



COMING UP CUBAN

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Papi

I try to calm my heart long enough to look in his face, past the hair that covers it. And slowly, like muddy water settling and becoming clear, his face comes into focus and I see it *is* my father. I shake my head to understand, to take it all in, but I can't.

"Ana, it's me. I am sorry to have scared you," he says in a voice that is rough and unrecognizable. "*Caramba*, my ear . . ."

My father? Who had been gone so long? Who had joined the rebel fighters in the Sierra Maestra mountains? Who left us to fight in the Revolution?

I feel small, crazy, embarrassed as we stumble and roll through the gate, into the house.

Inside, stunned, I watch and listen as my mother and father chatter and kiss and try to pull me toward them. But I pull back. He stinks.

"We did it! We won, Lydia. Fidel and our rebels have won," he says. "Corrupt dictator Batista is out!"

"I missed you so," Mami murmurs. "Ana, come . . ."

But it's too much.

"Don't worry, Lydia," he says, laughing, holding on to his ear. "Ana has not seen me in almost two years. She probably

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doesn't recognize me." He stares at me. "I hardly recognize her. You look taller than the girl I left behind, Ana. Quite a bite you have there too." He examines my face as though I am a photo. "Same freckles though, same light brown eyes." Chispa growls. "And who is this?"

"Chispa! We got her while you were gone," says Mami.

The man reaches to pet Chispa. "Trying to take my place, huh, doggie?"

Chispa growls.

"You are so skinny!" says Mami.

"I need a bath!" he answers, smiling at me reluctantly. "And a bandage for my ear."

My parents swirl upstairs, leaving me alone in the room, spinning like a top, panting like Chispa. Through the noise of the shower, I think I hear my mother say, "*¡Batista se fue! ¡Llegó Fidel!*"

My father repeats her words. "Batista is out! Fidel had arrived!"

His words ring in my ear.



Victory

“Do you see him, Ana? Do you see your father?”

How can I recognize my father? All these rebels look alike! Long hair and beards.

“Do you see him?” she repeats.

We are at a victory parade looking for Papi, but all I see are crazy-looking hairy men in trucks and jeeps. The crowd all along the Malecón roadway presses me forward, screaming, “¡Viva Cuba libre!” I hear my own grandmother, aunts, and uncles yelling the loudest. They pop up and down, peeking through the crowd to get a better look at them. My family reminds me of cartoon characters in a show from the United States.

“¡Viva Cuba libre!” the crowd roars again and again.

“Do you see him?” my mother asks me again, like a broken record. She is the only one not screaming, but breathless like an American movie star in a love story. “Do you see him?”

The heat makes me weak, and I feel about to faint when all at once the screams get as sharp as sirens. “¡Fidel! ¡Fidel!” The cries jerk me up.

On a platform, on the back of a flatbed truck, is the revolutionary leader himself—Fidel Castro!

He waves. All hands, black, brown, and white, reach out as one. He waves again and again as everyone cheers madly. He

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seems taller than anyone I have ever seen and makes me think of a stallion with wings. His hair is thick and black and flies off his wide forehead like the waves of the Caribbean Sea behind us. His face is divided by a long nose that looks about to snort. He holds his cigar in his mouth like a weapon that can shoot or explode any second.

“There he is!” My mother’s lips move again. But she is not pointing at Fidel. She is pointing to my father in the jeep behind Fidel.

My father spots us, and stares so hard I feel pinned against something.

His jeep passes us.

Mami bends down and screams in my ear, “Did you see how close he was to Fidel Castro? Just one vehicle behind! Did you see?”

I nod yes as my eardrum vibrates from her voice. She turns me around and shoves a red-and-black revolutionary flag into my hand.

“Did you see how close your father was to Fidel? That is because your father is very, very important to the Revolution! He helped Fidel win! Wave your flag, Ana. Wave your flag!”

I do what she says.



Papi Snacks

I call my best friend, Carmen. “Yes—he’s back. In the living room having chunks of skin ripped off him.” Carmen laughs. “No—I’m kidding,” I go on. “But that’s what my grandmother keeps doing! She keeps hugging and kissing him and grabbing at him so hard I think she’d like to break a chunk off him, just to make sure he is for real. Ha! But who am I to say? I almost bit his ear off.”

“Ana! Come for a *croqueta!*” calls out my mother.

“What did his *ear* taste like?” teases Carmen. “Like chicken . . . ?”

“Ha! I’ll tell you when I see you. Mami’s calling me.” Then Carmen asks me if I think our teacher, Sister Michelle, wears a bra!

“Ana . . .” Mami calls out.

“No, Carmen, I don’t think Sister Michelle wears a bra! I think she wears a sling because it looks like she only has one big, round breast that goes down to her waist!” With that, I hang up, giggling, and sneak into the living room.

My father and I accidentally lock eyes for a moment. We never look at each other at the same time. I look and he turns away—or he looks and I turn away. Maybe he is mad because I bit him.

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Getting my pad and pencil, I lose myself in drawing the lines and shape and shadows of the ear I almost ate.

“Tell us about fighting in the mountains!” my family pleads as my mother runs to the kitchen to get him more food he can’t eat because he *just* ate.

“I’d rather tell you about how Ana almost bit my ear off!”

I’m so surprised he mentioned me I think there is some *other* Ana in the room he’s talking about. But I am saved from responding by a knock on the door. My father answers.

“Antonio,” my father calls out, letting in a man with a face full of so many pimples I decide to give him a new name—Pimple-Face! “¿*Qué tal?*” says my father, forgetting all about me. “This is my *compañero* Antonio,” he announces to everyone. “We fought together!”

Pimple-Face pats my father’s back, saying, “And this man, this man, Rafael Andino, saved my life.”

My family gasps.

“And now Antonio and I will help form this new government!” adds my father, throwing his arm around his buddy-boy-pal.

I’ve got to call Carmen and tell her about this man with a mountain range of pimples, but nobody picks up. Nobody home. They probably went for ice cream. I wish we could go for ice cream. Instead I am forced to listen to the conversation going on in the living room. The Revolution this, and the Revolution that . . . I thought the Revolution was over.

But actually, it was just beginning.