

THE NIGHT OF THE ALMIQUI

by Gabrielle Lucille Fuentes

Monday

The change occurred just before the revolution began in earnest. The secret police still roamed the capital's humid streets without fear, torturing and disappearing who they wished. The rebels' victories had been paltry—a few granaries, an unguarded armory. There were still different and opposing guerilla factions in the island's jungles and coastal cities, and the particular rebel band that would eventually ride to the capital on stolen tanks through cheering crowds was still exaggerating how many troops they had to American reporters that snuck into their territory. Troops that were still mostly intellectuals from wealthy families with no knowledge of the terrain they sought to conquer, who

didn't know to hide their leather boots at night from the giant land-crabs that roamed the mangroves, didn't know how hungry they would get, how long they could stay hungry, how long it took for the body to eat itself. Yet they were learning, from the peasants and the hunters and the women who snuck messages across the countryside in their girdles and organized the burro trains of rice and cornmeal and ammunitions, from everyone on the island rising to their aid. The ceiba trees and the land-crabs and the night jars and the almiqui, a nocturnal rodent considered extinct for a hundred years, probably did not notice a change. But for those praying for the rebel's victory, each animal and plant and object morphed in its meaning, shifted in the not-yet, cast off its old name, and took on a name of waiting. For surely the revolution, when it came, would rewrite the whole island anew.

Even in Campo Chico, backwater to the east, bordered by jungle and mountains and cane fields, the revolution hovered on everyone's tongues. It altered the shape of quotidian sounds, made them ghostly and unrecognizable.

La Abuela, five-months pregnant and decades younger than her name suggested, had noticed the change just that morning. After making coffee, she crept downstairs to open the

small sewing shop below her room. She'd worked at the shop for years, first sleeping under the counter when El Papi threw her and Benny out of his mansion and later moving to the rooms above when the owner grew too old to climb the stairs, though she kept firm hold of the deed to the shop. La Abuela ducked under the counter—her enormous belly protesting against an action she used to do without thinking—and walked across the shop to open the wooden blinds and unlock the door. The key that always slept in the lock was missing. She spotted it quickly, fallen to the ground in the night. But in the moment when she worried how she'd be able to open the store, she realized that she had forgotten the word for *key*. And when she remembered it again, fitting the grimy brass teeth in the lock, she knew that name was no longer right. It had become a placeholder for the true word that was still being formed, not only up in the mountains, in the guerillas' monsoon-and-tobacco-soaked tents, but right there in the dim sewing shop, right on the tip of her tongue.

La Abuela lost words all morning, though she didn't know to connect this shift to the rebels' decision to begin their approach of Campo Chico, with their plan to encircle the town by the end of the week. She had just lost and found the word for

a persistent crease in a collar, though, like the others, remembering *wrinkle* only revealed the word's new frailty, when her sisters-in-law walked into the shop. Their polished kitten heels clipped on the rough wood. Their parasols' silk rustled when they folded them shut and the carved horn handles knocked against the counter. El Papi's daughters never left the house without their parasols, proud of their fair skin that would burn with even a touch of sun, so they claimed. Since La Abuela and Benny were kicked out of El Papi's mansion, Benny's sisters brought their mending to town, not because there was no one at the mansion who could do the work but for the rush of pleasure at seeing La Abuela, their still young, still as-beautiful-as-she-would-get sister-in-law prick and singe her fingers over other people's undergarments. La Abuela waited in the back room at the ironing board, listening for the pause as the sisters straightened their faces and captured their laughter, the intake before they spoke loud enough that they knew she could hear.

The sewing shop had no fan and the only light in the backroom filtered through the blinds in the front. Dust hung in the air and the smell of hot cotton thickened the insides of La Abuela's mouth, making her feel as if she had walked for days without water. She kept the fire for the iron outside but the wind

blew in the wrong direction and smoke always entered the shop. In Campo Chico, no matter how crisp your clothes were, they still smelled of ash.

Her sisters-in-law, Dorotea and Chia—whose names remained firm and inextinguishable as stone, for now at least—stepped up to the counter, waiting to see if La Abuela would emerge at the sound of their voices or if she needed more encouragement. Chia drummed her fingers on the glass case but Dorotea, the eldest, was more patient. She smoothed the circle skirt, a delicate houndstooth print she had ordered from the capital, and admired how the shutters cast stripes of filtered light over her open-work lace gloves. She set her face before she spoke, becoming a Madonna almost lifeless in its placidity, and Chia hid her grin behind her glove.

You know Chia, Dorotea began, The nursemaid said the rebels hide so deep in the mountains there isn't any food to eat. Just rocks and gravel and dried up bits of wood. Do you know how they survive?

Chia shook her head, not trusting herself to speak.

They live off the food traitors bring them. And who do you think would dare do such a thing?

Chia stamped her heel, trying to stay calm.

The rebels are hideous, hermanita. They have long, ragged beards and never bathe. Those camped further down the mountains roam at night and steal the farmers' guns and sugar and grab anything they can get their hands on.

Chia's could no longer contain herself and her voice erupted like a bark. It's true! They grab and grab and when they see a woman, they just go crazy!

Don't get too excited, Chia, Dorotea said, her voice glassy. Save that for your fiancé. Chia flushed and stuck out her lips in a hurt pout. Dorotea cupped her sister's chin in her hand. Though I'm sure they'd *go crazy*, as you say, over a scrawny half-breed like the one that works here.

