THE STUBBORNNESS OF THE ASHES

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Girl, you're walking along Lincoln St, I say to myself. I come across several art galleries and arrive at one, Lincoln Gallery, which, according to the sign, seems to specialize in *gringo* art. It doesn't say *"El Yuma"* (US), which may be why I approach with my guard down. I come to a halt in front of the display window, frozen to the spot: my gaze encounters my own face in strokes full of misgiving. I can't believe it. I enter without a second thought. I walk up to the painting, caress the frame. Then, a voice behind warns me, first in English and then in Spanish, that I can't touch the *cubana*'s work.

I ask permission to sit down in a chair, the young man stares at me and his demeanor changes; he slowly relaxes. He doesn't move. I see myself reflected in the glasses of this stranger with his straight, fine hair, and I come face to face with my loneliness, although he radiates empathy. I want to talk; I care nothing about this man nor what my life will be, I just want to tell him, tell him everything. I am that *cubana*. It's pointless to avoid my experience, not to acknowledge my shadowy past. Maybe I've made some bad decisions; it's just that I was born without so many natural talents, with the sole urge to do good and obey my parents. I need to tell him how I got to this point because I learned that, unlike plants, we humans don't have roots, and even if we talk about uprooting, we're just a body and hopefully some part of that thing they call a soul. Those who distance themselves from their native land because they fear for their lives usually feel lucky, I think, and so when they leave their homeland, they're saving their skins, you know what I mean? But those of us who pursue our dreams feel unhappy. The exiles beat death while life, real life, defeats us. Our dreams, by definition, are unachievable; when our feet touch the ground in the new land, all we'll find are anti-dreams, disillusionment. We're condemned to the distance between illusion and what actually is, to having to put up with distortion.

In this seaside resort with its proud, upright palm trees, buildings with name plates on their fronts – a city which gives shelter to old residents with frustrated and unsettled premonitions – I feel the uncertain weight of my future. That's why, when this young man who is the curator of Lincoln Gallery, I think, asks me how Miami is treating me, I prefer to ask for a glass of water on the assumption that it will be free. Moreover, this strikes me as most logical; it would have to be the most appropriate drink for any grub. 'Many others have gone through the same thing,' I reflect to calm myself, and take a deep breath. "And what do you think?" I add. "It's not the most intelligent who survive landslides, but rather those who put their bodies on the line [give their all] and avoid the debris dodge the wreckage." There were things I couldn't imagine. No one could have, I think, while I look again at the expression on my imploring face in the picture on the wall.

The curator brings me the glass of water, sits down and, in his *gringo*-accented Spanish with its nasal *r*, asks me if he can take notes. I'm not one to tell him to feel at home in his own place, and I smile. In view of his attentive silence, I start to speak.

"I wanted to be confident that things would turn out well, you understand," I say, confused by not knowing how to start my tale.

The young man looks at me seriously with his bright eyes and gentle, almost childlike, smile. I try to be precise, organize my thoughts, attempt to calm down and moderate my speech, make it more measured. As I grab the glass, I realize – as does he – that I'd become accustomed to chewing on my nails. I feel embarrassed. If I used to bite my nails on a daily basis before leaving the island, now my fingers are deformed. I don't attempt to justify myself, I don't hide my hands, and I thank him for the coffee he also offers me. I wasn't going to admit that everything that had happened in my short life was the fruit of my own decisions. If that had been the case, every one of my steps, including the one of boarding my first plane, would have been a matter of unbearable responsibility.

"That was my only feasible plan," I explain to him, for the first time mulling over how to separate my artistic story from my personal one. I try to focus on the artistic, on what I think the young man wants to hear.

"I let myself be carried away by my dreams and by my belief that you had to make progress by moving forwards. If you did what you knew how to do by trying to do it well – and in my case, that was painting – I believed that demonstrating this to the Argentinians would be enough.

"I arrived in Buenos Aires at age 27," I say, as if I'm eagerly dictating my biography to him so he can choose how to write it up well in some catalogue. "The only person I knew was Rodolfo, the Argentinian professor who had offered me a sort of tailor-made artistic residency there in return for helping him with his work as a sculptor. To be honest, compared with other friends of my generation, I had little recognition. They, not I, were at that time helping to construct "the new man" on the island and being applauded and receiving awards for that. But suddenly, they'd become "apolitical", determined and focused on planning their own lives. Boosting not only the echo of their own reputations, but their wallets as well.

