La Lucha

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MANUEL "MICKEY" LLANSO and Hugo San Román collided at Vicky Bakery in Coral Gables when both were out on a breakfast mission for the women they'd bedded the night before. The men, both in their mid-twenties and still new to Miami, had each only recently discovered the bakery, a gouge in the wall with the closest thing to authentic pastelítos de guayaba. But it was ten in the morning on Sunday, meaning they should have been at Mass, and there were only three pastries left, the early Church crowd having ransacked the glass case an hour earlier. Mickey and Hugo had ordered at the same time from separate clerks, and when it became clear that someone was going to leave hungry and guava-less, Mickey tried to reason with Hugo.

"I grew up with those," he said.

"So did I," Hugo said. "And I think I was here a minute before you."

"You sound northeastern," Mickey said, by which he meant northeastern Cuba. "Mayarí? Holguin?"

"Baguano in between."

"Holguin," Mickey said pointing to himself. "In an orphanage just outside the city. After the long Sunday Mass the nuns would open a tin of guayaba paste for the bread. And that only once a month, the last Sunday."

Of his time at the orphanage Mickey remembered the fruit gels the most. The name of the place or even how many years he was there he couldn't recall, though his foster parent, a tobacco farmer named Corzo who still lived in Cuba, had told him two years. Two years old when he arrived and two years

passed when he left. No record of his parents, but possibly some siblings.

Just the same, Mickey was really thinking about the girl in his bed, the first since coming to Miami. Besides her, he had few if any friends, and outside of work, a table-waiting job in a French café, he really had none. Also, he'd promised her something sweet. She was an American. To her he was alien, a brown exotic. He didn't want to disappoint.

"It's something special for me," Mickey said.

"Que orfanato?" Hugo asked. "I was adopted when I was four."

Hugo's foster parents, the Cabreras, had owned a cannery, but that was six years ago, 1955, before they'd come as a family to Miami where the father, despite his age, could start a new enterprise that he wouldn't have to relinquish to the State. From age six Hugo had eaten all the guava paste he'd wanted. There were years of his childhood he'd eaten it every day, and there were years when he'd grown so sick of it that he went months without opening a can. It had not exactly become a staple of his diet, but there was a part of his brain that ached mercilessly if he went a weekend without tasting the wine-colored jam.

"I don't remember," Mickey said. He was on his guard because the coincidence was uncanny, which likely meant the stranger was fucking with him.

"I grew up at a cannery, and the guava here has the same metallic tang. A little bit of tin to cut the sweetness, you know?"

"I do," Mickey said, and he remembered Sister So-and-So scooping a spoonful for each child onto a thin strip of stale bread. He could hear the spoon scraping along the lining of the flat can, a muffled, low-pitched grating.

"Are you brothers?" one of the clerks asked. She stood behind the counter with the last three pastelitos in a white cardboard box, the bunch wrapped in wax paper and napkins.

She said, "You have the same face."

Mickey and Hugo did have similarly high foreheads, each slanting down at a shallow angle toward the nose. Looking at the noses, one might also say they were similar, very Greek, very Mediterranean, like the busts at the university museum. They each had brown eyes, but so did most Cubans they knew, and there the similarities seemed to stop. Hugo was perhaps an inch taller than Mickey, and he had a scar across his cheek from an accident in the cannery when he was young. Mickey's skin was much darker, but he'd followed Corzo through the vegas every day by foot. His hair was longer as well, whereas

Hugo's was crisply trimmed, almost militaristic. They both did, however, possess smallish mouths and crooked smiles, expressing something like an air of disbelief in whatever joys there were to be had, at least in Mickey's case. For him there was no sense in getting too pleased with anything, but that, of course, was simply the permanent symptom of an orphaned upbringing. Hugo perhaps suffered the same lingering doubts, but his mouth seemed to curl against those inclinations, as if to say, *true for anyone but me*.

"No," Mickey said. "Of course not."

"Which is too bad," Hugo said, "because then you could share these with me and my girl."

Reaching across the counter Hugo took the box from the relenting clerk, who shrugged at Mickey. Mickey's shoulders tensed and he gave Hugo, who was flashing his crooked smile, a look.

"Ignacio's on 154th might have some left," the clerk offered.

"That's a drive," Mickey said.

"Well, shit," the clerk said, "you look ready to kill. You want something else? We got pork pies."

"No," Mickey said. He felt toyed with. This was a tasteless joke, a farce. "I wasn't lying about the orphanage," he said to Hugo.

"Neither was I, brother."

"Coño," Mickey said, and he left the bakery and drove to Ignacio's where they also were out of pastelítos de guayaba. In the end he bought the last five pastelítos de carne, the runts of the batch, and made apologies to his American girl who never saw him again. Hugo drove home leisurely from Vicky Bakery, passed by the beaches because it was a nice day out, and went to bed again with his girl, a young woman named Sylvia, before they ate. They stayed together for six months, and he continued to buy her guava pastries, but eventually she went to New York to live with a cousin and Hugo forgot about her.

The second time Mickey Llanso and Hugo San Román met was a few months later in the lobby of a hotel overlooking Biscayne Bay. Both men were waiting to meet with recruiters of an exile liberation group. Mickey had heard about the assembly from his friend Ernesto who'd been a student at the Cadet School in Havana before resigning his position and moving to the Keys. Ernesto had said the group was looking for more men like Mickey, a decidedly

agricultural stock who'd worked in fields and were familiar with machinery. Hugo had met a former officer from Batista's army at a bar, who'd spoken very nobly of the need to remove Castro from office. The drunken lieutenant had given Hugo the hotel's address on a wet napkin. Mickey waited on a couch by the front desk, and seeing him, Hugo immediately remembered the scene at the bakery. He laughed out loud.

"You sure you're in the right place?" Hugo asked. "You didn't put up much of a fight for those pastelítos."