The insult was an easy one and Dorotea knew it. She had always called La Abuela what she wanted. La Abuela's mother, Concepcion Armando, had been a servant in El Papi's house and died when La Abuela was still very young. For years after her mother's death, La Abuela slept in the common room, between the nursemaid Ninté's chapped heels and the backs of Abril and Ramona who worked in the kitchens, but spent most of her days with El Papi's children and nephew, learning to read and write. That stopped when a visiting aunt insisted she earn her keep instead. Not knowing what else to do, La Abuela copied the older

servants' every move, from the kerchiefs they tied around their hair, to their stoop carrying buckets of water, and she learned to talk like them too, bossing around the chickens and lizards in her high, nasally voice, and ordering El Papi's only son Benedicto to steal her fat strips of jerky from the drying racks at the edge of the fields.

Dorotea came up the name with *La Abuela* to shame her for her boldness, but since the grandmothers in Campo Chico seemed to be the only women that men listened to, La Abuela didn't allow the name to offend. Rather, she grew into it.

Is anyone back there? Dorotea called and La Abuela finally entered the front room, her arms full of starched sheets and coverlets, which she placed on the counter and began slowly sorting. She stood directly behind the stacks of linen, her swollen belly hidden, knowing that her sisters-in-law came in part to assess how far along she was. In profile, her face sloped out gently, so that her chin was farther forward than her temples. She had thick brows that sharpened her small mouth and a too-large brown mole in the middle of her cheek. Dorotea explained the order and La Abuela considered words for her sisters-in-law, words that were uncouth and used by the guerillas and so would not need to be remade, words she could pronounce with a

practiced crispness no matter how many sewing pins she held in the corner of her lips. The words grew in her but she waited in silence for the sisters to lose words of their own, or for another quality about them to flicker and fade. She wanted to know the limits and perimeters of this change.

Maybe our cousin Ignacio will come back to lead the guards, Dorotea said.

Chia rifled through a basket on the counter full of palm-sized silk dolls, each carrying a giant strawberry and stuffed with sand to stick sewing pins in. She flicked one of the doll's black silk pigtails, flinging it out of the basket and across the counter.

What do you say to that, Chia? Dorotea nudged her sister ever so slightly but kept her eyes on La Abuela's face, appraising the effect of her words. Won't it be wonderful to have our dear Ignacio home?

Yes, wonderful, Chia said, and flicked another doll.

La Abuela snatched the parcel from Dorotea's hands.

I'll have the dresses mended and pressed by Tuesday.

She disappeared back into the ironing room, though she didn't move fast enough to hide that her hands were shaking. Dorotea hadn't even gotten a good look at La Abuela's stomach, though it did seem to be bulging low, a sign that perhaps she

carried a boy. She picked up the pincushion her sister had sent rolling and carefully balanced it on the top of the pile. She pressed the doll's head with the tip of her nail until it stayed put. A long wait for little reward.

The sisters walked out of the dark, smoky shop into the sun and passed a row of old men playing dominos. The men looked up when the sisters passed, but they did not stand and greet them as they would have even a few weeks before. They simply nodded and placed their chosen pieces of polished bone on the severed tree stump that served as their table, holding their breath until the sisters' parasols were out of sight.

That night La Abuela and Benny lay on their cob mattress in the room above the seamstress's and La Abuela said she was joining the revolution. During their first months in the tiny apartment, the two rooms were stuffed with the useless trappings of a gentleman farmer's beloved son: Benny's evening suits and riding gear, his embossed-leather books and baptismal gown. When El Papi kicked them out, La Abuela had insisted on going through each room of the mansion and stacking Benny's trunks in the yard, taking nothing that could be claimed by Dorotea and Chia but everything that Benny had worn or loved. No one had

expected such impetuosity and no one had stopped her. But by the time she said she was joining the revolution, they had sold everything they could. The rooms were bare expanses of plaster and shadow.

Cielo, Benny said. I don't think that's a good idea. It's not safe for the baby.

La Abuela had not been able to hide her second pregnancy from Benny for long. No other part of her body but her stomach grew. Once Benny knew, she refused to wear the loose maternity tunics popular with the women in Campo Chico, nor the circle dresses with flouncy crinolines, instead fashioning tight, wrap around blouses and pencil skirts, so that from behind she looked exactly as she always had and from the side like she had chosen for some reason to stuff a coconut under her shirt.

Whose fault is it that I'm pregnant? La Abuela said. As far as she was concerned the matter of the revolution was settled.

Benny didn't answer. This close to her, he could smell the rose toilet water La Abuela splashed over her face and neck before going downstairs to the shop. He liked her scent best in the early morning before she put anything on. The perfume always made him feel as if he were a child again, waiting in a corner for punishment.

La Abuela peeled the mosquito netting from her bare, sticky legs and turned away. Bright green lizards shifted across the plaster walls she had painted when they moved into the little room, first ash-white in mourning, now deep green for battle. The lizards played in and out of the shadows cast by the curlicues in the wrought iron shutters. She never knew where they came from or where they went. It was a game of hers since her childhood—when she had watched them race across the brocaded wallpaper in El Papi’s parlor or the damp stone in the rum cellar—to try to catch one disappearing into the wall, but she never could. She didn’t know how they were able to leave without anyone noticing.

