

Nosotros, a bolero by Pedro Junco, played on Havana radios during the spring of 1954 .
The wonderful melody and the sorrowful mood of the song had a strong effect on Tony de la Torre; he memorized the lyrics:

Us
we were so sincere
and from the moment we met
we have loved each other

Us
we made of our love
a marvelous world
a romance so divine

Us
who love each other so much
we must separate
don't ask me why anymore

It's not because I don't love you
I love you with all my heart
I swear I adore you
but in the name of this love
and for your own good
I must say goodbye

He was surprised by the feelings of empathy and sadness that the song evoked, as if the singer's story mirrored his story, but Tony was thirteen, going on fourteen, and he had no experience with girlfriends or love. He was ready, though. Every time he listened to a romantic song on the radio he could sense how desperate he was to start his romantic history. And something else was happening—he felt lust towards every female younger than his mother who crossed his path. He could not control himself. Whenever he saw a woman walking down the street he would stare at her thighs, her breasts, her legs, and he would imagine what it would be like to spend a night with her.

He assumed that his ever present stream of sexual fantasies were normal mental activity for a boy his age. It was nature at work, possibly intensified by the fact that he lived in Havana, a city where he knew he could buy sex as easily as he could buy shoes. He also assumed it was normal for boys to masturbate—he did it, and all the boys he knew did it—but his habit presented an immediate problem. He went to Belén, the largest Jesuit school in Havana, and the school required that all the boys go to confession every Friday. He tried to stay away from the details of his errant behavior by confessing, rather quickly, three all encompassing infractions: “Father, I lied, I had bad thoughts, I masturbated.” Sometimes he reversed the order: “I masturbated, I had bad thoughts, I lied.” That sequence must have sounded more perverted, and would get a longer penance.

Masturbation was the sin that seemed to really bother the priests, but he had no intention of stopping. He had been doing it for a few years. He was addicted. He couldn't fall asleep if he did not do it at night and he couldn't get out of bed if he did not do it in the morning. He also managed to do it in the afternoon, when he returned home from school, because he took a bath, and he liked to do it in the bathtub. He suspected his habit was excessive, unhealthy, and a reflection of a weak moral character.

When the priests asked him how many times he had masturbated during the course of the week, he always had the same answer:

"21 times, Father." Three times a day, every day. Like clockwork.

Tony would hear a sigh, and then he would be told that his behavior was unacceptable. Didn't he understand that every time he masturbated the devil was clamping a stronger hold on him? Didn't he understand that if he died after he masturbated, he would go to hell for eternity? Did he want to suffer unspeakable pain for an eternity? Before assigning the penance, the priest would ask him: Are you going to try harder to control your disgraceful and dangerous weakness?

"Yes Father," he would lie, committing the first sin for his next confession.

Then he discovered Father Zulueta. He decided to try him when he noticed that the line to his confessional was always the longest line, and soon he learned why. Unlike the other priests, Father Zulueta was not interested in the frequency of masturbation. Tony would recite his list and Father Zulueta simply said:

"Try to be better."

That was it. No further questions and no lectures about the devil. Father Zulueta was a realist, resigned to the ways of boys, and he was never too upset by anything he heard. Best of all, he gave short penances. Often, he ended the confession by saying:

"And pray for me. I'm also flesh."

That was a clear signal that Father Zulueta masturbated too. He was one of them. Tony was also thankful that Father Zulueta never pursued the "I had bad thoughts" part of his confession. The confession would really embarrass him if he had to describe his bad thoughts. 90% of all his mental activity consisted of bad thoughts.

He certainly had bad thoughts every time Sylvia Machado came to his house to play Canasta with his mother. Many of the women in his mother's circle were attractive but Sylvia really stood out. She could have passed for Ava Gardner's double, and she was divorced, a condition viewed by Cuban society as some kind of disaster, but as far as he was concerned, it made Sylvia more exciting, and possibly, available. It was not unreasonable to imagine that after years of living a divorced life, and alone, she now yearned for the touch of a man. Tony noticed how she always paid some attention to him—how she would greet him with a big smile, as if he amused her, as if she was particularly glad to see him, and then she would come closer and bend

down slightly, offering her cheek for Tony to kiss. When he kissed her, he could smell her perfume, which reminded him of jasmine, and he could not help thinking how exciting it would be to continue kissing her, and how lucky her ex-husband had been when he was married to her, and they were still in love, and he had her permission to kiss her all over and more. She had a very appealing and perfectly proportioned body. Cubans had a phrase that perfectly described Sylvia's body: *Esta buenísima*. He knew that Sylvia had been a champion swimmer for the Havana Yacht Club, and all that exercise must have contributed to her excellent figure.

He couldn't imagine what her ex-husband had done to cause the divorce. Maybe he had been caught doing it with another woman. What a fool! Had he been her husband, he would have been a model husband and totally faithful. He also would not have slept one wink during their entire marriage. He had seen her the previous summer in Varadero Beach, in a very tight and sexy one piece bathing suit, and afterwards, often, he'd lie at night in his bed, awake for hours in the heat, staring at the ceiling, busily concocting an improbable story ending with him and Sylvia in Sylvia's bedroom.

Then there was Lucia. She was the youngest maid in his grandfather's house. Cocó, his grandfather, had nine servants, and most had been with him for years, like Rolando, the black cook from Oriente, who had been cooking for Cocó for thirty years, and Jose Ignacio, the perfectly correct Spanish butler from Galicia, who had immigrated to Cuba from Spain during the Spanish Civil War, and had been with Cocó since then. Cocó paid his servants well, or well enough, and the turnover was minimal, but there seemed to be a revolving slot for a young maid, someone who came from a small town in one of the provinces. She would stay in the house for two or three years until she met a man who would propose marriage and she'd be gone.

Gonzalo, the chauffeur, also had his eyes on Lucia. Tony thought Gonzalo was a sexual maniac. He was in his middle thirties, and married, but apparently, his sexual appetite was insatiable. He had wasted no time explaining to Tony his theory about provincial girls. They viewed sex as a natural, matter-of-fact activity, mostly because they were used to watching farm animals do it. In the provinces, sex was not viewed as a sin, but as nature. Gonzalo was prone to

exaggerate, but this theory made some sense to Tony. He certainly watched Lucia more closely after listening to Gonzalo. He watched her while she dusted around the house, or mopped the marble floors, and noticed how the muscles in her arms flexed, so unlike the girls in his sister's group, who had no muscles, and how her maid's uniform revealed a firm and generous figure. Lucia would notice Tony watching her. Sometimes she answered his glances with a smile, and a polite "good morning," but she never said much more. And neither did Tony.

