you. Some *babalawos* are dangerous. Some of them are spies of the government. Who knows more secrets than they do? They can use your secrets against you. Some *babalawos* do terrible things. Sometimes they kill people." She could not alter the seriousness that rushed over her or leaven it with irony. The weight of the moment had made her grim. She was no tour guide now and I was no tourist. What had started with the *santera* in Old Havana had led me here.

Then she crossed the street and took her place in line. I watched her from across the street, as one by one people made their calls. I did not ask what the phone call was for. She did not give an explanation then or ever. I stood there for a long time in the strange, sultry quiet of the late afternoon, and told myself I was not coming down this road to be a tourist. But who was I kidding? I looked at my dusty sandals, my dusty feet, and did not know who I was. With my camera buried deep inside my straw bag, my blue and silver beads tucked safely out of sight in the pocket of my dress, I was neither tourist nor on my way home. I was caught somewhere in between. I could not wear my camera or my beads.

The streets seemed empty of everything but the heaviness of eyes. Behind doorways and half-shuttered windows, from narrow, dark alleyways, and here and there, cool and appraising eyes floating down the street. And now a woman in a yellow turban and gold earrings taking me in as I stood there so obviously an intruder, my foreignness as weighty upon me as the humidity. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her stop to stare after me. I wanted to follow that flash of color as it disappeared down the street but kept my head down and stared at my ankles. I could feel my heartbeat in my hands, a rush of air down my throat.

I looked up at the sun coming slowly now through the thin layer of clouds. I could feel the sun on my face again, the sun coming through in patches now, on my face, my arms, my shoulders. Nancy put her hand up to shade her eyes, turning her palm to the

sky, her Chango bracelet—that unmistakable language of red and white, red and white five times over—flashing in the sun, as everything turned in slow motion.

I nodded to her, and she rolled her eyes. She crossed her arms and tapped her foot. Oh it was taking forever, wasn't it? She sighed and inched forward. People should have some consideration. A public phone. *Dios mio*. No place for a lover's quarrel or whatever it was! But of course this was all there was in Central Havana. She could not disguise her impatience. Finally she disappeared into the shell of the phone booth. Her expression when she emerged had not changed, the grim set of her mouth, the worried look in her eyes.

She came back over and took my hand. "A man in a red shirt will meet us on the corner," she said. "I know. James Bond again. It's okay though. Everything's okay now." She managed a half smile but kept watch on the street ahead.

There were people everywhere now, making their way down this street or that, toward or away from the amazement of their everyday lives. We stood on the corner for five or ten minutes. She never took her eyes off the street ahead. She never let go of my hand.

Then there he was, making his way down the street toward us, his maroon shirt red enough for her to be absolutely sure now. We crossed the street to meet him and he kissed her on the cheek and shook my hand. There was a short, staccato exchange and then he turned and we followed him quickly, silently, down block after block toward a distant salsa beat throbbing with the pulse of the heat.

The overcast was almost gone now. Any minute the sun would completely take the sky again. The man in the maroon shirt had gone on ahead. He'd stopped in front of a window with a yellow curtain billowing against the wrought iron grating, in the little breeze that had come up. The sun had caught the yellow in a flash of color and light. Then the man turned back toward the doorway where he stood for a moment without saying anything, then rang the bell. Nancy squeezed my hand. I could feel her breath warm on my neck. The man in the maroon shirt had dropped his head in an almost reverential gesture and shut his eyes. It was clear even to me that something was about to change and that all three of us were waiting upon it.

But then the door opened and there was a beautiful woman breaking into a smile at the man in the maroon shirt. He embraced her and kissed her on both cheeks, then slipped his arm around her waist just for a moment until she stepped back, and flashed a look over her shoulder. The *babalawo's* young wife. The man who was never named pointed to me and said something in rapid Spanish. The woman dropped her smile and looked me over. Then she looked at Nancy with narrowing eyes, then both of us together, then back at me. We stood there for what seemed like a long time. Her eyes were cool and appraising and never left my face. Then she took me by the hand and led me into the house. When I turned around the man in the maroon shirt was gone.