Once, when they were children, Ignacio had shown her the scroll where his uncle El Papi kept meticulous record of the family tree, stretching back over the ocean to Galicia and Asturias. Ignacio pointed to his name proudly but reddened when La Abuela asked why his name was connected to the others in a dotted line and not a solid one. Benny’s line to El Papi was two black trunks and Dorotea and Chia each had a solid line of their own. *It doesn’t matter*, Ignacio said, *why don’t you try to find your name here*, knowing she couldn’t. When she married Benny, a small *m.* was placed by his name but hers was not added to the

scrolls and it never would be.

Did my sisters come to the shop today? Benny propped himself up on his elbow, trying to see La Abuela's face in the dark. I told them to stay away from you.

A new lizard, this one such a similar dark green to the wall color that it was hard to track, moved in and out of the shadows surrounding the window frame. La Abuela thought of the stacks of ironed cash El Papi kept in his mansion, and of what else was hidden there, what was probably still tucked away in Ignacio's old room. She considered the words she would say to El Papi. Wild words, murderous and world changing. She imagined the words grew up from the ground beneath the seamstress shop, carried on the backs of termites and those same green lizards, curling round the bedposts and easing through the mattress, to pause in her gut until they made the final journey over her tongue and out her lips. El Papi had always avoided Ignacio's name around her. His eyes flicked to La Abuela and then away whenever his nephew was mentioned. He knew everything that happened in his house.

After the revolution El Papi won't have any power over us, she said. And your sisters will have nothing but their scrawny necks to keep their chins so high in the air.

Benny nodded. He knew La Abuela was not the only one saying things like this. He hated his sisters as much as she did. Perhaps, for her sake, he had always hated them more.

There was the island around her. Campo Chico, its tobacco fields, the jungle and mountains, no hint of sea. And there was the island she dreamed of. The revolution would bring her that new island, the rebels carving a path straight to the shore that anyone might walk. Straight to that open palm of green hovering over blue, that soft ground always out of reach. Her home remade.

Two villages east of Campo Chico, a small group of rebels pushed closed the door of an ancient barn. The sunset shone dimly through the wooden slats, narrow strikes that couldn't reach the center of the dirt floor. Desiccated clumps of tobacco leaves hung from the roof beams. The rebels had been ambushed two nights before, half their group slaughtered in their tents, young recruits seventeen- and eighteen-years-old, so fresh from the capital their boots still had soles and laces. The ones who survived were told by a loyal paisano that the landlord in the valley below where they'd camped had seen their fires and ratted them out. The survivors found the landlord and tied him to one

of the thick posts that held up his barn.

One guerilla read the names of the men who had been killed, tripping over their extended patronymics. He had known most of them only a few days. But he repeated the list again and again, asking the landlord if he'd seen the boys, if he knew where they were. He added other names too, of the women he knew found strung to lampposts, their limbs twisted and faces slack, of the suspected rebels shot in the street, their eyes blindfolded, yet able to hear the sound of water in the gutters by their house, the rustle of their cousin's pigeons settling in their roost. Soon the names were clear on his tongue, crisp syllables drowning the landlord's whispers.

The rebels stamped their cigarettes into the dirt. The dark heat pressed down on the air outside the barn, choking out all other sounds. The only living people they knew were hundreds of miles away, safe in the capital, or not safe, hiding in crawl spaces beneath floorboards, changing houses each night, waiting to be caught, or already captured and waiting in dark rooms to die, to be thrown into the sea with their hands and feet chopped off. No one would ask the guerillas what they did that night. No one would know they were there at all.

Tuesday

The ceiling fan was unnecessary but Ignacio kept it on all day. His office had broad windows with intricate lattices imported from Spain that fractured the light while allowing the capital's sea breeze to pass through. The room was positioned perfectly to be always cool and slightly dark, the fan an added luxury unheard of in Campo Chico. Ignacio played an old game with the movement of the fan to comfort himself. By blinking slowly, he tried to capture a still image of the blades instead of the constant blur. To segment something from its whole and indulge in only the parts—to create of it a part. The same green lizards moved across his office walls as in Campo Chico. They seemed more melancholy to him here against the uncracked walls painted a fashionable gray. In fewer numbers too, as if they survived on the crumbling plaster and manure of which there was so much less in the capital, at least the sections Ignacio frequented. He faced away from the window, leaning back as far as his new leather chair would go to catch the breeze from both the fan and the sea.

El Papi had finally sent him a response that morning. For months, Ignacio had asked his uncle to visit him in the capital. *I will show you a royal time*, he had written El Papi. *Please let me repay*

in some small way all your kindnesses in treating me as your son, as a brother to your children. The old baron had always refused. Perhaps El Papi knew his name and small fortune meant little in the capital. There, a man's connections to the U.S. mattered, not his land, not his family name, and El Papi's connections were dying out. Perhaps El Papi had sensed this, relayed to him by his ghost pigeons or in Ignacio's boldness of calling during dinner and laughing so loudly El Papi had to hold the receiver away from his ear.