In his Lucia fantasies, he knew what to do: every morning, after the adults left the house, he would sneak into his aunt's bedroom, where Lucia was busy making the beds. The moment he entered the room she would smile, tell him to make sure the door was locked, and then she would start to take off her clothes. He would undress quickly, and leap into the unmade bed. Lucia would laugh, join him in bed, and introduce him to all sorts of natural and matter-of-fact sexual activities.

Another bout of erotic fantasies occurred every morning on the school bus trip to Belén. Tony would get a window seat so he could watch the daily spectacle of an army of young women—office workers, secretaries, coffee machine operators—waiting for buses and trolleys. He was amazed how many attractive women he saw every morning. Coffee machine operators were particularly sexy. There was a coffee stand in every corner of the city and the success of the stand depended largely on the attractiveness of the operator. There was a stand on 23rd and J, two blocks from his house, where he went often for *un cortadito*, a small cup of espresso. The woman who ran the coffee machine there was extremely attractive, and there was a large group of men always hanging around that stand, drinking coffee, talking about baseball or politics, smoking cigars. What he particularly liked about her was how she always referred to her clients as *mi amor*, my love, or *mi vida*, my life. She was extremely friendly with everyone. When Tony ordered his *cortadito* she always said: *come estás, mi amorcito*. How are you, my little love. It was worth getting the cup of coffee just to hear her say that.

Gonzalo claimed that working girls were extremely sexy. They worked to afford their own apartments, so they could get away from their families and the old traditions, like the tradition of

going out on a date with a chaperone, and especially, waiting for marriage to have sex. In their own apartments working girls felt free, and very modern, and after work they could not wait to call their current boyfriend and have him come over for dinner and you-know-what.

Tony's fantasies were put on hold at school, where he concentrated on how to divide fractions, the eating habits of manatees, and the distinctions between Limbo and Purgatory. He managed to do all his homework in study halls at school, and after school he took a bath, masturbated, and then retreated to his room where he listened to the latest *boleros* on the radio, built model planes, and continued with his train of bad thoughts.

Sometimes he thought about the girls he knew at the Havana Yacht Club. *Habaneros* socialized, and played sports, at clubs built by the water. There were all kinds of clubs; for the middle classes, the upper classes, for Americans, for Cubans of recent Spanish descent, for blacks, but the most exclusive and architecturally the most imposing club was the club his family went to, the Havana Yacht Club. The membership was 100% white Cuban upper class. The girls Tony knew at the Yacht Club were very proper, all raised by nuns, and generally considered untouchable. It was more difficult to have sexual fantasies with those girls, even though a good number of those girls were very attractive. To imagine any kind of a sexual situation before marriage with one of the girls at the Yacht Club was unrealistic. If he dated one, a few years from now, she would come to the date with a chaperone. The chaperone would sit at the bar near their table, keep an eye on them, and he would have to pay for her drinks. Not the kind of situation he could construct a good fantasy around.

He was more interested in fantasies that had a better chance of occurring. His Lucia fantasy was more realistic. He had overheard an older boy at the Havana Yacht Club's locker-room, a boy they called Gil, tell a story about how he was making it with one of the young maids in his parent's house. He very quietly slipped into her room every night after the adults had gone to sleep and they had sex. He overheard Gil telling a group of older boys in the locker room that what made their sexual encounters particularly exciting was the danger—the danger of getting

caught. The story was probably true, because every time he saw Gil at the Yacht Club, he was always yawning.

He started swimming in the Yacht Club's pool in early April. The first thing he noticed was how good the girls in his group were looking. Last summer they were young girls but this summer they came back as full-bodied women. He knew one of them, Carmen Macia, better than the others, mostly because she was his cousin Tina's best friend. She had an amazingly well developed body for a thirteen-year-old and she was very lively and funny. When she smiled, she was particularly appealing, and she smiled all the time. Every time he talked to her, he couldn't help noticing her perfectly shaped lips. This was a girl he wouldn't mind kissing. He also liked her great mane of black hair. She was turning into an amazing beauty and Tina claimed she was the smartest student in their class. Being smart ran in Carmen's family, because her mother was a literature professor at the University of Havana. Carmen's mother came from a good family but she was considered unconventional (society women didn't work) and somewhat of a bohemian who preferred intellectual friends. There was a good chance that like her mother, Carmen was unconventional too. Maybe the nuns hadn't ruined her and she was not afraid to kiss boys. Every now and then he tried to imagine a situation where he found himself alone with Carmen Macia, and he was kissing those perfectly shaped lips. His fantasies about Carmen only went as far as that kiss, but even so, it was a good fantasy, although it was hard to imagine where that kiss could happen.

One day after school, when he got tired of his room and the love songs on the radio, he went out to the covered porch at the back of the house where the servants took their breaks. Gonzalo and Rolando were sitting on the table on the porch, drinking coffee and arguing about baseball, a daily argument. Gonzalo thought that the manager of the Havana club was a born fool while Rolando generally agreed with his moves. When they exhausted that topic they moved on to politics. Gonzalo thought Batista would be good for Cuba, because he had been a good president in the Forties. Rolando was not so sure. Then they moved on to what numbers they

were going to play. The numbers were related to some object or animal that had appeared in their dreams the previous night, and seemingly, every animal or object came attached with a number, a secret language all the servants were familiar with. After they finished with the numbers Gonzalo got up and asked Tony if he wanted to accompany him on an errand. He had to drive to Old Havana to pick up a dress for his mother from Luisa, the seamstress.

He liked going with Gonzalo to Old Havana. For one, the business of sex was highly visible there. He liked to walk around and watch the goings-on. And Gonzalo was always amusing. He felt compelled, like most Cuban men, to say something to every attractive female he noticed walking on the sidewalk. The way Gonzalo explained it, it was his duty as a man to acknowledge female beauty. Tony also suspected another reason: if he didn't react to female beauty, someone might think he was a *maricón*, and in Cuba, being gay was very bad, as bad as it gets if you were a man.

Gonzalo's minimum acknowledgement of female beauty would be to slow the car and whistle at a woman, or make loud kissing noises, or say something like "Mami, what would I give to be your Papi." Sometimes, like that afternoon, the situation called for more drastic action. He stopped the car in the middle of a narrow Old Havana street, got out, bombarded an attractive *mulata* with a string of *piropos*, a form of improvised semi-poetic, semi-risque compliments, and when she smiled, he tried to get her telephone number. In the meantime, there was a row of furious drivers, all honking their horns, stalled behind Cocó's black Cadillac. Gonzalo ignored them and calmly went on with his business. When he got back to the car, he winked at Tony and said: "I got her phone number."