"A friend suggested I come," Mickey said. He remembered Hugo, and he tasted dry rope in his mouth as he recalled the desiccated meat pies he'd settled for that morning a few months back. "It looks like you've been back to Vicky more than once."

Hugo patted his stomach, which had grown some in the last few months. "Too much sugar in my coffee," he said. "But this, I'm sure, will help me trim down. I was told training is in the jungle."

"Jungle?" Mickey said. "Just swamps north of here, I think."

"You might want to call your friend," Hugo said, smiling. "Sounds like he didn't give you the whole story. Better figure what you're getting into."

"I know I'm not headed to the gym," Mickey said. "I got a better reason to be here than to lose a few pounds."

"Yeah?" Hugo asked. He puffed out his chest a little. "What's that?"

"Patria," Mickey said solemnly. "The homeland."

Hugo nodded, pleased to see a little backbone. "Good man," he said.

Both men were really there because of their foster parents. Corzo had been writing Mickey letters about the conspicuous control being seized by the state, the flagging trust in the unelected leader, and the poor outcome of his tobacco because of it. The letters were long and sad, but Mickey found himself reading them every morning. He'd somehow become incapable of sleeping past four in the morning, an insomnia he thought had everything to do with Corzo's shaky pen. He'd even gone to the doctor for a prescription of sleeping pills. Hugo's foster parents complained a little less about Castro. The Cabreras' new operation, an outfit of fishing boats, was doing moderately well, but every time something went wrong—a hull needing repair, fifteen nets lost, buoys pinched, a motor dead at sea—the husband blamed the communists for driving him out and taking from him not freedom or country, but a prosperous economic

engine. Everyone ate guava paste, and you didn't have to pay men to rip it from the sea; the cannery had been the biggest casualty of the revolution.

Hugo's real problem, however, was a terrible lack of business savvy, and he was proving himself useless in the family company. He had all the confidence in the world but the financial nuance of a blind rhinoceros. He charged into meetings, bullied distributors and generally got in the way whenever possible. All this Hugo knew, and so it seemed a not entirely foolish idea to hear out the drunk Batistiano at the bar and then attend the meeting. He, like Mickey, was just there to listen and see. In truth, they were both scared white of combat.

To their surprise, the recruiters at the meeting, a batch of ex-military Cubans like the man Hugo had met at the bar, treated enrollment as a forgone conclusion. The session was more an explanation of timelines and preliminary training than a pitch for service, and the two guayabaphiles found themselves filling out questionnaires regarding survival skills and background in the operation of light watercraft. Every brave applicant, as they were called, seven in total, was then interviewed alone in a separate adjacent room, during which an American, who'd appeared out of nowhere, would interrogate their family history, political leanings, impressions of Castro and knowledge about the southern coast of Cuba. The American was a tanned blond who wore shaded glasses indoors, and his tone was absent of emotion, which made Mickey nervous. Hugo, on the other hand, was jealous of the Yankee's poise, and he found himself trying to sit taller during his interview. He thought he might impress the American with a straight back and short replies.

The interviews ended with a report for duty date and free drinks for each brave applicant at the hotel bar, which was set alongside a set of eastern windows with a view of the Atlantic. Mickey drank scotch by himself, wondering how to slip away unnoticed. Nearby, the more zealous types—the other five men besides himself and Hugo—were chattering feverishly about their abandoned houses back in Cuba. It seemed unpatriotic to just leave. The American was among them, but he looked disinterested, or at least as far as Mickey could tell since he still wore the shaded glasses.

Away from the bar, Hugo spoke with one of the recruiters near the windows, and he kept pointing to the beach and out to sea. The recruiter nodded often but steadily sipped his drink, and Mickey thought he was humoring the arrogant SOB who'd stolen his pastelitos. He didn't realize that he was smiling

because of it, but the recruiter did, and in a moment the three were standing together, the head-hunter having dragged Hugo back to the bar.

"How's your drink?" the recruiter asked Mickey.

"Very good," Mickey said.

"This place has great rum," the recruiter told them. He pointed to Hugo. "Señor San Román was just telling me about his father's fleet and his sailing experience."

"Foster father," Hugo said, and Mickey was reminded again of the bakery. Maybe he'd been a bit rash. He could see no reason for the man to tell the same lie twice.

"And boating experience, not sailing," Hugo said. To Mickey he said, "We've got a fishing venture, and all our boats have motors." He turned to address the recruiter again, but the man had gone to join the larger group and the American.

"You were four, weren't you?" Mickey asked. "When you were adopted."

"Yes, from the orphanage to the cannery," Hugo said. "You remember."

Mickey nodded. "Do you know the name? Good chance we've crossed paths if you're from Baguano. Maybe I'll recognize it and remember."

"That's right, you had amnesia that morning," Hugo said. "Something religious with a bunch of nuns. Sisters of Mercy or Charity or Peace. Pick your pleasure. A full color crucifix in the chapel. I've only seen wooden ones since, some gold Cristos up here, but I remember absolutely that pink skin and those blue eyes."

It was not exactly a revelation. More like the glow of a streetlamp around a corner, and if Mickey closed his eyes, he thought he could see a similarly colored Christ, though he wasn't sure because the nuns, and of this he was certain, were rigorous enforcers of the supplicant's pose. Still he tried to remember what he'd seen at four years old and during the brief moments he'd glanced at the altar. The effect was a loose association, the feeling that he'd dreamed of the crucifix more than he'd witnessed it.

"You got a light going off?" Hugo asked.

"It's hard to go back to that far," Mickey said, and he felt that Hugo was too damn pushy. Somewhere along the way he'd been indulged as a child. He had the self-importance that came from knowing you'd been taken from a beggar's home and put into a palace, relatively speaking. Hugo knew how lucky he was,

or better yet, derived from his luck the belief that he was predestined for good things, would be lucky always, was clearly a blessed hombre of good fortune.