Then the woman closed the door behind us and I heard the lock fall into place. I looked at Nancy but her face showed nothing at all. The wife said something to Nancy and she nodded and they both turned to look at me. The wife stood against the wall and drew on her cigarette. But it was clear we had passed some kind of test, because her face softened into a half smile. It was settled now. She would wait with us until the *babalawo* had finished up with the couple in the next room, the holy room. Make yourself at home, please sit down, she said, or so I imagined, as she gestured grandly with her cigarette, taking in the whole room with the sweep of her arm. The bracelets on her wrist tinkled. Her face said she knew we would be pleased. She would conduct the door from the rocking chair. It would need no language.

The apartment was long and narrow but with wonderfully high ceilings and miraculous light. Even from this small, barred window that looked out on the street, the sun came brilliantly now through the yellow curtain, the iron grating making shadowy spears or crosses against it as it billowed out in the little breeze. I wondered about the shutters, if they were ever closed. I remembered how Nancy had described the blackouts, and thought how unbearable this apartment would have been at night. Where would you go? You couldn't sleep in the street. There was no rooftop or balcony where you could drag your mattress.

The wife smiled at us and crossed her legs, inhaled her cigarette deeply and put her head back. It was no big deal. All the time strangers coming in off the street to consult with him, her husband, the *babalwo*. She sat there finishing her cigarette, friendly and alert and calm. After all, it was her job to keep the guests company while

they waited their turn. It didn't even need any words. Nancy's face was a mask. She sat there grasping her knees, looking straight ahead. I had no idea what was at stake for her, but her edginess, her fear? had made her silent. I didn't know enough to be afraid.

This was obviously the living room, though but for a couple of chairs, a small couch, and a little table against the wall, the room was bare. The wife settled back in the rocking chair, and pointed to the door.

"She wants you to look," Nancy said. "She wants you to look at everything."

So I walked over to the door to admire the little wood sculpture in the shape of a rooster set above the door, and the cross in the center of the door circled or looped with a willow or reed. It looked a little Celtic. I was glad I did not have to say anything. So I smiled and she smiled back and pointed at the three sticks propped up against each other in the corner next to the door and the pile of things underneath. But if you only nodded back out of politeness, and never really looked, if you didn't know whose house this was, if you didn't know that this was an ancient, sacred art, you'd mistake it for somebody's clutter swept into the corner, ready for the trash.

But if you looked closer, and you knew what you were seeing, you'd see coconut shells filled with stones and feathers and candies and cigars, and a strange, stone figure with an oval head with cowrie shell eyes, and nose and mouth, and you'd know this was Eleggua, guardian of all pathways, and keeper of the gates, and that he was placed here by the front door so that no evil could enter, so that all bad things would lose their way.

And then you'd see that the sticks propped in the corner were carved or marked with signs you could not read, but signs nonetheless, and the middle one wasn't a stick at all, but a baseball bat, also with some kind of marking, and you'd remember the Cuban passion for baseball and all the Cuban players who'd defected to America, and the kids you saw playing baseball in the streets, no shoes or glove, or bat, but hitting the ball with their bare hands, and the ball that rolled in front of you with the stitching coming undone, and all the longing and diminished dreams, and then when you finally meet him, Lazaro the *babalawo*, he's wearing a Baltimore Orioles baseball jersey, and it all makes sense, it all makes perfect sense.

But you would never notice any of this at first. You might not see it at all, tucked away in the corner like that. First you'd noticed the doll propped up on the little table on

top of a boom box against the front wall. Mocha-skinned, wide-eyed, wearing a long, brilliant, yellow dress and kerchief. A *santera* doll dressed in the colors of Oshun. La Caridad de Virgen de Cobre, patron saint of Cuba by day—Oshun by night. Didn't that explain the yellow curtain? Wasn't it some flag or emblem, some sign you could recognize from the street—if you knew how to read it?