"I didn't see you write it down," Tony said, dubious of Gonzalo's claim.

"Don't worry. I never forget the phone number of a beautiful mulata."

When they got near Luisa's address, Gonzalo parked the car. He jumped out and returned five minutes later with his mother's dress. "I'm going to visit a friend in Obispo Street," he told Tony. "I'll be back in half an hour."

Gonzalo claimed he had a girlfriend in every sector of the city where he was sent on errands. Tony watched him walk away at such a quick pace that he assumed he was visiting one of them. He decided he would go for a walk around Barrio Colón, a notorious neighborhood nearby, infamous for the fact that every other building was a brothel. He had read an article in *Bohemia*, Havana's most popular weekly magazine, about the sorry state of Cuban morality. Havana, the article noted, was widely considered abroad as the brothel of the Caribbean, and for good reason. A professor from the university had done a study and discovered that there were 270 brothels in Havana and over 12,000 full time prostitutes. Many of the brothels in the professor's survey were in this area.

It was close to the end of the workday and the sidewalks were overflowing with office workers starting on the trip home. The noise level in Old Havana streets was alarming; there was a continual traffic jam, and drivers took turns honking their horns and insulting each other; lottery vendors screamed their numbers; peanut vendors yelled: *maní, maní*; jackhammers hammered; jukeboxes blared the latest *boleros* and *cha cha chas* in corner bars; men whistled and made comments when attractive women walked by; above the street, women leaned on their balcony railings and engaged in loud conversations with the women on the balconies facing them.

On the sidewalks, he noticed how men were walking into and out of the brothels, which he easily recognized because women sat by the windows and said something naughty to every man or boy who passed by. He noticed a man with thick plastic rimmed glasses walking out of a brothel in some sort of a trance. That must be the professor, Tony thought, doing some more research. A group of boisterous and drunk American sailors, walking down the sidewalk, beer bottles in hand, passed by him. He turned around to watch them and saw how a woman extended her arms through the iron grills of her window and, like a human Venus flytrap, grabbed one of the sailors. Tony was cautious; he kept a safe distance from the window grills. His hair bleached very light during the beach season and often he was mistaken for an American. A woman, sitting by a window, started talking to him, in very poor English:

"American boy, come here. We make good love. Two dollars."

"No, thank you," Tony said, very politely. However, he liked being asked.

He kept walking and repeated his "no thank you" after every new proposal, always trying to enunciate his English clearly. He spoke English well. When he was little, he always seemed to have an English tutor, all of them young women from England or America who had come to Cuba for one reason or another, fallen in love with the island, and stayed. Later, when he was ten, he was sent to camp Pasquaney, a camp in New Hampshire, to practice English. No one spoke Spanish at camp Pasquaney. Both his father and his grandfather had gone to camp Pasquaney. It was a de la Torre family tradition.

He liked posing as an American in Barrio Colón. He liked the deception and he liked the attention. After a while, he looked at his watch and decided it was time to walk back to the car. He was sitting on the hood when Gonzalo showed up.

"I just did it with a girlfriend," Gonzalo said, smiling.

Tony never knew what to believe when Gonzalo talked about his sexual affairs. It certainly could all be true. Gonzalo was handsome and simpatico. Everyone liked Gonzalo. But in this instance, Tony thought, there could not have been too much time for him to be chivalrous and polite, because barely twenty minutes had passed before he had returned to the car.

"You did it very fast," Tony observed.

"We did it on the living room floor," Gonzalo replied, grinning.

"Why?"

"Why not?" Gonzalo said, grinning some more.

They got in the car and they started on the drive back. Tony kept thinking about what Gonzalo had just said. Maybe they did it on the floor because he could not wait, or she could not wait, to walk over to the bedroom, and waste those precious seconds. Maybe she would not do it in her bed because the bed was reserved only for her husband. Maybe Gonzalo was lying and he just went someplace for a cup of coffee, and he didn't do anything at all.

"I don't know Gonzalo. It doesn't sound too comfortable, doing it on the floor. I would think it would be much more comfortable doing it on a bed."

"How would you know? You haven't done it anywhere. Let me ask you again. When am I going to take you to a brothel?"

Gonzalo was particularly interested in this often-repeated question because in well-off Havana households, chauffeurs were entrusted with the sexual education of the oldest son. Tony thought that Gonzalo brought to his role of sexual tutor excessive enthusiasm, but he had to admit, it was genuine. Gonzalo's theory was that men were defined by their biological need to have sex. Every other need was secondary. Other activities, like working at a job, getting an education, those were secondary activities. A man's primary job in this world was to have sex as often as possible. Tony knew that Gonzalo had a tendency to exaggerate, but there had to be some truth to what he was saying—Tony himself thought about sex and girls with every other thought. But then Gonzalo would carry on: "I'm married and I love my wife, but that doesn't prevent me from having sex with other women." And: "Men have a moral duty to bed as many women as possible." Gonzalo was simply performing his moral duty every time he visited a girlfriend in Old Havana.

Tony was not so sure about all that. When it came to sex, Gonzalo was almost a certified sexual maniac, although he could see that there was a bit of Gonzalo in him and in every Cuban man.

"The day I marry," he told Gonzalo, "I'm going to be madly in love, or I wouldn't get married. I don't plan to be unfaithful. I'll get married especially to have sex with the girl I love."

Gonzalo laughed and said: "And when are you getting married? In ten years? You are in for a long wait! And let me tell you: you don't have to be in love to have sex! If that were true, every brothel in Havana would go out of business. Grow up. Get down from that cloud."

It was obvious that Gonzalo was not happy with the progress of his sexual education. On the drive back to the house, Tony told Gonzalo about his obsessive train of bad thoughts, trying to impress him, but Gonzalo was not impressed.

"Thinking is one thing," he said, "but doing is another."

Gonzalo didn't think it was right for a thirteen-year-old boy to spend so much time making model planes or bouncing balls off walls. If he kept doing that he would have serious questions about his manhood. He wanted Tony to go to one of those brothels in Barrio Colón and get on with the business of being a man. He needed to be a doer. If he didn't do it soon, he could turn into a *maricón*. The way he saw it, a 13-year-old Cuban boy, still a virgin, was headed in the wrong direction.

Tony knew that soon he would have to go to a brothel. It was a time-honored Havana tradition for young boys. Some of the boys he knew at school were already doing it, and bragging about it. He not only had to contend with Gonzalo on a daily basis, but also with Ramiro, a first cousin his exact age, who had already gone to Marina, a three-dollar brothel.

Ramiro had always been his best friend among his cousins, but lately Ramiro was becoming unbearable. He never missed a chance to kid Tony about his condition: "What's the matter," Ramiro would say, grinning, "are you chicken? Are you afraid to go to Marina?"

