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Tropical Disturbances

Cristina García

Excerpt from the novel-in-progress:

MIAMI

Goyo Herrera wasn't afraid to die but he was tired of waiting for death. Waiting for the body to shut down, organ by organ, accruing its critical mass of toxins and blockages. There were places in Switzerland, he'd heard, that would facilitate the dying; expensive, antiseptic places in the Alps where tubercular patients once waited like so many hothouse orchids. Already, he might have died on any number of occasions in the fifty-plus years since he'd left La Isla: the time he got hit by a taxi on Lexington Avenue, his right leg crushed and shortened by an inch; or the night he was held up outside his Manhattan diner then pistol-whipped and left for dead. There was that kidney stone, too, that nearly killed him in 1978. But if Goyo had learned anything in his eighty-three years, it was that pain alone didn't kill a man.

Besides, he wanted that son of a bitch to die first.

Years ago he and El Comandante had been acquaintances, Goyo told anyone who would listen, but the truth was a lesser and more complicated reality. The two had barely known each other at the university, where Goyo was a quiet chemistry major and *he* was a loud-mouthed law student perpetually hungry for the limelight. Goyo had spent many waking hours and a good number of sleeping ones regretting the lost opportunity of shooting the bastard dead. In those days, it wasn't uncommon for even a quiet chemistry major to carry a gun and Goyo was a crack shot, having practiced since boyhood on tin cans and chickens.

He would gladly give up everything he owned for the privilege of killing his nemesis: his oceanfront condo on Key Biscayne, his collapsing brownstone off Second Avenue, every last cent of his considerable fortune, even the weekly rendezvous with the shapely bank teller, Vilma Espín, who was a magician of hand-mouth coordination and kept him in fighting form since his wife of sixty-two years had died unexpectedly last New Year's Eve. He'd wear chains on his ankles, chisel stones for his remaining days, even become a Democrat for the gratification of personally expediting the tyrant's journey back to the Devil, with whom he'd obviously made a pact.

It wasn't for politics alone that Goyo would've murdered that swaggering cock but for his mistreatment of the woman he'd loved above all others: Amelia Bustamante, a pianist whose interpretations of Schubert's early piano

sonatas had won his heart. That good-for-nothing had disgraced Amelia, left her with a child, a boy she'd named after her errant lover, who never recognized *el niño* as his own. For two years, Goyo anonymously sent Amelia money to help support her son until the day he learned that she'd hung herself from a chandelier in her parents' sunny music room, her bare feet grazing the keys of their Steinway baby grand. A plaster bust of Franz Schubert stood watch on a nearby shelf.

Goyo's reasons for wanting to kill the tyrant had multiplied prodigiously after the Revolution—his father's suicide; his younger brother's death at the Bay of Pigs—and his hatred only deepened with the ensuing decades of Communist corruption and lies. There was no one in the world he loathed more, no one for whom he stoked a more bottomless fury, no one else he unwaveringly blamed for invading, oppressing, and misshaping his life than that fear-mongering, fatigues-wearing, egotistical brute who continued to call the shots from his deathbed overlooking the sea.

Goyo reached for his inhaler and took a deep, bitter breath. His lungs had weakened since his bout of pneumonia last winter on an emergency visit to New York. His Turkish tenants had set fire to his brownstone while grilling lamb shish kebabs, nearly asphyxiating the other occupants in the process. The building, unfortunately, had become one unceasing headache. Goyo would've sold it in a heartbeat but the real estate taxes alone would amount to millions and leave him next to nothing. He was trapped, and no amount of wistful gazing at the sea would change that sorry fact.