In front of the doll, there was a sprig of something in a glass of water, a greeting card showing a menorah, a swan porcelain vase holding red flowers. It was a text I could not read, except perhaps as a gesture of kindness that said no matter your belief you will find something here that says your name. My customary skepticism had left me. I felt only a vague and growing sense of quietude I could not explain. Now I could see the young couple through the gold and blue beaded curtain in the doorway leading into the inner sanctum where the *babalawo* was finishing up, their dark heads so still, their backs so straight in their chairs.

The wife asked Nancy if I would like to take her picture. Of course. Wasn't this what all the tourists did? She got up from the chair and stood by the doll. There she was, framed in my camera, dark Capri pants, dark blue tank top with a row of white butterflies embroidered across the chest, gold hoop earrings, a gold chain with a cross, a red and white beaded necklace.

“Daughter of Chango,” Nancy said. “Red and white.”

No wonder she had felt so powerful there in the doorway. No wonder Nancy and the wife had looked at each with such recognition or challenge between them.

The heat of the day glistened on her cheeks and she wiped her face and arranged herself for the camera. She threw her head back, took a deep breath, and put one hand on the doll, the other on her hip. This is my house. House of *Oshun*. I am the mistress of this house, I am the wife of the *babalawo*. I am the one who let you in.

The young Asian couple came out of the sacred room, nodded to the wife and headed toward the door. The girl took the man's arm as they left. He was carrying a some sort of stick or club, streaked with what looked like blood.

You can go in now, the wife said, pointing toward the beaded curtain.

So I stepped through the curtain into the sacred room, lit only by an open doorway that led out into a narrow alleyway. But I looked back just as I came into the room, and

caught my face in the oval mirror on the wall next to the curtain. The suddenness of my face in the mirror startled me, and for a moment I did not know where I was. It was strange seeing my face in the mirror and the crucifix on the opposite wall hovering in the corner of the mirror against my face.

Please sit down, the *babalawo*'s wife said. The *babalawo* himself had disappeared. Look around, she said again. You can look at everything. My eyes skittered over the room—the dark, mahogany bureau with the oval mirror, a couple of chairs facing some kind of woven mat in front of the far wall, three drums wound with rope, some small, ceremonial iron tools, a statue of Santa Barbara in red and gold, holding her sword point-end up, a dark door that remained closed. Then Nancy pointed to the figure in blue against the wall in the corner. “Yemaya,” she said. “I don’t need to tell you who she is.”

“I know,” I said. My eyes had circled the room several times before I could bear to gather her up. But there she was. My *orisha*. “My beads are in my pocket,” I said. My voice was shaking. “I was afraid to put them on.”

“Why?”

“Because I thought it would be disrespectful not to know what I was doing.”

“But you know already.” Nancy smiled at me strangely. “Anyway, isn’t she wonderful?”

I couldn’t believe it. It was the most beautiful doll I had ever seen. Clearly this doll belonged in a museum or a gallery of folk art or some cathedral. What to call it? It wasn’t a doll. The dress was unearthly. A gossamer blue, beaded in a swirling pattern of silver and blue that caught and turned with the light. A rich, silvery brocade shimmered underneath. There was a tiny iron chain around her neck with her symbols—a sun, a moon, an anchor, a key, a ship’s wheel. In front of her the blue and gold tureen, and inside her sacred stones, floating in coconut milk and seawater, violet and blue and yellow flowers criss-crossed on the floor beside it.

Yemaya, goddess of the moon and sea, a silvery undulation over the waves. I thought of my mother in love with the moon. My own Eugenie, that moon-driven girl turning round and round. Were you only an apparition, a shadow, a phantasm of silver and blue? But what about the little blue castle mailbox you made, the silver key in the

secret place, the crystal quartermoon turning in the light? Clearly my mother was daughter of Yemaya, And so was I.