Sure, he was afraid. He still felt more like a boy, who made model planes and bounced balls off walls, than like a man, who drank at bars and went to brothels, or like Ramiro, who was becoming too mindless for his taste. Not that he had ever been particularly mindful. As long as he could remember, Ramiro specialized in doing reckless things, like breaking his arm three times before he was nine—twice while jumping, unsuccessfully, high up on a tree, for the same branch. That was when Tony and Ramiro lived together in La Estrella, the sugar mill owned by Don Antonio, his de la Torre grandfather. At one point, there were 17 first cousins living together in the large family house at La Estrella, but it was with Ramiro that he always had a special connection. They rode horses, fished, hunted, trapped birds, and built tree houses high up in giant banyan trees, but his favorite memories revolved around the fishing trips.

His grandfather kept an old 70 foot two-masted schooner anchored at a beach only 20 minutes by jeep from La Estrella . The boat was originally built to transport coal from Cayo Romano, one of the islands they sailed to, to the mainland. His grandfather had the boat cleaned, painted, and a new and perfectly equipped kitchen was built in the cabin. Tony remembered having some great dinners at sea—nothing tastes as good as a fish that goes directly from the ocean into the frying pan. Over the open hold, a canvas roof was designed to hang from the bottom spar of the main mast, to protect the family from the sun and rain. The boat was large enough to accommodate up to 25 people on three day weekend trips: Don Antonio, his sons and their wives, guests from Havana, the five or six oldest grandchildren, the captain, the cook, and

often, a trio of local musicians, who played guitar and sang *boleros*. His current interest in love songs must have been influenced by those days.

Tony still had vivid memories of those trips: his grandfather sitting on a canvas chair at the bow, with the youngest grandchild sitting on his lap, while he pointed out the different birds, or the flying fish, or told stories about past fishing trips. Tony's father and his brothers sitting around one of the tables on the hold, playing bridge, drinking scotch, yelling, laughing, arguing wildly after every hand. Tony's mother and aunts also sitting on the hold on a row of canvas chairs, talking, sewing, exchanging stories. Tony and Ramiro were always fishing. They sat on the two fishing chairs on the stern, trolling for whatever would bite. If they hooked a fish of no consequence, like a barracuda, which did not put up a great fight, and Cubans didn't eat, they could reel it in. They could always tell when it was a barracuda by the way it pulled. If it was a worthy fish—a sailfish, a tarpon, a kingfish, then Tony's father or one of his uncles would come over, take the rod from them, and reel it in.

They sailed to the many unpopulated islands north of Camaguey Province. At the islands they snorkeled for lobster, bottom fished from the boat, and went swimming on deserted sandy beaches with crystal clear waters. At night they anchored in protected coves, ate seafood dinners while the trio played, and slept in canvas beds set up on the hold. Sometimes they would take the beds to the island and sleep on the beach. It was wonderful, to fall asleep under a canopy of stars, listening to the melody of the waves and the coconut fronds. Tony loved those trips more than anything in the world. Every time the family returned to the sugar mill from the fishing trips he would run up to his bedroom, lock himself in, and cry. He couldn't bear the thought that the trip had ended.

With hindsight, Tony realized that his life at the sugar mill was as good as life gets for a nine-year-old boy. That life ended in 1950, when the American Sugar Company made a very good offer for La Estrella. Don Antonio sold the sugar mill, retired, and all the de la Torres moved to Havana. Tony's mother and father moved in with Cocó, his maternal grandfather, who had a large house in the Vedado section of Havana. Ramiro's family moved in with Don

Antonio, who also had a very big house in the Country Club section, on the western end of Havana.

At first, Tony hated living in Havana. He missed his de la Torre grandfather, the fishing trips, his life in a small country town surrounded by nature. His first year at Belén was a disaster—it took a while to adapt to such a large and strict school, especially since his prior schooling had been very relaxed, all done with private tutors. He flunked nine out of eleven courses. He didn't make new friends easily. At the sugar mill, his friends were all built in—his 17 cousins. In Havana, the cousins were spread all over the city. Ramiro lived on the other side of the city.

It was at night that he had the most trouble. The city noises were so loud that he had trouble falling asleep. He missed the soothing sounds of the Cuban countryside—the owls, crickets and frogs. In Havana, he could only hear jarring man-made noises. The slope of G Street in front of Cocó's house was steep, and the cars and buses going uphill made a racket in first gear—a rumbling sound that went through the walls. The cross street one block up the hill, 23rd Street, was even noisier; it had the trolley line in the center of the street and from there came a steady stream of the high-pitch screeching sounds made by the metal wheels.

He saw Ramiro on the weekends. They met at the Yacht Club, went snorkeling, ate lunch, and after lunch, they went to the movies. Cubans loved American movies and he was no exception. With time, he noticed that city life suited Ramiro's reckless streak just fine. There were more opportunities to break the rules in the city. It was impossible to keep up with Ramiro's schools, because he had been kicked out of every school he went to. Now he was going to the Havana Military Academy, the only school that would take him. He rode the Havana trolleys kneeling down on the back fender, which was dangerous and illegal, and Ramiro had to contend with both the policemen and the conductors, his idea of fun. The tram cost only five *centavos*, so Tony chose to ride inside, usually in the back seat where he could keep in visual touch with his cousin. At the movies Ramiro always wanted to sit on the first row of the balcony. Often, he would bring a paper bag full of eggs. In the middle of the movie, he would toss the

eggs, one at a time, into the darkness below. They would hear a splat, and then a howl, as a horrified moviegoer discovered what had happened. Ramiro was a budding delinquent.

Now Ramiro was claiming that he had gone to Marina, one of the better known three-dollar brothels in Havana, and wanted Tony to go with him. Tony knew this: he had no interest in going there; he had heard that getting crabs was almost guaranteed if you did it at Marina. If he was going to go somewhere, he would go to The Mambo Club, which cost ten dollars, but he could dance with the women before he chose them, and the Mambo had a house doctor, who inspected the employees every day. It was considered a class act among brothels. Some of the women there were reputed to be ex-chorus dancers at the Tropicana nightclub. Tony had heard that Batista, the president of the republic, went there. Batista would call one hour ahead to allow the club to get rid of all their regular customers; the General wanted all the women for himself and his entourage.