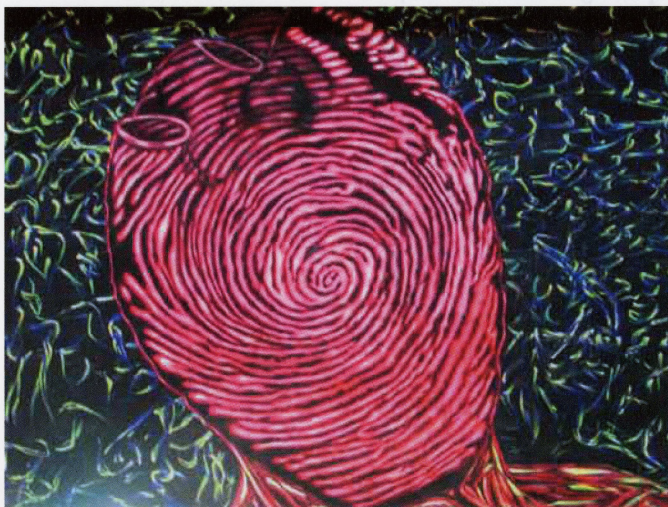
A regatta was underway in Biscayne Bay and Goyo raised his binoculars to get a better look. It was the same parade of self-important fools he'd battled at the yacht club for years before submitting his resignation and telling them in no uncertain terms to go to hell. This hadn't done much for his social life. But it wasn't the solitude of the endless tropical days that bothered Goyo. After years of crushing work in New York and a frenetic retirement with the ever-restless Luisa, old age held for him an appealing laxness, a mellowing and decadence of the flesh, the freedom to nap—something he managed to do despite the crises afflicting him daily—like the feral cats that used to roam his childhood village in Honduras.

Smarter people than he had philosophized about confronting death. He wasn't particularly original in his thinking. But he found it ironic that true languor—precursor to the eternal one, of course—hadn't invaded

his bones until after his wife had succumbed to a brain aneurysm. That death might lurk in the sudden lethal burst of one's own blood vessels distressed him deeply.

Luisa had been aggressively social and socially climbing all her life but she'd been too mistrustful to have any real friends. Goyo had loved her profoundly at first, then more shallowly, until the feeling devolved into obligatory affection and lapsed into ordinary tolerance. Love began at the beginning but then who the hell knew what happened? Decades of tired entanglements later, he still didn't know. Goyo felt unending shame when he thought about his wife, partly due to the guilt she'd induced in him over his affairs with their diner's flamboyant waitresses; for gambling away a million dollars in the stock market pursuing a 'bullet-proof' strategy by his hotshot ex-broker, now incarcerated; for not defending her against the barrage of insults by his mother early in their courtship.

The shame, however, was most piercing, most unendurable, when Goyo revisited what he considered his principal failing: surrendering his children over to his wife's violence and unreasonableness. His son, Goyito, now pushing sixty, lived on disability in the Florida panhandle, his brain irremediably fried by cocaine and further addled by the medications he took by the fistful to prevent him from killing himself. Alina, six years younger, was troubled in her own peculiar ways. Ever since she'd come to live with him—ostensibly to help him recover from precipitous widowerhood—Goyo had suspected her motives. His daughter had no visible means of support, had taken up long distance swimming (he could spot her now, porpoise-like, making her way along the horizon), and when she wasn't swimming, snapped her fancy cameras in his face.



Héctor Duarte, *Despertando*, acrylic paint on canvas, 9' 6" x 12' 6", 2003

The other day, Alina had the nerve to ask him to pose nude for her. Goyo was the first to admit that he didn't have much in the way of artistic inclinations, but pose nude for his daughter? This was perversity, plain and simple. He'd heard from one of the garage attendants that Alina had asked the same of other retirees in his condominium complex, embarrassing Goyo to no end. He had half a mind to kick her out for this alone. Within the hour, if she hadn't drowned or been eaten by sharks, Alina would walk through the front door, tracking in rivulets of sand and disturbing him with the strange configurations of seaweed plastered to her manly shoulders.

Goyo wondered whether El Comandante suffered such troubles with own children; a veritable tribe at this point, if the reports he'd read in *El Nuevo Herald* were even half-true. Some years ago, one of the tyrant's illegitimate daughters had written a tell-all memoir about growing up on the island, neglected and bulimic, a condition her hungry fellow citizens rarely suffered. The book had made her a celebrity in Miami for one short-lived season. Unlike his compatriots, Goyo wasn't a blind believer in exile gossip. He'd spent too many years in New York honing his cynicism and reading the *Post*. Goyo took pride in his ability to distinguish fact from fiction, the honorable from the crooked, the deal from the scam.