“Remember everything you can,” Nancy whispered, as the *babalawo* came into the room, took my hand and sat down on the mat, Indian style. He shut his eyes and placed his hands on his knees. Then he looked up and smiled at me, and leaned back. It was a wonderful smile that came from his eyes, which were beautifully brown and full of light.

He spoke only Spanish, but what he said, he said to me, not to Nancy, though she was the only one who understood. I thought of my dangerous American otherness and wondered if it was all right to be here. But I was not here as an anthropologist or scholar or tourist but as one of a thousand lost souls come in from the street.

He was a lovely looking, sixty-five year old man. He had a carefully trimmed white beard and close-cropped white hair under a gold crown. Crown is the only word to describe it. He was wearing a Baltimore Orioles baseball jersey, tie-dyed parachute pants and sports shoes. A hip high priest with a syncretism all his own. And around his neck a gold cross on a chain, yellow and amber beads for Oshun, and a string of white beads I could not identify. “White for Obatala ,” Nancy said, “Giver of life. Father of mankind. Peacemaker. Our colors tell who we are.”

On the wall above him was the crucifix I had seen in the mirror, nail holes in the hands and feet, the wound in the side, the bloody knees, the works, and a word I did not know in black letters above the cross beam. INRI. This was nothing like the statue of Christ guarding Havana Bay. This Christ was all ribs and knees and ankles, dark, matted, hair, eyes beyond sight.

The *babalawo* stretched out his legs and crossed his ankles and picked up his sacred book. It was full of numbers and markings and looked to be very old. He turned the pages carefully, then set it down. “He wants to know if you are ready. He has prayed to the dead of your family and to the orishas for permission of your guardian angel to conduct the divination.”

“Tell him yes,” I said. I unclenched my hands, unfurled my heart. Now he would tell me whose child I was, and what my future held. I looked down at my purse on the floor beside me and wondered about my camera. Just then I had an overwhelming desire

to photograph everything—the room, the sacred tureen, the crucifix, the mat, the beaded doorway, the bureau with the oval mirror.

“First he wants to tell you about the gods of Santeria,” Nancy said. And so she translated as he pointed to things in the room and I shook my head yes, and he wanted to know do you understand? and I said yes, and yes again to the rich, smooth sound of the words, yes to the dark, luminous eyes, yes to the *orishas* and how they connect us to the things of the earth—the sun and moon and sea and rivers.

Then he touched my forehead with his *opele*, the iron chain with the eight, two-sided coconut rinds. He held it in the middle, between his thumb and forefinger, and threw it on the mat. He studied the pattern they made, splayed out over the mat—which landed up and which landed down, like heads or tails, and wrote down the pattern in his little book. Then he threw the chain again.

“Each pattern is translated into a 1 or 0,” Nancy said, as he continued to throw the *opele* and write down the pattern. “It’s simple,” she said, “but very mathematical. Also very metaphysical. Everything is made out of something or nothing. There are 256 combinations possible. At the least. They hold all the knowledge in the universe.”

Finally his hand swept over the chain of coconut rinds lying in a pattern only he could read, and he looked up at me and smiled. Then he said in English, “Laura. Daughter of Oshun.”

“It’s the pattern of your life. It’s all written down now,” Nancy said.

Was I daughter of Oshun then? I remembered the gold and white doll in the living room on top of the boom box, the yellow curtain billowing in the wind, the babalawo’s golden crown, his gold and amber beads.

“You must remember September 8. It is her feast day. You must take care of her. Not just stick her in a corner in your house and forget her. You must give her things. Like pumpkin and cake. White cake. She likes coconut also. Cinnamon and honey. All sweet things. It is good to be daughter of Oshun. La Caridad del Cobre, patron saint of Cuba.”

Tears came to my eyes. So I was not daughter of Yemaya. I was not my mother after all. I was my own self. I was daughter of Oshun.

Nancy saw my tears and touched my arm. “It’s all right, she said, “you can belong to more than one *orisha*.” She had understood my quick partiality to Yemaya in Cathedral Square.

“No,” I said. “It’s not that. I’m happy to be daughter of Oshun.” It surprised me how much. I knew what the tears were for, now that I had shed them.