"I was painting, but living – if you can call it living – from my teaching, committed, prepared to sacrifice myself for the revolution. I didn't want to continue crossing paths with colleagues and hearing '¡*Qué bolá*!, what's up?', and having to be on the receiving end of their good news and, in particular, information about the numerous sales they were making through the buyers on call, while I never had anything to share with them. I couldn't stand listening to their constant, cynical good wishes, and greetings in which they emphasized 'to the family' and 'to your brother'. I was carrying a tremendous burden," I say, but the curator doesn't bat an eyelid." I'd become a reclusive, envious person," I

confess to him, and after articulating those words, I hesitate. Since the curator isn't put off and just keeps writing, I carry on.

"I withdrew from the small arts community; I didn't even feel like grabbing a quick coffee with anyone. I didn't distance myself as a dissident who prefers to keep a low profile, I clarify, but out of embarrassment. While it was true I wasn't a purist, nor did I believe that all visual art should exist solely to serve the nation, I was convinced that at least my work, and I as an artist, should be based on ethics. So, I felt that the success that others suddenly began to accept – especially the economic one that lifted my neighbor and ex-boyfriend Álvaro to another level – struck me as uncomfortable and disconcerting.

"It would have made me happy, at that stage, to be able to paint a mural in some decrepit palace or on the façade of some second-rate school. Anything. Having a commission for a small painting with the promise that it would be hung in a public space was my hope, my dream. But no, in recent times, decisions for these sorts of things were the responsibility of recently arrived celebrities. Cuba was experiencing changes and, despite the fact that I'd always had a feeling for the mission and was treated as a promising revolutionary artist, I was being shut out.

"No, no," I explain to the curator, who hadn't said a word while allowing his coffee to get cold, "I'd never confronted anyone politically, except for my own mother. Imagine! A hero of the nation, a great scientist, moreover. My paintings were neither critical nor confrontational but had a personal quest which I saw as interesting, though maybe no one else did." As soon as I say this, I regret it, so I continue. "I took risks, but within my own limits. I was more diligent and very dedicated. I loved my country and, maybe like an idiot, I searched for the validation of everyone else, especially my colleagues. And that's why, although at the time I didn't stop losing weight, I stoically took great pains to try to show everybody what I was capable of. I had faith that some commission would lift me out of my anonymity. But that year of hunger, I got tired of the lines, of the rejections, and I said 'Enough!' I was convinced that Rodolfo's offer was that call from destiny I needed so badly. After all, in my country, people typically wanted to go to Europe or the US, and I was going South. Mine was an emigration with no serious consequences, to a country that, historically, had an affinity with Cuba.

"It had always been said that, in all of Latin America, we Cubans and Argentinians were the most similar." The curator looks at me with interest. "Ego and arrogance," I say. "If it was true that we were linked, everything was going to be much simpler. Moreover, I thought, the Argentinians would be having a much better time of it. Not only did they travel a lot – because they were the tourists who visited the island the most in the 90s, especially at first – but they had a culture we all admired: the Argentinians shone in all disciplines. So, if I hadn't got a residency in Madrid, Buenos Aires seemed like an excellent option to alleviate my feeling of confusion for a while.

"'What could go wrong in the land of Che! My idols, Fito Páez and Subiela, were there.' That was enough to convince me that everything was going to be fine, and that for a short while, I could leave behind the constant cry on every street corner of '*aseré québoláh*!'. I smile as I say this, choke on my nervous smile and, given the ensuing silence, add: "But you'd better believe that going there really frightened me. We Cubans are like dogs: we bark to be let out but when they open the door, we don't make a sound. We don't even have the courage to peek out, but in the end, I went: my impatience got the better of me."

I grow in confidence as I concentrate on my story and listen to my own words, and my past starts to flow without a backward step. I answer each of his questions and expand on each answer with details. I enjoy talking about this with a stranger, but I start to get things mixed up. I suggest we start again from the beginning and do better at following a chronological order; he doesn't object.

