

Gone Away...

By Vivian Conejero

I was nearly six years old, on that morning in the winter of 1959. It was cloudy, but the atmosphere hovering over our home in La Habana, Cuba was charged with something far more ominous than rain; I felt it as soon as I came out of my room.

The presence of guests in our house was the first sign that it was to be no ordinary day. Quite a number of people I had not seen in a long time, or ever, were strolling around our house. They all looked somber and were dressed in black. Some had tears in their eyes.

My day began when my mother burst into my bedroom to serve me breakfast in bed, a gesture normally reserved for times of illness. Announcing that she had no time to help me shower, my Mom warned me to stay away from the back of the house. "Go play out in the yard, Vicky--and don't ask what's going on, claro?"

Our old caserón in the neighborhood of La Víbora was the envy of many. It extended over half the span of a long street block. The porch boasted colonial-style, floor-to-ceiling windows with wrought iron bars. The living quarters were surrounded by a cemented yard, bordered by flower trees. Lush palmeras towered near the street entrance to our yard. On spring and summer nights, we were engulfed by the alluring fragrance of the galán de noche and picuala flowers. Behind the house, the delicious aroma of ripe mangoes reigned over the fainter odors of avocado and lime.

On the right side of the backyard area, there stood our garage. Above it was the room built especially for my parents when they were married. The three of us had long since moved downstairs into the house. My Mom and Dad's new bedroom lay between the living room and the room I shared with Juan Carlos, my cousin and favorite playmate. He was seven months younger than I.

A large bathroom separated our room from our aunt Sonia's. She was the younger of my father's two sisters. Our abuelos—my father's parents—occupied the room behind the spacious dining area. The kitchen connected the dining hall to the backyard.

Along the corridor's right side, our patio was visible through all the iron-barred windows that lined it. An array of framed pictures of forebears decorated the hallway's left wall. Between the windows hung a few oil portraits of individuals not personally known to any of us. One of these paintings was a particular source of both terror and hilarity to us children. It pictured a man wearing a dark toga, standing alone on a craggy cliff; his right hand stretched out to the heavens, beseechingly.

According to family lore, these paintings depicted people whose spirits had at one time manifested

themselves during the séances held at our great-grandfather's former mansion. The dead, channeled into the early twentieth century, would describe their once earthly appearance to a medium. In the presence of all, a certain painter of contemporary renown would oblige in capturing their likenesses for posterity.

Ever since I could remember, my cousin and I sensed that there was an element of the supernatural about those canvases. Whenever the house became dark, either by the arrival of night or of dense, rain-laden clouds, we hastened through the corridor, hunching over and glancing furtively at those strange, painted people. Juan Carlos claimed that their ghosts roamed around our house at night as freely as the living did in daylight. I had yet to see any fantasmas, but lived with the fear that I might run into one of them at any time.

One ghost none of us ever wanted to see was that of Rosendo, the Italian physician, whose apparition was supposed to herald the death of one of our family. This white-bearded, benevolent-looking gentleman was portrayed as wearing a collar from Shakespeare's time. As the family legend went, Rosendo had "adopted" our bloodline centuries earlier and had faithfully materialized himself at the deathbed of many an ancestor of ours.

The room at the top of the garage had become Miriam's room, following her divorce from Juanito, Juan Carlos' affluent Dad. Miriam was my father's oldest sister and my godmother. We were genuinely fond of each other.

"How I wish you were my own daughter, Vicky!" Miriam would often exclaim. "You are such a quiet, sweet, and intelligent little girl! You don't need any nannies to look after you—unlike my son Juan Carlos. Now, he is a real troublemaker. Imagine! We had to hire two nannies just for him! And even Felicia and Faustina together cannot handle him at times. But you, Vicky—you just pick up some crayons and paper and give no one any worries!"

On that gloomy February morning, I ignored my mother's orders and walked over to the rear of the house. A pungent smell of coffee wafted from the kitchen and mixed in with the scents of various commercial perfumes. Everywhere, old women chatted in hushed tones.

When I entered the dining room and saw my grandmother lock herself into her bedroom, something about her manner chilled me. Her paleness was startling; her lovely, Italianate features had become disfigured by reddish eyes and cheeks. Her black dress set into relief her ivory white hair and very fair skin. Yet more disturbing was the unguarded frailty that had replaced her accustomed imperiousness.

An instant after Abuela had shut herself into her room, Sonia ran in the opposite direction, into her own room. She screeched hysterically. Her two visiting aunts-in-law followed her in. All of them were

wearing black too.