“You must pray to her,” Nancy said. “Ask her for things.”

I had not said any prayers since my mother went away and did not come back. Suddenly an old phrase came to mind from so long ago I hardly remembered knowing it: “Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.” And now my father in the doorway, a tall, dark shadow in the hall light, saying those words just before he said goodnight and left me to say my prayers. He never asked me to say them out loud. It was probably my mother’s doing. She couldn’t abide any violation of privacy.

Do you have family then? the *babalawo* asked.

A father, I said.

No husband or lover? No children?

No, I said.

Are you menstruating?

I turned to Nancy. What did he mean?

“If you are menstruating,” she said, “certain things have to be done differently.”

“I’m not anymore,” I said. How would I explain it? “I’ve had, you know, a hysterectomy.”

Nancy’s eyes widened. Of course. No problem. Nancy explained by cupping her hands below her waist and lifting them up.

Ah, the *babalawo* nodded. So there would be no children to wish for. I touched my stomach. The other scar, the new one, the one Maria had asked me about.

Then he handed me a seashell and a blue-grey stone. “Shake them in your hands, like dice, then hide one in each hand. He is trying to see if the pattern of your life comes with good or bad luck. If he picks the seashell hand it’s *ire*, good luck. If he picks the stone, it’s *osobgo*. Bad luck.”

I shook them and let them divide themselves as they would. Seashell and stone. Good and bad. The stone felt smooth and cool in my hand and no harbinger of bad luck. But I have a stone already, I thought, my little stone in the pocket of my dress, my little blue stone. It was for luck, wasn't it?

Then he threw the *opele* to see which hand to choose. He pointed to my right hand. I turned it over and there was the stone. He threw it again and it came up stone every time. Then he took the stone away and set it on the mat and handed me a bone. I almost dropped it when he put it in my hand. Bone of what? my eyes asked.

"It's all right," Nancy said. "It's only goat vertebra." I closed my hand around it and shut my eyes. It felt strange and light in my hand.

He threw the *opele* again and chose the hand with the bone. Then he consulted his book and wrote down the *oddu*, the pattern. Seashell, bone again, then bone again and again and again. I did not take my eyes off his hands. Even from here I could see the pattern of 1's and 0's he was making, one under the other, until they made four lines across. Upside down they were hieroglyphs—marks and zeroes. My life.

Finally I looked over at Nancy. Her face had undergone a transformation. It had clouded over completely. Her mouth was clamped tight. She was holding onto the edge of her chair.

"What's happening?" I whispered.

"He is finding out how the bad luck comes to you and what can be done to remove it."

But the babalawo's face did not change. The whole time the expression of transcendence and calm never left his face.

"Now he is asking what offerings must be made. Also what sacrifice."

I looked up at the crucifix that hung above him—the downcast eyes, the head hung to one side, the bloody knees. INRI.

Why do you come here? the babalawo said. What is the weight to be lifted?

A fist of panic caught in my throat. What was there to say?

I want to be happy, I said. It sounded so simple, so banal, so complicated. I don't want to be sad anymore.

Now the scrim of translation would shield me from nothing. I watched the *babalawo*'s eyes, how they softened at the corners, as Nancy translated. I listened to my words detach themselves from meaning and shape themselves into a languid, fluid sound I did not recognize yet understood, as they rose safely up into air. I did not take my eyes off his face, his luminous face.

I wondered what he had seen, what he had heard all these years, sitting there under the figure of Christ, with his back against the wall, the *opele* in his hand. Tell me, my child, tell me the darkness of your heart. And the voices rising up, hundreds, thousands of voices, all these years—my wife, my father, my sister, my child, save them, I will do anything. Any sacrifice at all. My sorrows, my fears, my hatred, my envy, here it is, all of it. Were they healed? Did they suffer? Then it occurred to me that maybe they were the same thing.

What do you want? he asked again.