Nevertheless, he was in no great rush to go to the Mambo, partly because he had heard that it was still possible to get crabs there, and gnorreak and worse, but mostly because the mechanics of lovemaking were still a mystery to him. He couldn't quite visualize how it was done. He meant to ask Gonzalo how it worked, but he was too embarrassed to ask. He knew, for certain, that he didn't want to go to Marina with Ramiro. In fact, by the time they had turned thirteen, Tony was consciously trying not to do too many things with Ramiro. Ramiro's friends were even worse—all the other delinquents at the Havana Yacht Club. One of them, a troublemaker named Conseca, had bragged to Tony how he had found a litter of kittens in the back of the bowling alley, and how, just for the hell of it, he had buried them all alive. Tony was horrified. He never wanted to talk with Fonseca after that.

Ramiro and his friends also got into fistfights. Getting into a fistfight, for a silly, inconsequential reason, was a test of manhood. They also swore all the time. Swearing all the time was another sign of manhood. And Cuban swearwords, when uttered by boys, were dangerous—they could break a nose. If a boy called Tony a *maricón* or an *hijo de puta*, his only honorable and manly response would be to fight him. Fistfights were common. Ramiro's friends

scared Tony, and he went out of his way to avoid them. The only thing he planned to do with Ramiro, when the beach season at the Yacht Club started in early May, was some snorkeling on Saturday mornings. He figured he could not get into too much trouble snorkeling with Ramiro.

Tony got to the Yacht Club early, changed into his bathing suit, and walked to the basketball courts, where he could usually find his cousin shooting baskets. He didn't see him there, so he thought he might be at the pool, but Tony could only see a group of girls sunbathing there. He knew the girls, but he was not about to go up to them, by himself, and talk to them. Even though he spent most of his day thinking about girls, and especially, having sexual fantasies about them, when the time came to actually talk to a girl, he felt paralyzed. He didn't know what to say. He had no trouble talking to boys, but with girls, his mind would go blank. One thought that made him really nervous was the huge probability that one day he would marry one of the girls that swam at the Yacht Club's pool. It made talking to them even more complicated. It made even swimming in the pool complicated.

He decided to try the courts again and halfway there he spotted Ramiro walking towards him. Ramiro lifted weights and carried his muscular arms like weapons. Tony didn't care for his tough guy strut—it seemed very low class. Tony also thought that Ramiro was too full of himself and he should be more aware of his shortcomings. He and his delinquent friends were clearly headed in the wrong direction. Still, there were some things he admired about Ramiro: he was a very good athlete, he was amusing, girls seemed to like him, he was very popular with his delinquent friends. Ramiro was certainly a doer—he did crazy things, he was gutsy. In a way, Tony wished he was a lot more like Ramiro. He needed to be more gutsy. He probably needed to do more crazy things. Tony suspected that something was wrong with his life—it was too uneventful.

Ramiro approached Tony and threw a left hook into Tony's ribs, stopping the punch just before making contact. He was a skilled boxer, and threw his irritating left hook as a way of greeting.

"Torrecita, what?" he said, grinning. "You haven't picked up any girls yet?"

Tony did not like it when Ramiro called him Torrecita, a diminutive for de la Torres. He was shorter than Ramiro.

"Not yet, Ramiro," Tony said. "I'm waiting for Casanova to show me how it's done."

"I'm your man, Torrecita. Girls can not resist me."

Unfortunately, there was some truth to that statement. Cristina de la Torre, a cousin, had told him that girls considered Ramiro very good looking. Ramiro was especially pleased with his hair; thick, straight, black, always perfectly combed. He could never pass a mirror without stopping to check his hair, adjust it, and admire his appearance. Tony did not feel so good about his hair; it was too curly and too blond and the sun and salt water bleached it nearly white every summer. He did not look Cuban. On one occasion, he had gone to a Negro neighborhood in Havana to have his hair straightened, so he could comb it straight back, like Ramiro, and many of the boys he knew. He had been the only white boy in the barbershop, and he felt out of place and slightly embarrassed. Afterwards, he felt very attractive for a week, but then his hair curled again.

They got their snorkeling equipment from the locker room and swam out from the beach. The water was getting murkier every year, probably because there were too many motorboats. He had read an article in *Bohemia* how the Cuban middle class was exploding, one of the largest in Latin America, and the newly affluent were probably all buying boats. According to his family, they were also trying to get listed in the Social Guide and admitted into the Yacht Club. They were certainly buying cars, because the traffic in Havana was becoming impossible.

They snorkeled for a while, but they did not see too many fish. Havana was fished out. They swam back to the Club, and climbed up on the floating wood platform at the tip of the Yacht Club's pier. They sat there for a while and watched the bathers at La Concha, the public beach next to the Yacht Club. They were dangling their finned feet over the water, making little splashes.

La Concha was always crowded on Saturdays. Its Moorish style buildings and pavilions had been designed by the same American architect who had designed the Capitol, and the Yacht Club, and it was considered the best public beach in Havana. A concrete diving platform, fifty yards from the shore, featured a few diving boards and in the middle of the platform, a giant twenty-foot beer bottle—an ad for the company that had donated the platform. The boys in Ramiro's group considered climbing the bottle and diving from the cap another test of manhood.

La Concha, in Tony's mind, was a very exciting place. This was the beach where young maids went to when they had a Saturday off, as well as the working girls he watched from his school bus every morning, so the female bathers at La Concha were, potentially, all sex fiends. Tony had also noticed that many prostitutes worked at La Concha. They picked up men at the beach and walked across the street, in their bathing suits, to a *posada*—a one-hour motel. The rooms went for one dollar, the prostitutes charged two dollars, and afterwards they would return to the beach, looking for more clients.

"Let's swim over to La Concha and talk to the prostitutes," Ramiro said.

"Talk about what?" Tony said, stalling.

"We can pretend we want to take them to a *posada*. Maybe they will let us feel them up."

"I doubt it, Ramiro. They are not stupid."

"Don't be silly Torrecita. It's what they do—they talk to men and try to sell them the goods. Don't be such a chicken. Come on, follow me."

He put on his mask and splashed over the side.

"Let's go," he said, treading water. If he did not go with him, Tony thought, Ramiro would spend the rest of the day calling him a chicken. If he went with him, there would be trouble. Ramiro was now swimming on his back. "*No seas ratón!*" he yelled. Don't be a mouse. Tony felt he really did not have a choice. And if he was going to be more gutsy, more crazy, like Ramiro, talking to the prostitutes at La Concha might just be the place to start. He put on his mask, jumped in and followed him.

At first, they looked at women underwater. As long as they kept a reasonable distance, nobody seemed to mind. Very quickly, Tony started to enjoy the excursion. He particularly liked to watch lovers—there was always some fondling going on under the water. In deeper water, he seemed to be fascinated by the sight of female thigh muscles flexing rhythmically as bathers treaded water. For a long while, he watched four young women in one group, all treading water—a truly erotic spectacle.