"Forget about it," Hugo said, looking over at the other men. They were suddenly laughing. Mickey turned to them as well. Everyone seemed to be having a hell of a time except for the American who wasn't drinking. He was a scarecrow facing their direction. Hugo said, "Americans are a serious bunch."

"He's probably still sizing us up," Mickey said.

Hugo raised his glass to the onlooking American, who nodded curtly.

"Do you think he likes what he sees?" Hugo asked.

"I think he'll take whatever he can get," Mickey said, "and that bothers him."

"We're the willing," Hugo said. "Not much more you can ask for, I don't think." He eyed Mickey, who stood as still as the American, though in his posture was a readiness for flight, a tension waiting to pop in all the limbs. "But I speak for myself. Maybe you're about ready to take off."

"Says who?" Mickey said.

Hugo shrugged and laughed. He was enjoying himself. He liked jostling with the somber Cuban who couldn't remember where he'd come from. It was an easy exchange, and unlike Hugo's friendships before, it seemed to have no limits, though of course it was too early to call it a friendship. But if they went into battle together, how long would it take to call it that? If you trusted someone with your life, they had to be your friend, didn't they? But there was something more with this guy. Hugo felt he could punch Mickey in the arm and follow that with an embrace. There seemed no irreparable transgressions between them, however that was possible, as if they were two cousins who couldn't escape the fact that their mothers had been sisters or that their fathers had been brothers.

Mickey said, "My belief in sacrifice and struggle only gets stronger."

Hugo said, "I hope so, compadre. Patria, you know." He meant it.

But Mickey had had enough taunting, and it was as good an excuse as any to leave. He put his glass on the bar and said, "We'll see who shows up where."

That night Hugo's foster father, Señor Cabrera, didn't know what to do. He'd brought his family from Cuba to avoid the war and escape the government and now the son, the son rescued from a Catholic orphanage, had enlisted for return. Back into the crocodile's lair, Cabrera's wife said. There was some pride

in the revelation, and Señor Cabrera was not entirely oblivious to Hugo's reasoning: he was trying to be good at something worth being good at. However, the image of Hugo's dead body worked in his brain not like a block of ice that brought cold sadness, but like bellows which stirred a lingering dissatisfaction with the adopted son. Hugo was a fool, a prodigal, a moron. Señor Cabrera loved his foster boy, but he was going to die on a beach. Coño.

The same evening Mickey attempted to write a letter to Corzo, but he couldn't find the words. He reread the most recent letter from his father and then tried another note, a shorter one that simply said he missed the old man. He couldn't finish that letter either, and when he closed his eyes to envision Corzo, he saw Hugo's face instead. He heard the idiot's voice as well, and Mickey felt like a spineless rat for slipping away from the recruiting session so meekly. He cried a little for Corzo. Then he took a shower, sipped bourbon on the patio outside his apartment, played a game of solitaire and went to a bar down by the water. There he met a woman who'd just returned from living in New York with her cousin who complained about the cold weather. Mickey took her back to his apartment. She herself was carefree and didn't mind when Mickey told her he would be leaving the country soon, that he was in no place to be with a woman for longer than a night. She seemed just happy to be back in Miami and to be among so many Cubans. They made love twice, and Mickey fell asleep feeling not exactly better but as if a minor, past wrong had ultimately been righted.

The windows on the plane were taped over with cardboad but, stupidly, from the inside, so once airborne, the recruits, Hugo and Mickey included, tore away the flimsy coverings to see Opa Locka airport diminish beneath them at a sharp angle. The plane headed southwest, and soon enough they were over open water. The monotonous ocean put most of the men to sleep until the landing several hours later when the plane touched down at an airport not far from a beach. Someone said they'd cross over to the Pacific, but no one had enough bearings to confirm the claim. A string of jeeps waited for the recruits on the tarmac, and they were driven off by other Cubans into a nearby town, which was really a village. They sped past women pushing wheelbarrows, girls playing fútbol and a pack of domesticated mules. Eventually the road cut east and

started gaining in elevation, coming to an end at a row of barracks on a hillside, which they would later learn was the northern slope of Santa Maria Volcano. They were assigned bunks and each man took in the surroundings warily, uncertain that this was all it took to be called officer or private but anxious enough to prove oneself. It began to rain. Both Hugo and Mickey thought it was a pathetic place.

The recruits learned that there were already 200 soldiers at the base who'd been training for two weeks, and those 200 men routinely fell into one of three factions: ex-Castro rebels, ex-Constitutional army soldiers betrayed by Batista, and students. The three groups cooperated during combat exercises, but the mess hall was a vitriolic snake pit, each faction sitting in high contempt of the other two. The students were the worst; they had the longest-reaching vocabulary, the greatest variety of insults. Mickey and Hugo were part of a fourth group that arose with the arrival of the newest recruits, which wasn't really a group at all, but simply the remainders of the first three. They hated nobody and were liked by no one, and they found themselves huddling together over thin stew at mealtimes to avoid the shouting matches between the more ideological crowds. A particular captain liked to remind the men that they all despised Castro and to rally behind the common enemy, but everyone had their own notions as to what would happen when they eventually seized the island and ousted the bearded idiot. They all spoke as if success was inevitable, even as they could not agree upon the colors of the brigade insignia.

"Shit looks grim," Hugo said, during lunch a month into the training. He pointed to a group of students sharpening their machetes in the direction of some ex-Constitutionals. "We're going to overthrow one army and replace it with three."

The other men at the table eyed the students with cautiousness and grunted in agreement. Mickey ate at the end of the bench, and he'd spoken to Hugo only once or twice since they'd arrived, and only when absolutely necessary. Recently he'd begun to find the students' arguments appealing. When he was among them they applauded his knowledge of the farm and his willingness to work the shoddy equipment they had which passed for trucks and radios. Mickey could fix things if he was given enough time, and the intellectuals thought that sort of skill bucolic, quintessentially cubanidad. They did not, however, consider how often Mickey had to fix those things or how little time

there might be for repairs in the middle of a gunfight.