What did I want? I wanted my shattered self knit back together. I wanted to be whole. I don't want to be alone, I said. Tears that came from nowhere ran down my face.

Do you wish for love then? Do you wish for someone to love you?

Oh, I don't know," I said. I don't know about that. I looked at Nancy.

I know, she said. Love is complicated, huh.

Yes, I said, I'm afraid to wish for love.

You should, she said. You should always wish for it.

All right, I said. And listened to my words rush out in Spanish.

The *babalawo* nodded and smiled. My child, my child, he said. Then he shut his eyes and began chanting in low, rich waves of sound.

All these years I had tried to beat back death with such an urgent eroticism, all I knew was the furious and unyielding insistence of my desire upon the moment. I had come unmoored, casting as I did filament after filament of myself into open air, then suddenly and always flung back to earth, and the loneliness after, a cold, old moon against a bleak, winter sky, a universe bereft of stars and human exhalation.

I had never been able to yield to the slow, more certain knowledge of heart touching heart, desire playing softly against my closed eyes, against my mouth, the sweet plum of faith on my tongue, the perfect supplicant.

I looked up at the statue of Christ on the wall and thought of everyone I knew who had been broken on the great, spiny wheel of life. I had been afraid of death my whole life. What I wanted was not to be afraid. What were those letters? What was INRI? Was this an answer to some question I should have asked long ago or never asked? I thought of the sign across from the Bodeguita, the four faces blindfolded in white and pink and red and blue, messages from the universe I could not read.

“You know,” she said. “It’s what Pontius Pilate said. “Here he is. Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews. I for Jesus, N for Nazareth, R for King, I for Jews. You must not be Catholic,” she said, smiling.

“No” I said, “I’m not anything.” INRI. My body broken for you. INRI. Jesus. King of the Jews. The syncretism was so clear, so complicated.

I thought of what Nancy had said about the beatific face of death, how in death Che had looked exactly like the dead Christ Rembrandt and Mantegna had painted a hundred (*or hundred two hundred???*get dates years ago. I thought of La Cabana and all the necessary sacrifices offered up to the gods of revolution within those fortified walls. Wasn’t Che himself the necessary sacrifice? So much illusion. How to gather the truth from it? And now? What was true and what was smoke and mirrors? So much of life we see only through the face of desire. Now these hands, these feet, the bloody knees. In the end peace coming with death, but only in the end.

But what about the Che in the photograph with the bound hands, the matted hair, the stunned expression, like an animal pursued to exhaustion then caught at last, before the resignation, the final agony? This photograph wasn’t in the museum, was it? Were there no pictures of Che in captivity or in death? Where had I seen it, then?

Then the *babalawo* lay down the *opele* and looked at me. There is a river to cross, he said. Your heart is a strange darkness. Why is joy on the other side of the river?

So much loss, I said. People who have died for no reason.

Who? Who has died?

It was all right. His eyes held me. My mother, I said. And once a little baby girl. A long time ago. There has been an accumulation of sorrows. Also a new friend who died. And much distance from my father.

I looked at Nancy. Her eyes were hot and dark.

Fear or joy, the *babalawo* said. One or the other.

Then the soft, low chanting began again and I shut my eyes and felt that rich, dark sound ripple over my skin, the top of my head, down the side of my face, down my neck—and inside the sound was another sound, hollow and strange, but also familiar, if I could catch it right. An after-sound, an echo. The sound of someone far away speaking in anger. And then in the perfect quiet which followed, there he was, kneeling beside the *babalawo*, his flowered shirt catching the light spilling in from the doorway. My son, my son, the *babalawo* said, and held out his hand and blessed him.

When I opened my eyes there was the *babalawo*, his hand in mid-air, the room shimmering with light.

Illuminata. Two times now. Now you will see things, Nancy had said. Yes, I thought, now I have. The *babalawo* turned his hand over and raised up his palm and looked at me and nodded. Yes.

Yes, I said.

Then he said, now you must hear a hard thing. Inside your sorrow is a great anger you have never spoken. You are angry for things that could not be helped. You have anger for your mother and father for not safekeeping you.