"I was sitting with my legs crossed," I recall, "nervous, with the seatbelt pulled really tight. How I battled with it to figure out how it worked! I sat still for a long time, upright, my back glued to the seat. I looked out the little window with a certain amount of incredulity, and when we took off, the joy of knowing I was airborne overwhelmed me. Later, I appreciated being able to enjoy all the refreshments I wanted after so much food scarcity, without even having to ask for them. During that flight, I allowed myself to be pampered and later, I had the courage to refuse the glass of juice the flight attendant offered me. 'That's what they call being full,' I said, sharing what I'd just done with the young man next to me.

"My travelling companion was Argentinian. Five or six years older than me, formal, his tie knotted very tightly, so much so that it hugged his Adam's apple. He was incredulous at the reaction each noise, each movement of the plane produced in me, which he perhaps judged as somewhat excessive. He wasn't very friendly, so I gradually fell silent, navigating through my own thoughts. His initial interest in me faded. My questions irritated him and I'm sure he felt sorry for me. I don't think he understood why I was so excited about landing in Argentina. But I knew why. I felt trapped on the island, I couldn't be happy there.

"Note that down," I tell the curator, feeling empowered.

"After several hours in the air, I squashed my face up against the window, trying to see the tail of the plane. The pilot performed a sudden maneuver and I got scared, but the message from the crew calmed me down. We were going to land and they asked us to get ready. My traveling companion gave me a polite smile. He adjusted his jacket and got comfortable in his seat. Then he told me to put the

back of my seat upright, treating me like an idiot, assuming that I might be from another planet; and it certainly was true that I had no idea how to behave in a plane.

'The continent, the land that contains you.' I had said this to myself cheerfully after crying at length in the minuscule aircraft toilet thinking about everything and everyone, especially Álvaro.

The curator suddenly interrupts me and recalls that he met Álvaro: "Yes, I spent time with him in Cuba," he tells me.

"I stare at him with curiosity in the face of such a confession. He flips back a few pages and stares at his notebook. And paraphrasing Álvaro, he reads: "She's an ardent revolutionary, of course, with all the contradictions of those of us who have believed and didn't want to stop believing." He finishes with: "She's a strange, effusive and impulsive woman. We were in love, but in the end, we grew apart, perhaps because of our desperate attempt to stay afloat." He's not, in fact, paraphrasing, he's quoting exactly. It makes me nostalgic and right away, I feel a fire stirring within me. I think about not continuing, about terminating our conversation. The young man senses this and, perhaps to spur me on, tells me that his father remained fascinated by Cuba and bought him the ticket, as well as talking to him about me. I don't feel better but, since I'm not in a hurry and have nowhere to go, I continue.

"Rodolfo, as he had promised, was waiting for me at the airport behind the barrier, on the other side of customs control. He wasn't holding up a small sign with my name on it; he was counting on remembering me. I recall that he was wearing a brown, V-necked sweater and he suddenly looked all of his 60 years. He still had a thick head of hair and a full, but untidy, beard. He was a bit gaunt, but I didn't think much about it; I guessed it might be from the cold.

"I emerged quickly from the immigration and customs sections. One of the first passengers, if truth be told: a Cuban with a tiny bag seemed to be of no interest to anyone. And I had been so worried about my paintings!

"I greeted Rodolfo with an effusive display of affection. Maybe I made him feel uncomfortable. He immediately established a formal distance between us. After all, he was a professor with a university Chair, and he had to maintain protocol. His relationship with me was fraternal; we had built up a friendship over the years since his visit to the island and then through correspondence. His caution was perhaps because he didn't want me to confuse things, or he didn't want our creative relationship to give rise to gossip. He apologized and then said that he had a cold and didn't want to pass it on to me. So I told myself there was nothing strange about it. He needed me, he'd already told me that: he was getting old and slowing down, he wasn't as strong, and he was very grateful to have me as his assistant. I recovered my enthusiasm and thought that everything would work out well.

“Rodolfo asked if that was all the luggage I had. I nodded, somewhat embarrassed. ‘Yes, almost all my canvases fitted in,’ I told him, proud of how well I had packed.