"I suppose we'll have to pick a side," Hugo said. "But I can't see these schoolboys making it through. Their manifestos aren't thick enough to stop bullets."

The table laughed, but then a few of the students looked over, which caused the soldiers to cover their mouths.

"They're going to put the beginners at the front, you know," Mickey said. "Those who don't know shit about what they're doing, so I'd be careful, because that means you'll be in the middle of those kids. You might want them to like you."

Hugo asked, "Where do you think you'll be? Think you're going to be reading reports to the Commander behind the lines? I'll see you next to me if you don't drown on the way in. They teach you how to swim in school?"

Mickey pushed his mess tray forward and stood. Hugo was up with him, and then the whole dining hall rose to watch. Hugo was grinning but he'd curled his hands into fists and Mickey was breathing heavily through his nose. They stood an arm-length's apart, but when Mickey finally took a step toward Hugo, a captain intervened and ordered them to stand down.This being the same captain who routinely reminded the men that Castro was the enemy, he'd had enough of the bickering. He assumed Hugo and Mickey were of the factions, and the entire brigade, all 400 plus men, was ordered to file rank outside the infirmary. One by one the soldiers reported to the sick room to have their hair buzzed and their beards and mustaches shaved. It took the better part of the day to clean every man, but by dusk the captain had his wish, and the men had something else uniting them: ugly white scalps that hadn't seen any sun under darker Cuban hair. The captain told them to look around. He said, You should see the other men as reflections of yourself. You are bald and they are bald. Their cheeks are bare, and so are yours. When you see another man hurt or fallen or struggling, see yourself falling behind. You're a selfish bunch, and so let's make use of it. When the trouble comes, save yourself, by which of course I mean everyone around you. God forbid you watch yourself die a hundred deaths.

The speech was stirring, especially coming from a captain who was known for discretion and an absence of emotion. The men took the words to heart and immediately the brigade felt a sense of camaraderie settling over them. However, they all missed their hair, and many, because they were so young, missed

the mustaches they'd been grooming for months. Hugo and Mickey were ostracized because of it, and they quickly found themselves often alone with no one to talk to outside of the other. More troubling was that with the shaved heads they looked even more alike; their skulls had the same shape, and without hair the difference in height was less discernible. The majority of the brigade took to calling them "the devil twins" because of the country lore that a witch would steal your hair if you fell asleep after quarreling with a family member. Soon they were just called "the twins."

The loneliness became unbearable, so Hugo made attempts at conversation, but it was only after some time that Mickey relented and agreed to silent matches of pinochle. But pinochle was a complex game that Hugo had never played before—there were situational rules and a vast terminology—and Mickey found himself talking more than he would have liked and eventually saying more about his life to his mouthy twin than he had ever planned. They spoke about their childhoods and tried again to remember their spells as orphans. Hugo told Mickey that his parents' records suggested lost siblings, a brother or sister given away to a peasant family, but eventually they spoke of what they missed most about Miami, which of course was the food and the women.

That was how they discovered they'd slept with the same Sylvia. This time they fought for a good ten minutes before being separated. It was not that either truly cared for Sylvia, but rather that both men were suddenly overcome with jealousy and possession, as if they were fighting over the memory of the girl, a shared past, but were sick of being called twins and having their double walk about with them. Mickey gave Hugo a swollen ear and Hugo bruised two of Mickey's ribs. Hugo also managed to cut Mickey in the face by accident with an untrimmed fingernail, giving the country boy a gash on his cheek that mirrored Hugo's own. They were put into a makeshift brig for two nights before reporting to the captain. He looked impossibly tired, as if he'd been pushing a rock up a hill all day only to see it slip back down the incline. Launch day was approaching, and while the brigade's spirits rose steadily in anticipation, the captain's face seemed to droop increasingly by the hour.

Outside his office the commandeer chose for Hugo and Mickey a log bigger than either could carry alone, and he sent them up the volcano. They were to pitch the rotting trunk into some lava and bury their differences once and for

all. The captain, though not a superstitious man, was from Matanzas originally, and his grandmother had been an ilayorisha. As a child he was made to perform a similar task, though it involved his sister and a toy they would not share, an ebó of cow's milk, chanting and the simpler directive of tossing the object into a nearby stream.

The walk itself was not terribly long, maybe six kilometers, but the rains had turned the ashen dirt around the base of Santa Maria into a loose sludge. At first Mickey led and they carried the log atop their right shoulders, but the ample silica in the dirt caused them to skid, and they had to walk more slowly and carry the trunk lower in case it should slip out of their hands. The volcano exhaled to the north, and both men looked up when the pitch of the trail rose sharply to see clouds frothing at the rim.

"A smoke?" Hugo asked. They dropped the trunk and sat down on it. Hugo took half a pack of Lucky Strikes from his pocket and offered Mickey a stick, which he accepted. The rain started up again. It, too, seemed to breathe, the brief dry spells the welling up of its wet, persistent breath before another fall. The precipitation forced Mickey and Hugo to bend over their flames. If not for the rain, they would have heard the slow sinking of the log into the muddy earth, a sucking sound not far from the digestive din of a masticating cow. They finished their break without a word only to stand and find their burden half submerged beneath volcanic muck.

"What did you do when a tractor got stuck in the mud?" Hugo asked.

"We didn't have tractors," Mickey said. "We tilled by hand."

"We're fucked," Hugo said. He looked north to the vapors escaping the vent and mixing with the rain clouds. "Orders, though."