There it was, all right, unclaimed all these years. I know, I said. My anger holds them to me. My anger fills the empty space of them. It keeps me safe.

But anger takes up too much room. I will prepare an offering to take it away and replace it with a brand new thing. Three times a blessing will come to you. Come back tomorrow.

I shut my eyes and shook my head.

She can't come tomorrow, Nancy said. Tomorrow is her last day.

Ah! Tomorrow your last day in Cuba! It seems you have only come here. I must do it now then, since she cannot return. You will wait please for me to prepare it.

Then he left the room and we went back into the living room. The wife had disappeared long ago into the kitchen, at the back of the apartment. We went into the living room where a girl in a white blouse and mustard skirt was sitting in the rocking chair waiting for us, the daughter of the *babalawo*'s wife, home from school. I recognized the white blouse and mustard skirt, the uniform for middle school. She was wearing a gold chain and cross like her mother, but no Santeria beads.

Your mother is making something wonderful, Nancy said. Rich steamy smells of garlic and onion and cilantro were drifting through the apartment.

The girl smiled shyly and looked down. She's good at cooking. I don't like to cook.

We sat without speaking and listened to the music coming through the window, more insistent than ever now, the singer finally breaking through the heavy, echoing thump of the guitar and the skittering percussion. The daughter smiled politely and sighed. She couldn't keep her face from the window. Finally she got up to look out. She couldn't help it. It was pulling her away, she could feel it. Away from her mother, away from this apartment, away from all this keeping guests company while they waited for the *babalawo*.

She knew what it would be like, to be grown up. Already she wanted it. *Quinceanera*, coming of age. Too long before she was fifteen. It couldn't be here soon enough. Then there wouldn't be all this looking out at the pulse and shimmer of the street from the inside. It was all coming from the music. Everything she ever needed to know came from that music. She felt her body move to it. She couldn't stop herself. No backwards religions for her. Everybody knew who her father was. Not everybody. She herself never told anybody. The *babalawo* wasn't her real father anyway. She stood by the window and moved her hips to the music pouring in through the window along with the hot, hot sun.

The hot breeze blew the yellow curtain against the wrought iron grating over the window. The iron spears moved in shadows across the girl's face and arms. Something came to mind. A rush of memory that caught in my throat. It was something in the light and this Cuban girl looking out, the shadows across her face, and the steamy smells from

the kitchen. It was just out of reach. Something I had forgotten. Something I needed to remember. Something about Eugenie.

Then the wife came back and motioned for us to follow her into the alley. Oshun asks for a sacrifice, Nancy said, so she can help you. All right, I said, and I stepped into the narrow strip of light filtering down from the long thin rectangle of sky between the buildings.

Then there it was, just as I knew it would be, out of the corner of my eye, when I stepped into the alleyway. The dark shape tucked under the shadows—the thin, black-speckled hen in the cage by the wall. I thought of all the plump, white chickens on kitchen towels and pot holders and hot plates and little rugs in front of the stove. Chickens and cows. Eggs and milk. Red strawberries on blue and white checkered table cloths, the fat white chicken in the middle, picnics, birthdays, Fourth of July, all safe, all safe. How far this alleyway, how far that life.

The *babalawo* did not look up as we came and stood beside him, but continued making marks on the ground with a piece of white chalk—a smooth, half circle in front of the altar and five or six crosses through the curve. Then he stood up and said a prayer to the sky, then a prayer to the altar he had made—a tureen with dark stones, another full of a dark-green, liquid that caught the light, a vase with yellow and white flowers, a single, small, white, lit candle.

What do I remember of what happened next? Who can say why some things collect in the net of memory and other things fall through?

It squawked only once, struggling only a little at the beginning, when it was first lifted up. That wild little heart against his smooth, dark palms, the panicked flutter of wings. But then as he stroked it the hen became still. Only its eyes told it was alive. It did not flap its wings or cry out. Its own tiny self a willing sacrifice, its heart a slow and steady pulse. How do they live, these birds bound to earth as they are, what sense do they have of sky or sun, or flight?