“He couldn’t get over his astonishment and offered to carry my luggage. He picked it up, but it was an effort. He didn’t complain because it was the moment to be a gentleman, but I realized he couldn’t handle the weight and took it from him.

“Once outside the airport, I felt the air getting inside my skin and penetrating my bones, an internal freezing I’d never felt before; it made me stop talking. With quick, short steps, I walked behind Rodolfo, whose body protected me a bit from the wind. His Renault 11 was right at the end of the parking lot, white, but looking more beige-colored because of the dirt covering it.

‘It’s a little dusty,’ he managed to say, trying to apologize, ‘but it works, and that’s what counts.’

“I was bursting with enthusiasm. I couldn’t tell the difference between a new car and an old one because to me, the car was modern enough compared with the ones in Cuba, and anyway, just then, the only thing I wanted was to climb in and get away from the raw winter that was making me shiver. I jumped up and down on the asphalt, trying to warm myself a little, shouting ‘I’m on the continent, I’m on the continent!’

“We got inside, but the car wouldn’t start. Rodolfo had to get out and call on his awkward acting skills to turn himself into a mechanic, something he clearly wasn’t, but which the circumstances required. He opened the hood, moved a few cables and tried to start it again and again.

‘It’s the battery,’ he said. ‘You arrived full of energy, but here we’re becoming rusty,’ he pronounced solemnly.

“I didn’t understand what he was talking about and laughed involuntarily. He had another go with the clutch and the gears, and then, just like that, from so much exertion, he farted. He didn’t say anything and I didn’t react, but for the first time I felt worried about my decision; it dawned on me that I was no longer on my home turf.

“Finally, astonished at his own mechanical feat, he managed to get the engine started.

“By this stage, an expert in doing up seatbelts, I tried to fasten mine. Rodolfo found that funny and laughed. He didn’t fasten his seatbelt, didn’t apologize, just accelerated toward the freeway.

“I began to pay attention to the cars, which looked nothing like the ones I was used to seeing. They weren’t especially handsome, but they were different from Rodolfo’s. Much newer. When we stopped at the first tollbooth, I looked at the sign with the prices and asked: ‘How much is two pesos?’

"Rodolfo answered without giving it any thought: 'There's an official exchange rate: two pesos equals two dollars.' He took two pesos out of his wallet and paid. I stared at the note, which had caught my attention. Then he held one out to me. 'Take it,' he said, 'it will do for two trips on the bus and you'll have some change left over'.

"Grateful, I grabbed it. The colors were very similar to those of the Cuban flag, I thought, although maybe this range of colors was a bit darker.

'Mitre (President) – In Unity and Liberty', I read. I wanted to believe that here the phrases that were pronounced by founding fathers, leaders and politicians, and then inscribed on money, bore more weight than the slogans I'd been hearing from my mother all my life.

"Rodolfo wanted to hear about my trip. I didn't know what to say. 'A banker who was sitting next to me did up his seatbelt but very loosely; I've no idea why he was doing it up like that. Besides, he didn't care about anything the pilot requested. He didn't pay any attention.'

'That's what we're like,' said Rodolfo.

"There was quite a lot of traffic; the car stopped suddenly because of a jam at one of the intersections. The sudden braking startled me. My gaze was confronted by the squalor of some of the houses; 'houses' was one way of putting it. I noted the old wooden structures, the strewn garbage, the hordes of children running around barefoot, and it left me pensive. I thought I was looking at a communist propaganda film, the sort my government used to put together to convince us of the advantages we Cubans enjoyed compared with the rest of the world. I looked at Rodolfo, seeking reassurance. He was smiling, his mind on other things.

'Are you hungry? he asked as he continued to concentrate on driving.

"If he'd looked at me, he would have realized how ill-timed his question was. I was shaken. You can't feel your own hunger to that extent, when you're confronted by a scene like the one I was looking at. Rodolfo wasn't expecting a reply.

'I'm going to have you taste the best Argentinian meat, first class,' he emphasized. 'I won't disappoint you,' he added enigmatically, but then he smiled at his comment, and repeated: 'I won't disappoint you. How pathetic I am! That came out sounding like one of Scrooge McDuck's slogans."' and, apologizing, he emphasized: 'Honestly, very good meat.'