Mickey watched as Hugo rummaged through the nearby brush and retrieved two fallen branches. He gave one to Mickey and they slid the limbs beneath the log. The levers were useless, however, without fulcrums, and the branches sunk deeper into the earth than the log itself, which pissed Hugo off to the point that he broke his stick. He threw aside the snapped bits and then stupidly tried to pry the trunk out from the mud with his bare hands. At one point he lost his grip and fell backward. Pulling himself up, he examined his thumb, which now had a thin cut running down its length.

"I'm not sure Sylvia was worth the trouble," he said. "But she was a nice girl. How long did you go with her?"

"Just the one night," Mickey said.

"You work fast, man. She wouldn't sleep with me for the first month."

"She had good taste," Mickey said, and he meant it meanly, but it came out a tease and Hugo laughed.

Hugo said, "I got to ask, did you leave the light on?"

"She made me turn it off," Mickey said. He wasn't one to normally talk about women, partly from not having anyone to tell and partly from the reticence he'd acquired from long, silent days with Corzo in the tobacco rows, but Hugo was a pathetic figure covered in mud—something like a bum with only enough courage to ask for your last pennies, and it disarmed Mickey. "I was working on her blouse and she stopped me to turn off the lamp in the room."

"You'd think that stuff was just for the first time," Hugo said while shaking his head. "Like a classy sort of introduction, but no, every time with the lights out. We rumbled for five months, but shit if I could spot her tits in a line-up."

"Do you remember the nipples?" Mickey asked. "The longest nipples I've ever touched."

"Yes. All right. Those things were like tuber shoots," Hugo said. "Popped up in the darkness and stiff enough to poke you in the eye. She never wanted me to see them. I could feel them, no joke, but they embarrassed her."

"Maybe why the lights were always out."

Hugo said, "I never thought."

Sitting back down he took out the Lucky Strikes, and Mickey reached for a cigarette without asking. He moved to the end of the log nearest Hugo and they talked a little while longer about Sylvia's nipples, then her scent, and then her practice of nibbling the tip before taking it in her mouth. They each lied about how many times they'd made her come, but they also admitted to missing her motherly demeanor the morning after. She'd made both of them coffee, and she'd kissed both of them on the cheek instead of the lips before saying goodbye. She *was* a nice girl, Mickey thought, and it was odd, in his mind, to come to the same conclusions as Hugo. Growing up with Corzo, Mickey had not known much of the man's thoughts, quiet as the farmer was, and this sort of talk was a foreign enterprise. But unfamiliar as it was, it nourished him. It seemed a necessary thing he'd gone too long without, and he was enjoying himself immensely, such that Hugo's arrogance dissolved into altruistic blunder and welcomed jocularity.

They finished their cigarettes and lighted two more. They moved beyond the topic of Sylvia and into other realms, but they dug more deeply than when they'd first played pinochle. Mickey asked about the Cabreras and what kind of people they were. Hugo wanted to know the names for all the different shades of tobacco leaf. He wanted to know if Corzo was proud of Mickey. They lighted a third round of cigarettes and, recalling that he really had no friends in Miami still, Mickey began to think this exchange was not simply the banter of a freshly welded platonic bond, but was the conversation of longstanding amigos, and somehow, fortunately, they'd cheated past the years generally necessary for such amity.

The airborne platoon was supposed to land in San Blas and secure the roads leading east. A curling wind pushing for the Gulf of Mexico instead swept half the men west of Playa Girón and into the Zapata Swamps. The soldiers realized this as they watched the target water, the finger-shaped bay a thousand feet beneath them, slide to the east. It was almost the exact shade of blue as the color on their maps, a closeness Mickey found reassuring. Instead, they descended onto shallow, wet sands. They were scattered without a radio between them but knew to march inland toward the road that led to Jaguey Grande, one of the small cities they would pass through on their victory march to Havana. Their boots, under the weight of their loaded packs, sank into the marshland, and Hugo, who did not say a word for the fear gripping him, was terrified also of crocodiles, the Cuban breed the fastest on land, or so he'd been told. The men moved as efficiently as they could, and being unsuitable for agriculture, full of reptiles and flooded with saltwater in parts, the swamps were empty. They crossed paths with no one until they found a road, which is where a gun was fired by a dirty, youngish guajiro, and which served as the starting pistol of the lost platoon's first skirmish.

They had no idea where the shot came from, so they set two lines of three and waited for an enemy advance before eventually deciding to send a scout. The task fell to Mickey, who would walk a mile north, cross the road, and flank whatever hid in the bush ahead of them. Yet before he'd gone ten steps, a ruddy farmer with a gun appeared on the road atop a horse, his firearm aimed at the dirt and a python dangling across the withers of the mare. The embarrassed

soldiers looked away from one another, but Mickey, who saw in the caballero his own country childhood, said, "We're home." He approached the young man, really a boy, showing his hands and smiling. The rider didn't move, nor did he take his eyes off the soldiers. Once alongside the horse Mickey took the dead python into his grip and squeezed it. It was still warm and had probably been sunning on the road when the boy shot it. Mickey saw at once Corzo's machete from years ago, a rusted blade that barely stuck to its bamboo handle, but that had nonetheless decapitated its fair share of field snakes.

Watching from a small distance, Hugo didn't feel the same. It was much hotter than he'd remembered. Having grown up in a cannery where snakes roosted in the walls to feed on rats, he thought the python was clearly a bad omen. At the same time Mickey glowed while holding the filthy reptile in his hands, and Hugo was glad that his friend seemed so sure of himself, so close to the land. Looking around he saw the other men also gazing admirably upon Mickey's conviction, and it was obvious they felt the same. Mickey was the returned exile, the native who would lead them through the bush, and when he smiled down at the carrion, they all smiled with him.

Leaving the boy on the road and taking the snake with him, Mickey found a small tributary, and judging by its flow, he thought it might lead them to the bay more safely than the roads, which were likely under patrol. They walked until dark, made a fireless camp in a thicket of copperwood trees and set a schedule for the watch. They would guard in pairs and in two-hour shifts until sunrise. Mickey and Hugo volunteered for the second shift, the difficult middle hours of the moonless night.