The chicken was offered to the tureen filled with that dark, glistening liquid. Would I have to drink it? I would be glad not to drink it. All right. I would do anything now. I had come to the dark center of otherness. It was as far as I had ever gone. I was being drawn toward things so far outside myself I was in a country with no words I had

ever known. I leaned over to take everything in. I would not shut my eyes, I would not miss a thing.

Then with the chicken in his hands, the *babalawo* made the sign of the cross—high up to the sky, down to the tureen with the stones, and then crossed himself, left then right, across his chest. It is blood that is needed, the *bababalwo* said. A sacrifice for Oshun. So she will help you. In that tight alleyway, the sun was edging its way down those high, grey walls.

Then the *babalawo* bent over and picked up the knife. Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, hear our prayer. He stroked the neck of the hen with the knife, and dark feathers drifted down through the light onto the offering. Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us. Still, the hen lay quiet in his hands, the blinking eye the only sign of life, as the black feathers floated down through the holy light. Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, grant us peace. He took up the chant again, this time low and sweet and soft, an incantation of love and death. Then he took the knife, and in a single, fluid gesture severed the artery.

I do not know what happened next or what I saw. I only remember how the offering glistened with blood—how the droplets came down like little rubies in the light, over the offering for Oshun. Fruit and pumpkin seeds and purple flowers sprinkled with sugar and honey, and all of it, carefully placed on a square of brown wrapping paper, and now darkening brilliantly with the blood. Then the *babalawo* lay the chicken on the pavement. I looked at it lying on the dark-stained concrete before the offering, a jumble of dark, scattered feathers.

Behind me were the spade and shovel. Gardening tools but there was no garden. Burial tools for graves of small significance.

Was it a worthy offering? he asked Oshun. Was I a worthy daughter? He dipped his hand in the dark liquid and shook it over the offering and sprinkled it on me. Then he nodded at me and smiled. Yes. It is a fine offering. All that is needed. So this was the necessary sacrifice. In death it seemed such a slight offering. The least of these, this small, diminished life, transfigured now through the awful blood. I looked at it lying there and felt the sun pouring into that narrow passageway, over my head, my shoulders, my open hands, washing me in a furious light.

And then there it was, a gift from my past, rounded and whole and undiminished by time. My first blessing. My father had brought it up from the basement that terrible Easter morning after my mother had died and laid it in my lap without speaking. A baby Easter chick. I cupped it in my hands and brought it to my face, felt its tiny beak against my lips, its warm breath on my face. I had not thought of it for so long. How did he ever do it? How had he ever managed to do buy that little chick in time for Easter morning?

So there was something given back, only I hadn't known it until now. It had not fallen through the net of memory after all, my only resurrection. And Eugenie? Where was Eugenie? What was given back of her? Was there nothing more of her also?

I did not see him sever the head. I only saw him bending over the offering and when he stood up there it was, the eyes unblinking now, and the mouth, which opened twice. Two exhalations without breath, two words without sound, the final benediction. The offering would be gathered up in the square of brown paper and cast into the sea. And my dark, fearful heart brought into the light.

I went into the living room and sat down. I could not stop the tears. Nancy had disappeared somewhere in the back where the *babalawo* was washing his hands. I had passed the oval mirror in the holy room just before I had gone back through the beaded curtain to sit down. For a moment I had not recognized my face. I did not recognize the flush on my cheeks, the strange white around my eyes, the wide, dark pupils, my outrageous, extravagant hair. *Asiento. Asiento.* All those months of that long year making the saint—the covered mirrors, the shaved head, the fierce and radiant chastity.

Then they came back into the room and he saw the tears down my face, and took my face in his hands and wiped my tears. A small sacrifice for such a big thing, he said. It is your life in her hands now. You must come back some day and let me know how it goes. We will have a party.

I had come so far. How would I ever find my way home? I knew no bridge to take me there.