Tony was hoping that Ramiro had forgotten his original plan. Watching girls underwater was fun. But Ramiro wasn't satisfied; he wanted more. He had been looking all along and now he had spotted two candidates, standing in waist-deep water. One of them was very striking, with bleached blond hair, like Marilyn Monroe. Marilyn was very popular in Havana. She had the kind of voluptuous body Cuban men favored and Havana magazines had frequent features about her. The other woman was even more attractive. She had straight dark hair that went down to her waist. They were both around twenty years old and they could to be prostitutes—because they were smiling and staring at men.

Ramiro suggested they stare at this pair and smile. Tony felt foolish, but he went along and smiled, seemingly for a long time. It was very awkward. It was hard for him to fake a smile, but Ramiro knew what he was doing because the two women noticed them and started staring and smiling back. The dark-haired woman raised an arm out of the water and beckoned them to join them.

"I told you," Ramiro said, turning to Tony, grinning triumphantly. Ramiro led the way as they waded towards them. Tony felt nervous, but curious. This was going to be embarrassing, but he could count on Ramiro to do most of the talking. Nevertheless, as soon as he was within hand-shaking distance, he surprised himself by offering his hand to the dark-haired woman.

"Hello. My name is Tony."

"You are very polite," she said, shaking his hand.

He was stunned by her green eyes. He had never seen eyes like that before. This seemed like an omen. One of his favorite boleros, *Aquellos Ojos Verdes*, was about a girl with green eyes. She was holding on to his hand, in no rush to let go.

"My name is Sonia, handsome. And she's Magali."

Tony was thinking how attractive Sonia was, and how she had called him handsome.

Sonia let go of his hand. "So tell me," she said, "are you boys spending a day at the beach with your mothers?"

"Oh, no," Ramiro broke in.

"I see," Sonia said, "I was wondering why you boys were smiling at us."

"Well," Ramiro said, trying to sound experienced, "we were hoping we could do some business."

Christ, Tony thought, what if they are not prostitutes? For all they knew, they could be nuns-in-training spending a day at the beach, just being friendly. Ramiro should slow down. He should start with a more normal conversation.

"Wonderful!" Sonia said. She turned to her friend: "Magali, aren't these boys cute?" She turned back to them and said: "Tell me," she said, laughing. "You boys know how to masturbate already?"

Maybe they are prostitutes, Tony thought.

"We were especially thinking," Ramiro said, "that we could go to a *posada* if you don't charge too much."

"Oh my, this one is very advanced for his age," Sonia said. "A child lover-boy looking for a bargain. You can have him, Magali, I prefer shy little Blondie here. Tell me, Blondie, what's a Cuban boy like you doing with blond hair and blue eyes?"

Tony had been asked this question before. There was an answer, which he offered; his de la Torre grandfather had blue eyes and he married an O'Kindelan from Santiago, a Cuban family of Irish descent.

Sonia moved closer and smiled seductively. "Cuban and Irish!" She laughed, then added: "Oh, my, this one is going to be very good in bed. I also bet you boys don't have a cent with you."

"We don't have it with us," Ramiro said, "but we can get it from our club next door."

"Oh good," Sonia said, "two little rich boys from the Havana Yacht Club! Let me guess. You also would like to touch my tits before you put down the money."

"Yes, if you don't mind," Ramiro said, very politely.

Sonia ignored Ramiro. Looking intently at Tony, she said: "I also bet Blondie doesn't have any pubic hair yet."

Tony was speechless. It was surprising to hear a woman talk this way. It was particularly surprising to hear a woman talk about *his* pubic hair.

Sonia moved closer still. "Blondie," she said, "I'm going to have to check, because Magali and I have standards and we don't do it with kids without pubic hair."

Before Tony could react, she circled him from behind, stuck her hand inside his bathing suit and held on tightly to his private parts. Then she relaxed her grip and started fondling him.

Tony experienced some type of paralysis.

"Blondie," she said, pressed on to him from behind, "you barely passed the pubic hair test."

Sonia let her examination results sink in, then she whispered: "Blondie, come back with five dollars next Saturday and I promise you we will have a very good time."

She lingered there for a few seconds. "Don't forget," she whispered again. "Next Saturday. Five dollars." She pulled out her hand.

"Come, Magali," she said, "we'll let the boys get back to their mothers."

They waded off towards the sand, talking and laughing. Tony was still shocked from Sonia's surprising moves. He watched her as she emerged from the water and noticed that she had a very nice figure. He was thinking she probably was not too serious about her soft murmur, her promise concerning the following Saturday. Sonia must have read his mind. She turned around and yelled: "Don't forget Blondie!"

He did not forget. How could he forget. He had just acquired some excellent material for a fresh set of bad thoughts.

All week long he thought about Sonia, and her whispered promise, imagining a Saturday afternoon spent in a little room at the *posada*, Sonia slowly lowering his bathing suit as she said: "You know, Blondie, thirteen-year-old blond, blue-eyed boys are my weakness, my obsession." Then she would lead him to the bed, a little cot with clean white sheets, where she would take her time with him, and introduce him to sexual pleasure, and all the while he would be hypnotized—lost in her beautiful green eyes.

He was also worried. A number of possible scenarios occurred to him; Sonia would laugh hysterically when she saw his small penis; he would not know what to do in bed; Sonia had criminal friends hidden in the motel, waiting to kidnap him and ask his parents for ransom; she would give him crabs. Still, these thoughts would not last long. He could not explain why, but he trusted Sonia. Maybe she did feel especially attracted to young, blue-eyed Cuban boys. Maybe she really had found him handsome. She certainly had focused on him, and not on Ramiro, who everyone agreed was very good looking. He even liked how she called him Blondie. Then he thought about the situation this way: after a lifetime of being timid—a mouse, as Ramiro had called him, Sonia was presenting him with the opportunity to do something dramatic; to try on a new, more exciting, more risk-taking personality. He needed to be more of a doer, as Gonzalo had advised. He would also lose his virginity, and get Gonzalo and Ramiro off his back, and he would be doing it with Sonia, who had gorgeous green eyes and thought he was handsome. He seemed to trust her and she seemed to like him. It was a special opportunity and he had to consider it.

He was so focused on Sonia that it was hard for him that week to pay attention to his family at the dinner table, or to the Jesuits at school, or even to Gonzalo in the back porch, and when Saturday came around again, he was determined to act. At the club he did not look for Ramiro, thinking that this was something that he had to do alone. He changed into his bathing

suit, walked to the tip of the Yacht Club's pier, dove, and swam over to la Concha. He had five American dollars tucked in his bathing suit pocket.