Through her room's closed door, I could hear my grandmother wailing in despair. I wanted to go to her. My father, looking more overwhelmed than usual, would not permit it. "Go play, Nené," he urged every time I ventured near the door to her room. "Abuela is not feeling well today."

Once our family's physician arrived, he persuaded Abuela to let him and my father in. Within minutes, the two men left my grandmother's bedroom; yet, she herself was not to be seen anymore that day. After a short while, even her weeping was no longer audible.

As that morning wore on, frightful thoughts crept into my mind: had Abuela died in her room following her doctor's visit? No, that could not be; someone else was dead, someone whose passing was causing her anguish—but, who was it? I had not seen my beloved grandfather for days. Could Abuelo be the one being mourned that morning? Or, was he on one of his periodic trips to the provinces, to take the medicinal waters?

There was nobody around who could or would relieve my curiosity. My mother and the servants were too busy minding the mourners. I could not find my cousin anywhere in our house, nor either of his two nannies. Most likely, Juanito had whisked Juan Carlos away to his own parents' palatial abode in Marianao. The last time I had seen my cousin, he had said something about spotting Rosendo on some recent night; but when I pressed him for exact details, he exploded into tears and darted off.

A few days earlier, my mother had gathered us children into our room.

"Miriam has been called away," she informed us. "But...she will always be watching over both of you," she hastened to add.

We cried out in unison, "Is she dead?" and began to sob.

Mom bit her lower lip. She put her arms around us and stammered out, "No, no...she is here; I have seen her...and she is happy.... Miriam simply had to go away....She wants me to tell you both that she loves you very much."

"Why did she go then?" I whined.

"When will she come back?" Juan Carlos bawled. "Can we visit her?"

"Can we at least talk to her over the telephone?" I whimpered.

My mother let out a deep sigh. Brushing her auburn hair away from her forehead, she mumbled, "Don't worry, children; you will see her again... someday."

"But, how soon?" we pleaded.

My father appeared on the threshold to our bedroom; his frown was deep. Fearing his disapproval of

our inquisitiveness, we fell silent. Mom walked away, promising to talk more about Miriam's whereabouts, later.

Three or more days had elapsed since that conversation with my mother; yet, Tía Miriam's unexpected disappearance from our lives had not been discussed again. Could the deceased be Miriam? No, that could not be; Mami had clearly stated that we would see Miriam again. It had to be someone else... but, who? Maybe it was an old relation of Abuela's, who did not reside with us--someone she obviously cared about a great deal.

I went out into the yard. Even there, black-attired figures huddled about, muttering and whispering. Some of them smiled at me; some attempted to pick me up. I ran away from them all, even from those whose faces I could identify. I wandered all the way to the front of the house. I walked into the receiving room and opened the living room's glass-paned doors. I headed towards the television set, which stood between the two colonial windows. Across the room, the upright piano beckoned me, but this was no day to try out some tunes. All the windows' wooden shutters were closed, leaving the room in shadows.

I stopped abruptly. I gasped. There was an old couple sitting on the sofa beneath the window that overlooked the structures to the right of our house. I recognized the elderly lady with the white shawl over the pale blue dress to be my great-grandmother, Vita. Hadn't she also "gone away" someplace, less than two years earlier? I wondered. That surely meant that my aunt Miriam might drop by someday too. That clarified what my mother had been trying to explain to us children. Yes...grown-ups just have to go away sometimes, for a while--but they always come back to visit their loved ones. This conclusion made sense.

After all, how many times hadn't Juan Carlos and I encountered Vita late at night in the dining room? Whenever my cousin woke me up in the wee hours of the morning, to accompany him to fetch a glass of filtered, cold water, there was Vita in her rocker. She sat by the window that opened on the yard, the entrance to the kitchen behind her.

On those occasions, Juan Carlos would cling tightly to me, as we made our way to the kitchen, through the eerie, moonlit hallway and its pictures of dead people. Every time we passed by the "granny" rocker in the dining room, Vita would give us a sweet smile. I always would return her smile, but my cousin would giggle and push me onwards.

"Mira! There is Vita again in her sillón!" he would whisper.

I would retort, "What about it? She is our bisabuela. She lives here too."

He would snigger, pressing on towards the kitchen.

We would pick up our glasses from the kitchen's cupboard and proceed to the refrigerator, at the far

left of our large dining room. The refrigerator's whir and the old grandfather clock's tick-tock were the only sound to be heard. Once we had satisfied our thirst, Juan Carlos would dash back to our bedroom. Left alone in the darkness and the silence, I would dutifully return our glasses to the kitchen. On some nights, I would leave them on the long dinner table and run off after my cousin. Slipping past Vita, I would catch a glimpse of her, laughing silently at us, in good-natured amusement.