Whatever El Papi's reasons for not coming to the capital, Ignacio knew El Papi's motives for keeping him out of Campo Chico. It wasn't just that El Papi had always been fond of La Abuela, with her ironed kerchiefs, her high, nasally voice and pronunciation worthy of the Spanish court, even if the subject was the best method for skinning rabbits or roasting yams. Though family, Ignacio was still a guest in El Papi's house. He had committed a crime of trespass, nothing worthy of vengeance or violence, of course, but still unseemly. Neither called Ignacio's stay in the capital the exile it was. Exile wrapped in a promising government position and a suddenly vacant multiple-story apartment overlooking the sea walk, but exile nonetheless.

Now, however, the rebels were getting closer to Campo Chico and El Papi needed help ordering his band of conscripted

peasants. El Papi had increased the village guard from four to twenty men and armed them with Yanqui weapons sent from the capital. But in the towns farther up the mountains the peasants had turned against the guards and slit their throats with machetes normally used to cut sugarcane. They had stuffed the pockets of their guayaberas with the gold fillings from the guard's teeth.

The letter to Ignacio contained no mention of La Abuela, and why should it, the wife of his disowned son, a long-dead servant's daughter? But for Ignacio, it was as if the letters spelling out Campo Chico were always written in her hand, or more accurately, that her body formed the letters, bending and stretching into the landscape of the pathetic village.

He folded El Papi's letter and ordered the stacks of documents and envelopes on his desk, made a list of what he would do to prepare for his absence. Even after all those years, he still felt at the old fool's bidding. But that would change soon. When the rebels lost, those who had fought them would receive special recognition, Ignacio had been assured. His prominence would soon dwarf the sugarcane baron's. Many things were possible with that kind of power. He would leave the capital that day.

Outside of the slaughterhouse of Campo Chico, two old women sat, straining their eyes against the horizon in search of clouds. Thin strips of bull and oxen meat hung on racks in the drying fields, desiccating slowly to jerky under the sun. If any storms were sighted, the women would call the workers out of the slaughterhouse to bring the meat in as quickly as possible. They played cards while they waited, their deck as soft as the printed cotton of their skirts, coated with their fingertips' oil. Each card had a mark on the top left corner for what it meant when they weren't playing a game, for the fortune it created when collected in the right hands. A wind came up from the campo and stirred the browning meat, a hot slap like opening an oven door, but there were no clouds yet.

La Abuela counted out a quarter of her weekly earnings and placed the bills in an old coffee tin behind the flour.

Don't forget all the secret spots you're hiding money, Benny said. You already have a cigar box for the baby under the bed.

This isn't for the baby, La Abuela said.

Saving up to buy me something? he teased.

It's for the rebels. I learned today that they're coming to

Campo Chico. Friday or Saturday at the latest.

Are you sure? It's already Tuesday.

I know. I will bring it to them as soon as I can.

Benny held his smile but the money in the coffee tin was too much for even him to bear.

This year you have made many statements, *mi amor*, he said finally.

True.

La Abuela poured a small brown paper bag of rice onto the table and began sorting through the grain for gravel and chaff.

All the people in town told me not to believe your pronouncements, Benny continued. That they were a woman's caprices and would soon pass. But I, who know you better than anyone, knew better.

Yes, *mi amor*.

First you told me to quit smoking because you said it was bad for my health.

And I was right, you see? La Abuela pointed to her round stomach. Besides, all the old folks who smoke sound like their lungs are wells with rats trapped inside them.

All of them drink, play dominos, and go to church, should I give those up too?

Maybe the church. La Abuela licked her thumb and plucked a stray wisp of straw from the table. I don't like that new priest. And don't test me on the dominos.

She reached in her purse for a slim pamphlet made of cheap red paper and placed it on the edge of the table.

Have you read this yet?

No, Benny said. He pushed the pamphlet away from him, careful to avoid La Abuela's neat piles of rice. The less he read or spoke of the guerillas, with their scraggly beards and endless factions—the Nationalists and the Marxist-Leninists and the Separatists and the Loyalists—the less he would encourage La Abuela. But she had him thinking of those men in the jungle. She had derailed him from his task once again.

La Abuela finished sorting the rice, swept the grains into a pot, and put it to boil with half an onion and a handful of bay leaves. Outside their window, the sky was splitting itself into green and red. Tiny motes of dust, kicked up from the unpaved road, glowed in the column of twilight like plankton in a clouded sea. She sat back down and picked up the basket where she kept her extra mending.

Then you made me quit boxing, Benny said. Which I was making good money at and that you are the one who made me

start.

I was much younger then and foolish. Now I know better.

I hope you don't change your mind about every decision you made when you were younger.

Benny kissed her neck and smelled roses. He had first proposed to La Abuela when they were both ten, one day after he stole jerky from the drying racks for her.

You know I never go back on my word, she said.

She stopped his hands and opened her worn parasol, a hand-me-down from his sisters years ago. The rains had weakened the parasol's silk and there was a long tear, but she was determined to fix it. When they were kids, Benny used to laugh at how much she cared about that parasol, practicing to be able to twirl it just like his sisters did, weeping when they stole it from her. La Abuela still carried the parasol wherever she went, despite its ragged appearance. *It does the job*, she would say. He might laugh at the parasol but he thought too of how his sisters chased La Abuela and pinched her when her skin darkened in the summer. Just as Benny couldn't remember a time when he didn't love La Abuela, so he couldn't remember when his love was not buttressed and laced by the need to protect her, by the knowledge that no one else would, and by the pity that

knowledge created. She had nothing her whole life and the little she may seem to have—her body, her will—was always under someone else’s control. Loving her meant being the one person that was not a crucible made to melt and reform but a doorway she might pass through, carrying all she desired.