Yet this seemed irrelevant at his stage of life. It was all a fiction, he decided, a pliable narrative one could shape, photographs one could freeze at pre-selected junctures then engage in speculation and pointless deductions. Wasn't that what El Comandante had done for umpteen years? Bent history to his will? Revised and massaged, cut, snipped, swiped, and divided time until he unspooled it to his specifications, splicing together a seamless, uninterrupted whole?

The sea was calm, mocking the agitation Goyo felt inside. He was weary of the excuses he'd made for sitting on the sidelines of life, the ongoing rationalizations that choked

him like a fetid mangrove swamp. What would he say to El Comandante if they ever met again? Or would they immediately resort to insults and blows? Might they have anything in common besides arthritis and diverticulitis? Goyo had spent his early childhood in the countryside, like El Comandante, and also like him, he'd had two brothers and a Spanish father—Asturian, too—who took years to formalize relations with the mother of his children.

Goyo's mother hadn't been an islander by birth but Guatemalan, superstitious and fiercely protective of the boys with whom her itinerant Spanish lover impregnated her every other spring. After three sons, Arturo Herrera moved his family to coastal Honduras, headquarters of his burgeoning shipping business, to a beach where Goyo once watched the sea recede for a mile before a tidal wave destroyed their town. Undeterred, Arturo relocated his family to La Isla and finally married Goyo's mother, who was seized thereafter with a sporadic religiosity borne

of gratitude for her good fortune. By then his father had grown very wealthy and Goyo's days on the beach were soon supplanted by a too-long stint at a Jesuit boarding school in Canada, where he learned Latin, played baseball and the clarinet, and fell in love with chemistry.

Goyo pricked his finger to read his blood sugar, which was a little high but nothing to panic over. He reached for his pills but forgot which tablets were for what and washed down a random handful with a glass of diluted orange juice. His ailments had multiplied faster than he could keep straight, upsetting the color-coding medications system devised by his wife. In descending order of importance, Goyo suffered from heart disease (he'd had a triple bypass four years ago), crippling arthritis in his lower spine and both knees (he walked at a thirty degree angle to the floor), borderline diabetes, irritable bowel syndrome, and intermittent impotence. Perhaps the impotence should've topped the list. It certainly would have in his prime, when he could screw a dozen times in a day and still roar for more.

The flotilla had rounded the southern edge of Key Biscayne, returning to the yacht club's docks. In his boating heyday, Goyo and his wife had motored around the Bahamas and other parts of the Caribbean for weeks at a time, usually in winter when the weather was best. Once, he came dangerously close to trespassing La Isla's boundary waters. He'd been fishing for marlin and the efforts of those magnificent fish—every last one battled ferociously for its life—dared him to try. Goyo got as close as twelve miles off the northern coast of the island, close enough to imagine the scent of ripening sugarcane; to recall the prance of his best Arabian horse, Veloz, on their weekly inspections of the ranch. Twelve miles. A scant twelve miles from his past. Only Luisa's hysterical threats ("Are you out of your mind? They'll chop you up for shark bait!") made him turn around.

Sometimes Goyo liked to fantasize that he could see, telescopically, back to his homeland and zoom in on his archenemy. What living hell could he devise for that despot? For inflicting a plague of grief on millions of his countrymen? Goyo's first order of business would probably be to tape the bastard's mouth shut. Next he'd turn off his flat-screen televisions and deprive him of watching the news. (It was said that El Líder compulsively channel surfed for even a passing mention of himself.) Lastly, cattle prod in hand, Goyo would force the son of a bitch to listen to a taped litany of every victim, living and dead, whom he had wronged. Goyo could keep this up for eternity, since it would undoubtedly take that long.

His daughter often accused Goyo of staying alive for one purpose only: to celebrate the news of the tyrant's death. He couldn't deny it. Goyo subscribed to an exile website—HIJODEPUTA.COM—that charted, hourly, the maximum leader's body temperature (it was 99.6 degrees the last time Goyo checked at 7 a.m., the apparent result of a minor ear infection). Inside operatives, the website assured its followers, had infiltrated the National Palace, hovered

by the dictator's bedside, worked as cooks and gardeners in his multiple homes. But if the bastard actually had died as many times as had been prematurely proclaimed, he would've lived more lives than Hemingway's sixty polydactyl cats.

The truth was this: El Comandante had fossilized into a monstrous constant, into time itself.