I felt no surprise at meeting my great-grandmother once more. Certainly not on that unsettling morning, when so many folks I had not seen for so long congregated in our home. Yet it had been months since the last time I had run into Vita. In fact, her rocking chair had been moved to our grandparents' room, which was kept habitually locked. That room had once belonged to Vita herself.

Her sillón had disappeared the morning after I attempted to talk to her. At breakfast, I had blurted out, "Why does Abuelita Vita sit on her rocker alone at night?... Why do you, Abuela, keep her in your room all the time?"

I was swiftly ushered out of the dining room. Over my shoulder, I spied my father holding my grandmother in his arms, while she keened.

My beautiful, Italian bisabuela had looked rather strange the preceding night. I had come close to her and asked, "Abuelita Vita, why do you like to sit by yourself in the dark while we all sleep? Why don't you join us at mealtimes anymore? My great-grandmother smiled at me sadly; her eyes had a fixed, glazed look about them. She did not reply. When I reached out to touch her, Juan Carlos drew me back with a sharp motion. He snapped, "Look! There is one of the ghosts! The toga guy!" We galloped down the hallway to our room, without looking back. That night we did not get to drink our water.

My mother's explanation for Vita's nocturnal appearances was that she was very old and ill and spent all day sleeping. "Your bisabuela needs tranquility; that is why she comes out of her room only late at night, when there is no one around to disturb her." Henceforth, Mom ensured that we would have filtered water by our bedside every night.

I had never met the old man sitting with Vita on that sorrowful and perplexing February morning. To be sure, his features were familiar to me; pictures of him alone and with others hung along our corridor's walls. He looked most austere and frowned as he stared at me. His clothes were old-fashioned: he sported a chestnut-colored, double-breasted jacket and an odd-looking cravat. The thick, dark-brown whiskers on each side of his face were sprinkled with silver. There was an air of over-formality about him. He alternated between eyeing me with overt disapproval and whispering noiselessly into my great-grandmother's left ear. She smiled at me welcomingly, while waving him aside.

I flopped down in my favorite rocking chair and wiped off my eyeglasses. Within seconds, I became immersed in the lively cartoons on the television screen. The sound of my mother's voice brought me back to that moment, to that bewildering day.

"So, this is where you were hiding, niña! I have been looking for you all over this enormous house!" I stared at her blankly. She went on, "Aren't you hungry?"

It was not until Mom walked out of the living room that I remembered the old couple. I directed my eyes towards the wooden sofa; its wicker seats were empty. The old people must have quietly stepped out behind me, I reasoned.

Once my mother returned with my lunch, I wanted to know, "Mami, who was the angry old man sitting with Abuelita Vita on the sofa?"

"What 'viejo enojado' are you talking about, dear?...Sitting with Vita, your... bisabuela?" she questioned, wide-eyed. "There was nobody in this room, but you, Vicky....You probably dozed off while watching T.V. and dreamt it all up."

I persisted. "Sí, Mami, el viejo! The old man from the pictures in the hallway!" My mother shook her head slowly and said nothing further.

The following morning, I spotted the stern old man in one of the photos along the corridor. I called out, "Mami! That is the old man I saw yesterday with Vita. It is him! Mira!"

My mother paled. She took a breath, and declared, with a certain air of ceremony,

"That is a very old photograph of your bisabuelo, the illustrious newspaper editor." She paused and elaborated, "He was your grandmother's father, your father's grandfather."

Before I could inquire whether he too had "gone away" and come back the previous day for a brief visit, my mother encouraged me to go play and let her go about her household chores.

I stood alone, closely examining the picture in front of me. My "illustrious" great-grandfather's mien was most forbidding indeed, I noted with a shudder.

I had heard my grandmother tell many stories about her dear and brilliant but intimidating father. He was a newspaper editor, writer, spiritualist, and amateur painter. On the other hand, "Papaíto" was also a strict and harsh patriarch, who disinherited Abuela when she married Abuelo over his objections. Worst of all, my great-grandfather was a domestic autocrat who had kept Vita a virtual prisoner in her own house, since their wedding day; he was firm in his belief that women belonged literally in the home.

No wonder he glared at me with such condemnation yesterday, I mused. He must have heard—or so my soon-to-be six-year-old self speculated—of my ambitions to study, to travel, to be somebody in the

world.

My mother's words echoed in my ears: "He was your grandmother's father..." "He was..." I repeated to myself. Then, I finally understood: he was... "gone away"...and so were Vita—and Miriam! They were all gone away...forever. Dead. Muertos.

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