And now you want to join the revolution, Benny said.

La Abuela stiffened, I’m not asking you to do anything.

But *you* wish to do something.

Yes.

And you *will* ask something of me?

Outside the window, a little boy sat on top of the fruit wagon and shouted into his cardboard loudspeaker: *fruta bomba, fruta bomba, fruta bomba*. The light was changing, the stripes of green and red fading.

I can’t stay in this town, he said finally. I can’t stay in a place that shames you.

What do I care about shame? La Abuela said, licking a piece of thread and pulling it through a needle.

If Ignacio comes back, I don’t know what I will do, Benny said.

Don’t speak of him, we were only children then—

You were a child.

I'm not leaving, she said.

I can go to New York or Miami, Benny said, as he had many times before. I can make us money there.

I'd rather take El Papi's money. I'd rather take it from him with a bayonet pointed at his chin.

Yes, Benny knew La Abuela was not the only one saying things like this. But she was the only one he had to live with and the only one he believed would actually do what they said.

I'm staying, La Abuela repeated.

She covered the rice and turned down the flame. Then lit the kerosene lamp and moved close enough to be able to see her stitches. Outside their window the effervescent motes had disappeared. The sky seemed to have forgotten that it was ever any color but a hot, dark blue. She hoped her words meant, as they always had, that he would stay too.

On the edge of Campo Chico's tobacco fields the ceiba tree cast a shadow so long the tobacco near it never grew as tall as the rest. A woman walked three times around the tree's base, her body a blurred smudge in the twilight, and dropped a coin in a small depression in the dirt. The coins clinked against the others there and rustled up the wet scent of metal turning to

green and flaking to earth. A zunzuncito, the smallest bird in the world, flew across the fields and stopped in front of the woman's chest, hovering in the air as if on a string, its iridescent green body catching the last of the light. The hummingbird was drawn to the woman's coils of red seed necklace and the gold medallion tucked between them. The woman held her breath to make the bird stay but she was not a flower and the zunzuncito disappeared back into the forest. In the branches, high above anyone's reach, sat molding candles placed there years ago when the tree was young. If they were lit they would look like eyes floating in the night, but they had been dark for decades.

Wednesday

The next afternoon, La Abuela reached for her mended parasol and descended through the shop out into the market. Fearing either the rebels or the guards, only half of the stands were open. La Abuela walked by a shirtless boy with a distended belly who sold live pigeons. His sister, seated on the wicker baskets filled with birds, her toes curled around the dirty cage floors, collected pesos in a red handkerchief tied around her waist. Behind them, the wind moved through the tobacco fields, bending back the leaves, its path through the valley clear.

At the other end of the street, leaning next to a fruit stand, La Abuela saw Ignacio. His posture, at once pompous and failed, was unlike anyone else's in Campo Chico. He must have known she would come to the market, all the women in Campo Chico did, and he was at the stand that sold her favorite fruit. Even across the market, La Abuela could see him slowly stroking a mango's green flesh, as if he were testing it for ripeness. She knew his performance was for her alone, repeated until she appeared; he believed he could call her to him. But she would not let him see her. To speak to him and then not tell Benny would be a lie and she already held too many. Ignacio could be anyone, really, from this distance, though she had known the moment he stepped into Campo Chico. That morning she'd woken on the edge of knowledge and when she cracked the orange-yolked eggs into a pan for breakfast it was as if a separate layer of skin had poured over her. The layer was doubly reflective—projecting her movements both to the world and to herself. The layer made it abundantly clear she was not in control of her actions. For the rest of the day, she watched herself: making coffee, stacking the brown packages of finished orders for costumers, crouching behind the pigeon cages when Ignacio walked by. The pigeon boy stood beside her, held the largest bird,

the one he wouldn't sell, out in front of him, its white wings flapping against his hands. La Abuela felt like a creature in a storybook, thumbed over by many hands.

La Abuela was able to avoid Ignacio at the market but when she returned to the shop after sunset he slipped into the doorway behind her.

I came home to protect what's mine, he said. But I see I've already failed. Little Benny this managed all by himself? Didn't need any help from me?

Ignacio's hand wrapped around her mouth and La Abuela left her body. It was always like this with him; as a child, she watched her body carved into a thin sliver of pleasure from the attention of someone just a few years older, but seeming so worldly. Knowing she had no choice and choosing to enjoy. Because when she'd tried to stop him, it hadn't mattered.

Ignacio pressed against her, pushing her into the narrow doorway. La Abuela bit hard into his palm, at a clump of flesh she could catch between her teeth. But it was a sound behind them that made him pull away. Two women, ages impossible to judge, appeared on the road, their white dresses and headscarves glowing in the dusk. One carried a rooster by its feet and the

carcass swung with the rhythm of her steps. Ignacio sucked on his hand where La Abuela had bit him. He stared at the passing women and spit blood into the dirt. La Abuela opened the shop door and slipped inside, quickly turning the lock. She could hear him breathing on the other side of the thin wood, then make his way into the street. All someone else's words. No part of her life her own.