But Sonia was nowhere to be found. He waited for her until lunch, went back to the Yacht Club, ate lunch quickly, and returned to La Concha. He wandered up and down the beachfront all afternoon, looking for her. At five-thirty he noticed that Gonzalo was at the tip of the Yacht Club's pier, looking for him. When he spotted Tony at La Concha, sitting dejectedly at the water's edge, he started yelling at him; Gonzalo was upset because he had to be back at the house to drive Cocó to a dinner and he was going to be late.

Tony knew then that his adventure with Sonia was not going to happen. He was very disappointed. It had been his first attempt to do something about his sexual impulses, and especially, to do something courageous, on his own initiative, and Sonia had let him down. She had completely forgotten what she had promised the previous week.

He felt terrible about being stood up but he would tell no one. Especially Ramiro. He could hear Ramiro, gleefully reminding him for the next decade, how he was the first man in the history of Havana to be stood up by a prostitute.

3

By the following weekend his interest in Sonia had subsided. The fantasy he had constructed around Sonia was not working any more. It had come down to earth and crashed. Still, driven by curiosity, he did spend some time sitting on a deck chair on the upper level of the Yacht Club's pier—the chair aimed at La Concha—hoping to spot Sonia. He did not plan to swim over there if he saw her. He was just curious. He might wave at her, and see how she reacted. He sat there for an hour, then decided he was a fool. Come down from that cloud, Gonzalo would have advised; it was time to move on. He got up from his chair and headed for the pool. There were a few girls there from his age group—the Delgado sisters, Carmen Macía, Lola Sampedro. The Delgado sisters were somewhat silly, and Lola Sampedro was as skinny as a rail, but he could not find one shortcoming with Carmen Macía. If he had any courage at all, he would go up to her and start a conversation.

The four girls were lying face down on large towels, tanning their backs. He had known them since he was three or four, when he started going to the birthday parties of the boys and girls in his age group. Some of those parties were ridiculous affairs, with all the little guests wearing the same costumes. He remembered one party when he dressed as a member of a military band, another one when he was an angel. He remembered hating the outfits, especially the angel one, which had wings. But he had to go, because the parents of those girls and his parents had been life-long friends. They had grown up together and gone to the same schools, the same clubs, the same parties, and were listed in the same hardcover telephone book known as the Social Guide. There must have been well over a thousand families listed in the Social Guide and most of them knew each other.

Soon—he guessed this summer—the birthday parties of the girls in his group would be occasions for dance parties, and the process of pairing off would start. The odds were in favor of

him marrying one of the girls who showed up at those parties, because, well, they wouldn't be invited unless they came from "good families," and the number of good families in Havana was limited. He heard that term often at the dinner table at Cocó's. The easiest way to find out who belonged to a good family was to check the Social Guide telephone book. The Guide included not only the families that belonged to the Yacht Club, but were members of the other upper class clubs, like the Vedado Tennis Club, the Biltmore Yacht Club, and the Country Club.

For the moment, though, it was a struggle to talk to his prospective brides. He had never found it easy talking to them when he was dressed as an angel and he was having more problems now, as an adolescent, with his mind overflowing with perverted thoughts. He could not help noticing how all the girls in his group seemed to have shown up at the Yacht Club for the new beach season with brand new, almost full-grown breasts; a small voice inside his head keep repeating: don't stare at their breasts. It made talking to them that much harder.

It was also hard to figure out what interests they shared with him. None of them were interested in fishing, baseball, boxing, or building model planes. They certainly were not interested in sex. He knew that they thought that anything dealing with sex was a major sin and something to avoid until they were married, when it no longer would be a sin. Movies was one topic available. Cubans were crazy about American movies. *Bohemia* published an article about the obsession Cubans had with American movies and found that there were 138 movie theaters in Havana. Funny stories about mutual friends, that was another topic. A joke making the rounds was a good subject, although in that area he was woefully deficient, because he could never remember jokes. A boy he knew had an inventory of over 100 jokes that he could deliver perfectly. Tony could only remember a few, and even for those he would sometimes forget the punch line.

Being funny was important. In Cuba, being funny was the highest virtue. The opposite to being funny, *ser un pesado*, was the worst sin. Nothing could redeem a bore. Still, Tony suspected that what the girls from good families mostly wanted from a future mate was the means to maintain their lifestyle. They all wanted a huge house with seven or eight servants, just

like their parents' house. Before he considered those girls as possible mates, and before they considered him, he had to come up with a career that would pay for the eight servants and the house to put them in. He was pretty sure about this because he was not going to inherit anything from his father. His father mostly played golf.

He walked up to the pool and dove in. He was a good diver and maybe the girls would notice that. One thing he was good at was anything to do with the water: fishing, skin-diving, water skiing, swimming, diving, and holding his breath under water. Not many career prospects there. He swam about ten laps, came out, and sat upright on a deck chair. He looked towards the four girls, and noticed they had not changed positions. Ten very fast laps had gone unnoticed. Maybe they were asleep. He would love to know what those girls dreamt about. Did they have sexual dreams, like he did? He doubted it, but really, girls were a complete mystery to him. Still, he should be polite; he should go up to them and say hello. Their families and his family were friends. He could ask Carmen if she had seen his cousin Tina lately.

He had known Carmen for years; she had been a guest at the angels' party—he could recognize her in the photograph of that party in his mother's album—but he had never talked to her much. That changed last summer, when he visited Tina's mom and dad for two weeks, at their cattle ranch in Camaguey Province, near a little town called Ciego de Avila. Tina, Carmen and Luis, Tina's younger brother, were already there and the four of them did everything together. His uncle had thoroughbred horses and they rode every day. Tina's mom called them the four musketeers. His impression of Carmen was that she was funny and pretty and a bit of a tomboy; she rode as well as he did, and when they played together on a pick-up baseball game, she really smacked the baseball and ran fast to first base. He liked that.

He thought of her then as a young girl, but this summer she looked more like a woman. What a difference one year had made. She had great looking breasts, not too big, but not too small, and her waist had narrowed and her hips had some heft to them. He overheard a boy in the locker room say that Carmen Macía *estaba buenísima*. Tony couldn't agree more, and felt good about it, because he knew her well—certainly better than that boy.

Tony leaned back on the deck chair, and closed his eyes. What would it be like to make love to Carmen Maciá? The thought excited him. It could happen, but it would be years from now, when he graduated from college, and he would have to marry her, but their first night together would be a night to remember. She would have a huge backlog of frustrated sexual desires, years of going out with chaperones and living by the rules of Cuban culture, which did not permit her to kiss a man, or be touched by one, and suddenly there she was, lying under thin linen sheets next to him, and anything she did was allowable and acceptable. Even the church would applaud, as long as the goal was to produce babies. And he could definitely be the man under the sheets next to Carmen, more than willing to satisfy all her desires. Why not? Better him than the idiot boy who had been admiring her figure in the locker room.