"We won't hear a thing coming," Hugo said.

"No one's coming," Mickey said. "The beach landing was hours ago. Any Cuban with a gun is headed south."

Hugo squinted into the darkness and felt for the stock of his gun. The safety was on, but he wanted to know the distance between the trigger and the guard without having to see it.

"You're a Cuban with a gun," Hugo joked.

"And I'm headed south," Mickey told him.

"You eat that snake or something?" Hugo asked. "I don't think you mind any of this."

Mickey took out a cigarette, thought better of it and said, "I thought I would, but I don't."

Then he told Hugo about the time an older couple, a man and woman in their thirties, if Mickey had to now guess, came to the orphanage and visited with him for two days. The memory came from nowhere, was part of nothing in that darkness, but it came with the ease of Corzo's machete. The island, it seemed, was an aphrodisiac of recollection. Of course, he said, the man and woman weren't just visiting him, but a number of young boys, each one a prospect. Maybe some girls, too, but Mickey remembered the boys getting cleaned up, really spic and span, for the first time in a long time, and the couple took them out one by one. Everyone got to go to the beach and play with the couple. The nuns told them to be cheerful and polite, but Mickey, who'd never been to the beach before, as far as he knew then and now, was terrified of the water and cried for the majority of the outing. The man told him the water was a pretty picture, a blue border all the way around Cuba. The woman, however, and here Mickey paused to inhale, gathered him up like a sack of potatoes, pressed his face into her shoulder and rubbed his back in a way he'd never dreamed of. I kept crying, Mickey said, but not because of the water. I think I was crying because I knew if I stopped, she would put me down. She smelled wonderful, he said.

"Like nectarines," Hugo offered. He'd been listening intently to the story, but when Mickey spoke of the woman, Hugo was reminded immediately of Mrs. Cabrera and the bitter citrus scent she'd always had, as if she bathed every morning in juice and seawater. It was a strange thing to say, not because it disrupted Mickey's vision, but because it completed the memory.

"Yes," Mickey said, and he turned to face Hugo, even in the dark. "How did you guess?"

"I was thinking of my mother," Hugo said. "Or my foster mother. She's always smelled like nectarines, no more so than around the neck."

They each said nothing, and both were thankful then of the relentless swamp, the way its animals chattered through the dark. If it had been light out they might have moved closer and scrutinized their respective features for details beyond coincidence. But instead they sat still, nearby but not quite side by side, until the last two soldiers of the group came and relieved them of duty, at which point they parted ways and went to bed. Hugo and Mickey slept on the opposite sides of the thicket, and neither could make sense of what seemed clear and obvious, and they both hoped to dream of something else, perhaps the

lives they'd led in Miami when they were nothing more than stray men alone in the world.

Hugo and Mickey carried the distant scent of nectarines with them through the next thirty-six hours. It filled their nostrils when they woke the following morning, it trailed behind them when they resumed their march, and it seemed to float ahead of them, hanging in the No Man's Land just past the front line of the brigade, which they'd reunited with on the main highway. When they drank water or breathed, it was citrus liquid or citrus air, and when their guns went off, the smoke was an orange breeze with an iron undercurrent.

The lingering smell was not distracting, but both Mickey and Hugo were disrupted by its presence. Hugo looked over his shoulder constantly. For what, he did not know, yet when he looked back Mickey was always there, and after some time, maybe six hours of fighting, Hugo realized his twin was what he was looking for. In a similar fashion Mickey found himself within ten steps of Hugo at all times. The proximity was not necessarily accidental, but when he noticed it, it surprised him. They, along with the other men, chewed grass to keep their mouths from getting dry, but unbeknownst to either one of them, they spit in the same direction.

Toward the end of the day the fighting intensified and the Cuban militia grew, the brigade scouts sending reports of an even larger force approaching from Jaguey Grande. The supply lines from Playa Girón were also under attack, bombarded by unforeseen Cuban air support, and the front lines were nearly out of ammunition. A retreat was ordered, but while the brigade was pulling back, a small band of peasant militia flanked them from the east. The brigade scattered, some heading south and some west. Hugo and Mickey fled with twelve men back into the swamp. For a short while they ran together in a loose formation, but a few gunshots from the rear and they dispersed. Hugo and Mickey, of course, stayed together and they ran for what felt liked a day but was no more than half an hour. They ran until the rifle fire was a distant echo, until the shouting was muffled by the damp vegetation, and they would have kept running had Mickey, a step ahead and leading the way though the bush, not been shot in the ribs by the same farmer boy from the day before.

Hugo wondered, what was it the young shooter had said? *He took my snake?* Or was it *that snake belonged to me?* Sitting in a wooden chair, he couldn't reconstruct the sentence, but he watched as the dentist, the man they'd found instead of a doctor, sterilized two needles with a cotton swab soaked in peroxide. The father of the shooter, a thin campesino, held Mickey down by the shoulders since he'd begun to moan and twist on the floor. His blasted side was swollen, and the dentist had said he'd lost so much blood that he would die. *Surrender,* the campesino had said, which Hugo recalled without problem because Mickey'd responded in clear, firm opposition before going into shock.

However, the campesino had a point; the militia medic could treat Mickey and they might even move him to a hospital. They might deliver him to a real doctor. *This is my home*, Mickey had said. That was the objection somehow, as if to surrender was to give up his home, which if Hugo considered long enough was a diluted truth, though God forbid he should then watch his dream of coming home die this sort of death. A goddamn snake, he thought. They got Santeria down here? Is there a snake God in Cuba?