Thursday

El Papi enforced a curfew the next day. He did so out of instinct. He did not know, his spies poorly placed or already turned, that the rebels were camped in the mountains outside of Campo Chico. Under El Papi's new curfew, no one could leave the town unless his guards approved and they wouldn't approve anyone they didn't like. Benny couldn't go to New York or Miami now no matter what La Abuela said.

That night, La Abuela walked out of the house, carrying nothing but the bills from the old coffee tin pinned inside her bra. El Papi's guards stopped her before she passed the royal palms that bordered Campo Chico. When she wouldn't turn back on her own, they grabbed her elbows and dragged her back to the shop.

Benny opened the door, wearing only his loose, worn underwear. He accepted La Abuela into his arms without a word, receiving her before the guards let her go so there was not a single moment that she was outside and untouched. Above them a nightjar woke and made its call like the sound of two wooden spoons clapping together. Benny could not sleep, knowing she would try to run again.

Friday

We're going to make the delivery tonight, La Abuela said, looking up from her mending at Benny.

Beneath their window, a group of boys kicked a rag ball down the street. One of them accidentally sent the ball to the feet of a guard standing in front of the church. The guard kicked it back, right to the boy, but the boy turned and ran, leaving the ball in the dirt.

Oh, a delivery, Benny said, forcing a laugh he hoped sounded both sarcastic and unworried. Gracias a Dios. And who are we bringing this blessed delivery to?

To the mountains. Just some food.

We don't have any food.

We'll get it. We'll get it from El Papi.

And what about his guards, mi amor? Benny pinched the bridge of his nose. He didn't really want an answer.

No one will stop us in one of El Papi's cars.

I'm not going in that house, Benny said.

Everything there should be yours. It should be mine too. I cleaned floors and scraped wax and scoured bed pans for years and so did my mother. Besides, Ignacio won't be there.

From a few well-placed questions of her customers, La Abuela knew Ignacio was staying at the guard's headquarters. She had not told Benny she had seen him. She had not sought Ignacio out and she had not spoken to him. His appearance at the doorway of the shop was too similar to his other visits. Nothing had happened other than reliving all she wanted to forget and she did not tell Benny about every time she remembered something she did not wish to.

La Abuela put down her mending. Perhaps she was pushing Benny too far. But she had no choice. She needed El Papi's money for the rebels and she needed something else there too, something she hoped would still be in Ignacio's old room. She had to get inside that mansion. She had to reach the rebels. She had to try for that island she dreamed of. And she had to know, now, if Benny would join her.

The boys playing football had run inside or into courtyards that swallowed their shouts. The only sound from the window was the guards striking matches and tossing them into the dirt.

Stay home, Benny said. The rebels will win or not win without you.

We'll go tonight, she said, like she was asking for jerky from the drying fields. Before the rain starts.

The leaves of the ceiba tree had turned inside out, presenting their white underbellies to the darkening sky. Leaning against the wind, the widows of Campo Chico held onto their black lace shawls with one hand and with the other carried inside the vases of lilies that lined the steps into the church. The light melted around them and the dirt roads turned a deeper red than before.

El Papi's tobacco fields came right up to the back of his mansion. He could always see them, even at night, even when nothing was growing. The palm trees shook and salt from the growing storm thickened the air. When Benny and La Abuela came to El Papi's door the rain had just started.

La Abuela slipped behind Benny, moving away from the

porch.

Where are you going? he asked.

You knock. If he won't let you in, I can find another way.

You can't stay out here.

I know how to get into this house without anyone knowing even better than I know how to get out of it.

He won't let me in.

Just try.

La Abuela kissed Benny on the cheek and tucked her parasol behind the porch steps. She disappeared into the thick vines covering the mansion, shifting into them as if she was made of them, as if they were welcoming her back into their arms.

Lorenzo, the butler, opened the door and let Benny in without question, like he had been expecting him. El Papi was standing in the parlor looking out over his tobacco. He handed Benny rum in a crystal glass. Clean-shaven, El Papi was lean and tall with muscles like strips of woven hemp. He was dressed in white, his face pale from the hat he wore surveying the fields. But his hands were darker than Benny's, their speckles and sagging flesh the only apparent hint at his mortality.

She's pregnant again, Benny said, not knowing where to begin or how much La Abuela would want him to say.

I have eyes, El Papi said. Is that why you came?

Benny didn't answer. He hadn't been in his father's house since their first child died, since El Papi told La Abuela never to enter his house again, told Benny that if he left with her the same held for him.

I think she scared, Benny said.

Now that girl decides to be scared. Of what, if you know?
Of what will happen if the rebels win.

They won't, Benny. As much as she might want it. Or thinks she wants it. The rebels are animals. This is the first time they've been outside their pigpen. They think they've discovered a new world, but they've only reached where the slop is made.

They're winning, Benny said.

The Americans will stop that.

Their president supports them.

But their companies don't. How far along is she?

Benny never understood why it was after their child's death that El Papi cast them out, instead of after their marriage, or after La Abuela's pregnancy became obvious. Perhaps it was because the little girl's death had broken El Papi's heart too. Perhaps another reason. His father's heart unnavigable to him.

I won't beg, Benny said and set down his glass. El Papi

turned from him to watch the rain come over his tobacco fields. He nodded slowly, as if not to his son, but to words spoken by something neither of them could make out in the dark.