He opened his eyes and looked at the girls again. They had turned. They were tanning themselves on a timer. He thought about the vacation he spent with Carmen and his cousins in Ciego. He had really enjoyed his stay there. It had been exciting to live in the same house with a girl that he could easily fall in love with. A girl with perfectly formed lips.

They got up early every morning, saddled the horses, and explored every corner of the ranch. They rode fast, and raced often, and afterwards, they went for a swim in the river. They particularly enjoyed swinging into the river, Tarzan-like, on the rope they had attached to a tree high up on a bank. After lunch, they played Ping-Pong on the porch, and later they played tennis at the local version of a country club. In the evening they played poker for pennies, or went to Ciego to see movies, although there was only one movie house and the movies were old. During all these activities Tony and Carmen talked, joked, flirted, kidded each other, and competed. Being the oldest, he was the one to beat at horse races, at Ping-Pong, at tennis, and Carmen liked to compete.

He especially remembered one night. It was a particularly hot night; it was going to be impossible to sleep. The four of them decided to walk to the river, and go swimming. They went in and afterwards, they stretched out on towels on a sandy area by the bank. All four lay there, touching elbows, staring at the stars, listening to the owls and the frogs. Carmen was next to him

and Tony was aware how their thighs were touching; it was an innocent moment, possibly for Carmen, but not for him; he was very aware how soft and warm her skin felt pressed against his. Above them, they could see a textbook Milky Way, and every now and then, a shooting star. That started a discussion about where the shooting stars came from, and about the universe, and about the likelihood of life on other suns, and about God and whether there was a God. Carmen was very opinionated. Definitely yes on the question of life on other earth-like planets, and she did not think there was a conventional God, at least, not the one the Catholics believed in. She said she preferred how Buddhists approached the question of God. Tony was impressed. He didn't know anything about Buddhists, except that they wore orange robes and lived in desolate monasteries on top of mountains, but he was prepared to like how they approached the question of God. The Catholics clearly had it all wrong, convinced that every pleasure in life was a sin. The discussion lasted a while, and they were pleased that they were having an interesting, intellectual conversation about a serious topic. Through it all, Tony was intensely focused on Carmen's thigh, and how she didn't move her leg away from his. That had to mean something.

So here was Carmen again, sunbathing by the pool, and he really should go up to her and say hello. They could, of course, talk about the previous summer in Ciego, but that would be a very personal conversation, and the other girls would feel excluded. They could talk about school, but there was not much one could say about school. It would be much more interesting if he reminded her about the night they had talked about the universe, and how their thighs had touched, but everyone would be horrified if he mentioned that.

She probably didn't remember that night at all. Instead, Tony decided to swim some more laps. When he was finished, he glanced at the girls. They were lying face down again. He would say hello some other day. He left the pool and headed for the boy's locker room. It was getting late and Gonzalo would be arriving to pick him up.

He showered, dressed, and was tying on his shoes, getting ready to leave when a boy he knew by sight, Emilio Eloy, started undressing in a nearby locker. Tony had heard stories about him; mostly that he was a little crazy and an *agitador*, someone who enjoyed getting into fights.

In fact, he was one of the few boys Ramiro was afraid of, but Emilio did not strike him like a bully. He was not much bigger than Tony, although he looked stronger. He was handsome in a grown up way; his black hair perfectly combed straight back, like Rudolph Valentino. He grinned constantly, as if everything that happened around him was amusing.

Tony could foresee trouble when he casually looked towards Emilio and saw that Emilio was staring at him. Tony quickly averted his glance. Emilio noticed, and did not waste any time. He started singing:

I know a cute little blond boy
She's so cute
And she sneaks into the boys' locker room to tie her shoes.

This song clearly referred to him. He pretended he was not listening. Emilio continued singing, this time louder:

THIS LITTLE BLONDE GIRL
SHE HAS A VERY NICE ASS
AND SHE DOESN'T HEAR TOO WELL!

He bellowed the last line. Tony knew he was expected to do something—there were a few boys around and they were watching—but he was not planning to get into a fistfight. He was totally uninterested in that test of manhood. On his last fight, in sixth grade, he had been knocked out cold. His strategy now was to talk his way out of fights, without doing too much damage to his self-respect. A little damage to his self-respect was clearly preferable than damage to his nose. One way to avoid fighting was to pretend he did not hear whoever called him a *maricón* or an *hijo de puta*, and walk away, but in this situation it was going to be difficult to pretend he had not heard Emilio.

"You want to fight?" Tony said, surprising Emilio, and himself, and everyone else in the room.

"Anytime, little blond girl!" Emilio said, delighted. He moved closer to Tony.

"Why? I don't even know you." Tony figured he could try to reason with the idiot.

"What are you, a philosopher? Because I called you a girl with a nice ass, that's why." This drew a few chuckles from the other boys.

"So you called me a girl," Tony said, trying to appear calm. "Not very original. Maybe you need glasses."

"I can see well enough to see that you are a *maricón*!" Emilio said, laughing, pleased with his wit. There were more chuckles from the audience.

What a jerk, Tony thought. "You can think whatever you want, I really don't care what you think." He figured that was a good exit line, and it was delivered calmly. He could feel his heart pounding as he leisurely walked across the locker room and left.

The following weekend he was not too eager to go to the Yacht Club. He skipped the snorkeling-on-Saturdays routine with Ramiro but on Sunday, his entire family went to the club for lunch and he had to go. After lunch Cocó excused himself and headed for a game room on the second floor to play dominoes; his father made a beeline to the bar, to drink scotch and play *cubilete*, a dice game. His mother and grandmother went to the ladies game room to play canasta. The children were on their own. Tony did not know what to do. He was not planning to swim, and run the risk of running into Emilio at the locker room. As bad luck would have it, Emilio came into the dining room, saw him, and walked straight to his table.

"You're Tony de la Torre, right?" He said, smiling. "My father told me you're going to be one of my classmates at Choate this September."

Tony was shocked. He knew that other Cuban boys were going to start out with him at Choate, the prep school in Connecticut his father had gone to, but he never expected Emilio would be one of them. He thought one had to be smart to get accepted to Choate.

"I was just kidding in the locker room the other day," Emilio was now saying. "Do you want to be friends?"

"Sure," Tony said. He would much rather be his friend than his punching bag.

"Would you like to come to my house for lunch next Saturday?"

"Sure," Tony said.