This wasn't what Hugo remembered of Cuba, or at least it was not the inherited memories of the Cabreras who grew up in Camaguey, who'd relocated to Havana and become city folk, ambassadors to the Cuban urbane. If someone had asked Hugo right then, that is, the moment before the dentist slid the needle into his near-explosive vein, *where are you from*, he would have said *Miami, near the dick-tip of Florida. I'm an American cocksucker.* He pictured Mickey with a box of pastries in hand, the greatest struggle of the daylight deciding which beach to lie down on and which girl to lie down with, eh coño? He thought you and your friend were raiding the farm, the campesino had said. But looking at the boy, who watched from the corner of the kitchen, which was part of the campesino's house, which was at the eastern edge of a yucca farm, he saw nothing that resembled remorse. He said you took his snake.

"Shit," Hugo said. "Shit." The needle was under his skin, and when the other end with another needle sank into Mickey's arm, the pressure would suck the blood from one vein and pull it down into another. No one answered him, but the dentist patted his knee as if to say, *We're past the hard part*. The blood would slide down the plastic tube and slip into Mickey's empty veins. I'm fainting, Hugo thought, but he did not. Mickey, despite his pale color, still shook. Hugo

remembered saying, *He and I are a pair of long-lost twins*. He felt tired, but he did not fall asleep. He considered that maybe he was already asleep. "Cuba is a dream I have," he said, but not because he hoped to wake from it. Rather, in dreams one couldn't die. Also, a dream had two players on either side of it, the one who lives the vision, and the one who dreams the dream. Surely Hugo was the first, which made Mickey the second, the man alive on the other end, and God forbid this dream should end, because as long as Hugo walked through the world, it meant that Mickey lived. God forbid he should watch himself die.

A peasant militia eventually searched the yucca farm for escaped invaders, and Hugo was arrested. The militiamen escorted him to Jaguey Grande where he was reunited with the rest of the captured platoon. The men were crammed like cattle onto the backs of canvas-covered trucks and driven 150 kilometers to Havana. Hugo went half mad in his jail cell not knowing the whereabouts or condition of Mickey. He begged the government officials who came to see him to find news of his brother's health, but they ignored him, asking in response, Who sent you? How much did the Americans pay you? When is the second wave coming?

The fourteenth day in Havana an official, a man with glasses and a thin voice came to Hugo and told him two things. The first was that Mickey had died. The militia had tried to move him to a hospital, but on the way his temperature had spiked and he'd had difficulty breathing. Then he'd passed. They'd tried to save him, the official repeated. Hugo asked if the official was certain of the man's identity, and the official said yes, he had on his dog tags. Hugo asked if the man could describe Mickey's face. Like yours, the official said, with a thin scar on the cheek. The second thing the official then told Hugo was that he had a visitor, and the guards were going to let him shower before taking him to a separate room. Hugo cried while he bathed, but mostly he suffered bouts of anger and thrashed a fist against the shower stall. He cursed the ineptitude of the Cuban military. The whole country was fucked. His pain, he thought, was a consequence of poor communication, of absent leadership, of an island that was known for losing important things, like its citizens and families, or the records of orphans, or even its own government. A prison guard had to help him dress.

The visitor was an old man who appeared to be someone's grandfather left

too long out in the sun by a negligent day nurse. He introduced himself as Señor Llanso, the father of Mickey Llanso and said he'd heard his son's name on the radio. They were reporting the dead on both sides of the invasion. After the authorities confirmed his identity, he'd been told that another captured insurgent had been there at the time of Mickey's death. He'd asked to speak with Hugo.

"I'm told we have fifteen minutes," the man said to Hugo.

"How's your crop this year?" Hugo asked.

"I was hoping you could tell me about my son. I don't understand how exactly he died."

"I don't know how he died," Hugo said. "I wasn't there when he died. Whoever said I was there lied to you."

"They told me they found you two near a swamp."

"Do you have any smokes?" Hugo asked. "Sometimes the guards offer us cigarettes, but they're shit. They fall apart in your hand."

"I'm sorry," the man said. "I don't have any."

"How bout something to chew? Any leaf on you?"

"Nothing, I'm afraid. I'm sorry to press you. I'm sure this has been hell. Could we talk about my boy?"

"There's nothing to say. He came to Cuba with a gun and he got shot. Now he's dead, and here you are talking to me in his place. I'm a poor substitute, I'm sure, but you're also a poor substitute for my dead brother."

"You were close?" the man asked.

"We trained together. We dropped out of a plane together. We came from the same part of Cuba," Hugo said, though to say the next thing, *we were separated during our childhood*, was a grand leap he was still crossing, and it seemed safer at the moment to go at it alone, to keep it a private affair, to keep it in the family.

"Where did you train?" the man asked.

"On the side of a volcano," Hugo said. "You should have brought me something for my time."

"I couldn't think," the man said. "They said you wouldn't be here long."

"Where are they taking us?" Hugo asked.

"Why would they tell me?" the man asked. "My son's not going with you." He sounded ready to fall apart. "How did Manuel get involved in this?"

"We called him Mickey," Hugo said.

"Tell me something," the man begged.

"Who called him Mickey first?" Hugo asked. "It must have been you, right? Why do you call him Manuel? What's your name?"

The man surrendered his hands to the table and began to cry.

"Who was Mickey's mother?" Hugo asked. "Did you ever meet her? How about his father?"

"I'm his father," the man said, and he struck his fist against the table.

Two guards entered the room, grabbed Hugo and pulled him away. The old man remained seated and weeping, and Hugo wondered only briefly if he'd been wrong, that perhaps the grief was genuine. He tried to look back, but as he was carried away he was knocked on the head. He awoke in a cell by himself, where he stayed for six months until they put him back with the brigade. It was another year and half before a deal was struck between the Cuban and American governments. The time, however, meant nothing to Hugo because his spirit had gone, and the days slipped away as effortlessly as dreams are left behind after waking.