At the other end of the mansion, Ninté put Dorotea's children to sleep. She had worked as a nursemaid for El Papi's family all her life, had cared even for La Abuela, teaching her how to sew, how to keep her hair clean during the week. Ninté lowered the children onto the thin summer blankets and closed mosquito netting around their four poster bed. Dorotea watched at the doorway. Her children's limbs shone where the hall light hit and disappeared into shadow where it did not. Dorotea knew that her children were more Ninté's than her own. Ninté had given them more of her body and for longer. That was why Dorotea never spoke Ninté's name. Dorotea knew the other woman's power—at least a portion of it—too well.

Dorotea walked down the hall to Chia's room. Her entrance surprised her younger sister and Chia dropped the wineglass in her hand and it shattered on the wood floor. Dorotea bent to pick up the glass, but then stopped, crouched low, as if suddenly remembering something. The shattered crystal had sprayed all over the room and even dug its way into

the thick carpet around Chia's bed, like carcasses of small fish sinking to the ocean's floor, like rodents snatching what they wished and disappearing, never to be seen again.

Unmasked, Ninté entered the room and blew out the lamp.

Listen to that, she said.

The three stood waiting in the dark. Thunder outside and gunshots in the mountains, the two sounds made more similar by the blending force of rain.

La Abuela entered El Papi's mansion through a small passageway used only by the kitchen staff. She crept into the cellar where the wines and rums were aged. El Papi had a good collection and she relished the thought of the rebels toasting with his finest rum. The cellar was where she used to hide as a child from Ignacio. They had played there first when she would let him find her. Later, when she did not want to be found she chose that same place, thinking he would not expect her to go there again.

Climbing back up the stairs with three bottles of ancient rum in her hands, La Abuela saw no one, but she wasn't finished. She headed towards Ignacio's old room. She hoped she had some time. El Papi wanted Benny back but he didn't know if he had

to take La Abuela too, if Benny would come without her, or what would change when the baby was born. El Papi might talk for a long time, testing Benny, testing how far he could be pushed.

In Ignacio's room, La Abuela set down the rum bottles and peeled the heavy carpet off the floor just enough to reveal the hiding place Ignacio had used since childhood. La Abuela had kept each letter Ignacio sent her both before and after she married Benny so that one day if she needed to she could use them against Ignacio. But after her baby died, she had dreams of the carefully-penned words becoming parts of Ignacio's body, of them crawling from beneath the bed and whispering their truths into Benny's ears. One night the dreams stopped and she searched for the letters and found they had been stolen, a single sheet of the same paper—blank, its watermark elaborate and clear—in their place so she would know who had taken them. In her mourning, she had sought only peace and let the letters stay where they were, didn't try to get them back. But she was no longer mourning. And she realized she'd been a fool, the letters would hurt only her and not Ignacio. Benny knew what Ignacio had done when they were children, but he did not know how long his violence had lasted. La Abuela could not allow Benny to know that her marriage vows had been broken for her.

La Abuela stiffened at the sound of footsteps behind her, muffled by the rain and El Papi's plush carpets. She reached for one of the rum bottles and gripped it by the neck. She would crack the bottle across Ignacio's skull, she would not let him touch her again. But when she turned around it was Chia in the doorway, holding pieces of a broken crystal glass in her hand.

In the same room, when they were children, Dorotea had held La Abuela's arms behind her back while Ignacio stared into the mirror above his dresser. *That's what I really look like*, he said, pointing to the thin white band of skin kept covered by his hat, which gleamed like an orchid stem growing under leaves. *That's what color I'd be if it weren't for the sun*. And Dorotea had twisted La Abuela's wrists to compare her skin with theirs, to prove why she must do as they said. La Abuela had never before wondered where Chia was when this was happening, if they sought her out when they couldn't find La Abuela.

Chia barely reacted at seeing La Abuela crouched in Ignacio's old room, though they were both surprised to find that beneath the stack of letters was a single key, stuck in a knot in the floor beams. Chia's eyes hovered for a moment on the key, guessing at what it opened. But even when La Abuela stood and walked past her, out Ignacio's room and down the long hallway,

she said nothing, just followed La Abuela silently, her hand cradling the shattered crystal held away from her body like an offering.

In the center of El Papi's foyer was a large credenza, edged in gold, its drawers locked. La Abuela knew the key she'd found in Ignacio's room opened the top drawer. El Papi, always so proud of the loyalty of those in his house, in the town he owned, kept his cash steps from the front door, within easy reach of anyone with the key or a hatchet. Even from the capital, Ignacio had kept his escape routes well-maintained.

The stuck drawer shook the credenza when La Abuela opened it. The stacks of bills inside smelled like the ironing board in her sewing shop. Hot cotton and ash, the closed room she was leaving.

Down the hall, past the half-open parlor door, El Papi said her name, not to her but to Benny, and not the name Dorotea had given her, but her real one. The credenza shook again when La Abuela closed the drawer and rattled the cut-glass bowl that had sat atop it for years. She placed her fingers on the rim of the ringing crystal to stop the sound and tucked the money and the letters into her shirt.

Beneath the stand of magnolias outside Campo Chico, a group of rebels crouched in the mud. They shared a hand-rolled cigarette between them, carefully cupping it against the wind and the droplets that broke on the magnolia's overlapping, waxy leaves. They heard a rustle in the underbrush and reached for their guns, but it was only the little boy who sold pigeons in the market and carried messages for them. They let him have the final puff of their cigarette while they read the news he'd brought. Most of the guards, including that new officer sent in from the capital, were asleep in their bunks. No one in Campo Chico had ratted them out. No one knew they were coming.

Cariña, Benny said when La Abuela stepped into the parlor. Papa and I, we've been talking. There's a plane coming that will take us to Miami. We can wait there until the rebels are gone. Then we can come home. All of us. It will be alright.

Benny reached out to touch her hand and noticed her ragged breath, the thin film of sweat on her forehead.

I'll tell Dorotea and Chia when the plane arrives, El Papi said. I don't want to give them time to pack. The plane has seats for everyone in this house. No more. My nephew will stay at his

post.

He turned from the window to La Abuela.

Come home, he said. Let me finally call you daughter.

La Abuela had all her words planned. Born in the ground and carried through the sewing shop's riddled wood, they had churned in her dreams for weeks. She had held them tight behind her teeth when she exhaled, careful not to let them spill before their time. In the little room above the sewing shop, with only the lizards and peeling plaster as her audience, the words had sounded hollow. But when she finally spoke them in El Papi's house she knew that for all their stilted grandiosity, they were true. Her words were not special, would bring nothing to action, they were not a spell. She was merely picking up a stitch of the whole of what would happen, was already happening, the newness about to be made.

I will never be your daughter, La Abuela said. But my child will live and he will be a child of the heroes of the revolution. When the rebels come to cut out your tongue, I will cheer.

Hijo, please, El Papi sighed. You don't have to listen to her.

But Benny had made his decision long ago. Before his father made him leave, before he read the letters La Abuela had

hidden, the letters he knew she carried now. Before love, before pity, Benny had known that what La Abuela needed protecting from most was his own family.

I'm sorry, Benny said. You know I always do what she asks.

El Papi followed Benny and La Abuela down the hall but turned away when they reached the porch steps. The rain splattered across the open doorway and over the back of his suit. The fabric clung to his skin so that the linen no longer looked white.

Beneath the porch, the almiqui rodent, whose saliva is venomous and whose kind had not been catalogued by scientists for over a century, scuttled out of the ground. No one could hear its movements above the rain. Its scaled tail brushed past La Abuela's forgotten parasol, then curled around its body, thick brown fur prickled against the storm. The almiqui sniffed the air with its crochet-needle nose, smelling beetles and rotting magnolia blossoms and wet dirt. The ceiba trees surrounding the tobacco fields glowed white from their upturned leaves. Any candle lit beneath their branches had been quickly extinguished by the first breath of rain. The flower vases that lined the church

steps and the racks of drying jerky had been pulled inside. Throughout the campo, everyone had stopped whatever they'd been doing before the storm started. All they could do was stand on their porches and watch the light change, track the palm fronds as they blew across the road and fields, until even that form of waiting became dangerous.

La Abuela's words were true. The rebels would storm through El Papi's mansion, they would shatter the crystal and make bonfires in the living room from the imported furniture. The horsehair cushions would burn quickly in lashing bursts and make the younger soldiers cry out in fear. The fire-blackened curtains would billow out the windows. When the hurricanes came in the fall there would be nothing to stop the rain from entering the parlor and bedrooms. The gilded wallpaper would mold. Water lemon vines would waltz down the hall.

The almiqui didn't mind being wet but its home was in the dirt. Uncaring of La Abuela's steps above, it took a few more careful sniffs of the green air. It caught with five-fingered, sharp-clawed paw a cicada, plump and pale in new skin. Perhaps, if the almiqui wanted, it, too, could speak. Of El Papi's carefully-constructed lineages, those scrolls unrolled and inked into at each new birth, of what the revolution would bring, imaginable and

not, if it would give the island La Abuela dreamed of back to her or unfurl another place entirely. Surely in no known language, in no letters ever printed, but in some arcane tongue, the almiqui might have one word, just one, to spit into the dirt. But the animal dug its way back into the earth beneath the porch of the mansion. It needed nothing more above ground.

La Abuela and Benny reached the edge of the porch, then walked in the rain to one of El Papi's cars. In the passenger seat, she tucked Ignacio's letters more firmly behind the parcel of cash, and smoothed her blouse to cover them both. No matter what the rebels brought, La Abuela couldn't live with the idea of anyone else reading the letters. Or of the words still existing, even if they remained unread. She would burn the letters the first chance she got and it would be the letters' words that were forgotten, that were lost to smoke, not ordinary words like *wrinkle* and *key*. She and Benny would go into the mountains. She would leave no trail to follow her by.



Gabrielle Lucille Fuentes is the author of *The Sleeping World* (Touchstone-Simon & Schuster, 2016) and a short story collection forthcoming on BOA Editions. She has received fellowships from Hedgebrook, Willapa Bay Artists in Residency, Yaddo, the Millay Colony, and the Blue Mountain Center and was a Bernard O’Keefe Scholar in Fiction at Bread Loaf. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *New England Review*, *The Common*, *One Story*, *Cosmonauts Avenue*, *Slice*, *Pank*, *The Collagist*, *Western Humanities Review*, and elsewhere. She is an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Maryland.