Hugo could not go home. According to his foster father, the family business had tanked, and its failure, according to Señor Cabrera, was Hugo's lack of resolve in the Havana prison. Rumors had blossomed in Miami that Hugo had spoken during interrogation. Supposedly he'd talked to an official and discussed his training, or that was what radio messages broadcast from Havana over the AM channels claimed. The allegations were enough to cast a shadow over Cabrera's outfit. No one would do business with the family. They went broke. Hugo was a traitor to the exiles in Hialeah, and Señor Cabrera left him at Opa Locka with a suitcase full of clothing, a framed picture of his foster mother, and a thousand dollars in an envelope. Before his foster father left him, Hugo asked for the name of the orphanage he'd been taken from. Señora Cabrera couldn't remember. Hugo asked what order of nuns had run the place, and his foster father said there were no nuns.

Before leaving the airport, the men were escorted to a small hangar to collect the personal items they'd left behind when they'd first exited the country. Hugo had only a passport, watch, and gold necklace to gather, but the American, the

man from the recruiting session, stopped him on his way out. He handed to Hugo a folder. Inside he discovered Mickey's passport, a wallet, some loose change, an old cigar label and a set of keys.

"The others told me you two were close," the American explained. "Perhaps you'd want to take these with you."

"Thank you," Hugo said. He asked, "What's going to be done about the dead?"

"A memorial service," the American said. "The President wishes to express his gratitude."

"What about the bodies?"

"Buried in Cuba."

Hugo shook the folder. "They told me they tried to save him."

"They told us the same," the American said. He asked, "You knew each other before the mission?"

"We were like brothers," Hugo said.

"No doubt," the American said. He shook Hugo's hand and walked away.

With the thousand dollars Hugo checked into a hotel by the beach and asked for a room with a high view of the water. He ordered a steak dinner from the kitchen and tipped the bell boy generously. He drank beer on the balcony and whenever a couple on the boardwalk looked up at the high rise and saw him, he waved. He fell asleep on the balcony and woke up cold and disoriented. He moved to the bed inside and broke out into a sweat. The sensation was reassuring, as if the water had been a weight inside him, and Hugo knew he was momentarily finding solace in the certainty of his and Mickey's estrangement, but that later the joy of solving the mystery would evaporate into a suffocating fog. A new question would shroud his brain in its place, the matter of Mickey's death and whether he could have lived.

He spent the next four days in the hotel room, and he made sure to shower every morning and eat a large breakfast. Sometimes he went for a swim in the hotel pool, but he never set foot on the beach. He considered walking to a nearby cinema or taking a taxi to a café, but the furthest he made it from his room at night was the hotel bar, and only then for an hour at most.

One night he called another man from the brigade to see if he wanted to

meet for dinner. The man declined because he was entertaining guests, other brigadiers. He told Hugo to come by and they could celebrate their return together. Across the line the man talked about the President, who was coming to Miami. There would be a speech at the Orange Bowl. Behind the man's voice Hugo could hear other men shouting, and he thought, They are war heroes. Hugo hung up the receiver and went to lie down. An hour later he went to the desk in his room and opened the folder containing Mickey's personal items. He smelled the cigar label and fingered the keys. He rummaged through Mickey's wallet and counted the money inside, twenty-two dollars. He examined Mickey's license and saw the address to his apartment. Before leaving, Hugo folded all his clothes, made the bed, and shut off all the lights. He left a hundred dollars on the pillow for the maid.

Mickey's apartment was exceptionally clean, and it wasn't difficult picturing Mickey tidying his kitchen and emptying the trash before heading to the airport. Hugo walked about as if he were in a museum, touching nothing, but as soon as he picked up an item—the first being a Time magazine from the previous year—he was compelled to open all the closet doors and pull out all the drawers. He began in the kitchen, moved to the living room and eventually made his way into the bedroom. Running his hand through a sock drawer, Hugo wondered if he was looking for something, maybe a picture of Mickey to take with him. Stupid, he thought. No one keeps a picture of himself. On the walls there were also no pictures. He rifled through Mickey's dresser, which was where he found a pack of cards and a flask half-full. Outside, he could see the entire courtyard behind the complex, though it wasn't much, and he sat down at a metal table. He opened the pack of cards, removed the deck and shuffled for a game of solitaire. He smelled the scotch before drinking it.

When it began to rain, Hugo went back inside, but he tripped on the bottom of the screen door that led out onto the patio and dropped the deck of cards. It was not really a mess, and it would have taken no more than a moment to pick up, but Hugo believed then what a sad, lesser man he'd been in comparison to Mickey. He wasn't sure if that was necessarily true, but as he stacked diamonds onto clubs onto spades, he understood that his disgust with himself had to do with the fact that somehow he was still alive when someone else was not. He did not know why, but he was certain in that moment that his parents, his biological parents, were also dead, and Mickey had met them

when he passed. He'd been kind enough to visit in the afterlife and put in an honorable word for his idiot friend who'd killed him. There was a little scotch left at that point and Hugo drank it because he was starting to get a headache. He went into the bathroom to search for some aspirin, but all he found in the medicine cabinet was some pomade and a bottle of sleeping pills. He took the pills into Mickey's bedroom and swallowed two of them. He sat down on the bed and after lying awake for an hour swallowed two more. He tried one more before deciding that he and Mickey of course were not twins. They were not even brothers.

However, they were connected; Mickey was Hugo's better half, which is a kind of twin, the ideal twin, because it gives the lesser man always something to aspire to if one can keep his jealousy in check. And Hugo was jealous, slightly combative, feeling always a subcutaneous itch to wrestle another man, and envious of Mickey who didn't have to return to Miami alone, who could simply lie dead for as long as he wanted now and perhaps just dream. Hugo was about to rest himself, and as he emptied the pill bottle of six more capsules, he wondered what visions he might have, though he was asleep before any came to mind.