

## **The Abduction of Escolástica Escoraz Vda De Miranda**

Up until Isidora turned eighteen, she was never happier than when she was listening (usually when there was a bright full moon in the sky) to her grandmothers and her grandfathers and her Great aunts and her distant cousins telling their stories. It was a little like owning a museum quality collection of old photographs, or more precisely, a set of old photographic glass plates, which were used without a second thought until the 1920s, but which were slowly abandoned as less fragile films were introduced into the market place and after a while were used only by astronomers seeking to capture the iridescent beauty of the stars.

Many of the stories that Isidora's long-dead relatives shared with the young and impressionable Isidora were in one way or another about tragically doomed love affairs, so Isidora soon found herself hoping to someday fall in love so she could prove to the bitter and inveterate naysayers of her extended family that true love was indeed possible, even in an age that prized brand-new linoleum floors above wedding vows. Naturally by true love she meant a vibrant, passionate, romantic love, the kind that sends a shiver racing like electricity up your spine and your legs crumble like diseased statuary and you can barely breathe and you wonder if you will ever walk again. So she became expert in the nuances of love that most of us miss, the subtle give-and-take between two consenting adults at any hour of the day or night; the tragic consequences of a love that has been forgotten and the resurging hope (more tentative the second or third time around, which is to be expected, but no less exciting) that accompanies that very love when it one day rises up from the cold ashes of forgetfulness; the quiet fullness of love that descends without warning upon two aging but once robust lovers who from then on can only express themselves through the mirror of their eyes, the lingering, infinitely gentle caress of a familiar, flattering hand.

For Isidora, the expression of love defined all human activity and the very nature of human existence, at least as far as she could glimpse from a pseudo-historical, partially imagined, quasi-psychic perspective.

Love, she decided, was walking along the Malecón on a summer evening, looking out at the dark blue waters of the Straits of Florida without a care in the world, the glorious knot of humanity flowing past, the faces of happy couples glowing brightly with the pink-glowing evening sky, nobody saying a single word, a family up ahead buying ice cream from an ice-cream vendor, and then the light softening, dissolving, fading into nothingness.

Love, she decided, was a quiet whispering between two voices that drifted out through an open window on a dark summer night and the lace curtains billowing in the breeze and they (the owners of the voices) could smell strange smells, a mixture of vanilla and cinnamon and tobacco, as if someone were baking pastries and smoking cigars at the same time at this very late hour, the smells flowing up from the Almendares River, originating somewhere on the other side in Vedado, perhaps a small bakery getting ready for the new day, and the two voices softly cooing, content whispers they were, which were soon lost amid the lonely but steady murmuring of insects.

Love, she decided, was the pattern of raindrops on the roof and then the sad and yet joyful sound of rainwater rolling into the tin gutters and then swirling down the drain spouts, a hollow, metallic echo that drifts across eternity.

Love, she decided, was the last time her great-grandmother had kissed her great-grandfather on the lips. The morning on that day was dark and moist and a rooster was crowing in the neighbor's yard. But Andres had to leave every morning when it was dark because they lived a few miles west of the old downtown, because Ana did not like the noise and the congestion of so many smells in such a small space, because she had grown up in a small nameless village on the other side of the island, near the El Cobre copper mine with the smell of sulphur always lingering in the air like bad eggs. So they lived out past El Carmelo in Miramar, in a small place near the Almendares River, small when compared to the palatial mansions that once lined the Calzada del Cerro, but gaudy by any other standard, a two-story neo-classical Baroque style house with ornate edifices and two inner courtyards and a brick walkway guarded by two sculpted lions (Andres had hoped for bronze, but that had proved too expensive).

Andres had built the house for Ana (though he often joked that he would never finish building this house) because she had grown up in a palm thatch hut a stone's throw from El Cobre (figuratively speaking, of course) and knew nothing of the modern world and modern conveniences and modern thinking, and he wanted her to know these things, though it could be said that her natural point of view was modern, for she did point out with some measured irony (and the barest hint of joyful exuberance) that they were without running water that first year. But Ana did not mind. She went to the river to fetch water, even when Andres instructed her to leave the duties of the household to the mulatta girl he had hired so Ana could look after the children. But within a year the city planners had caught up to Miramar and everyone had running water and electricity, so the instructions regarding the hired girl became a moot point.

It was shortly after that that Andres painted the house a very bright sunset orange, because Ana liked the color, but also because it was a modern color, which piqued his imagination. He was not so imaginative, however, when it came to the roof. He did not pay any attention to roofs unless they leaked. So the roof was a flat roof made of red Spanish tile. But Andres had quite a good imagination when it came to floors. He had installed solid mahogany floors, dark mahogany, top quality floors he had imported from New Orleans, because the darkness of the dark mahogany wood calmed his spirit and allowed him to read and think with a reflective, contemplative, even creative mind. So there was dark mahogany throughout the house, especially in the library, for he had always craved a library with a dark mahogany floor polished like dark glass so he could see his own reflection staring up at him like the image of God in reverse. His library was the visible expression of his soul. The shelves contained history books, though most of these were about The Reconquista, and volumes of poetry, from the ancient Greeks to the Futurists, in spite of the fact that the Futurists were no longer even read, and scientific journals proclaiming the latest and most astonishing discoveries in astronomy and Egyptology, and dictionaries in several languages (Spanish, English, French, Turkish), and various atlases, and a single shelf set aside for three Cuban philosophers.

The first of these philosophers was Félix Varela y Morales. Andres possessed several issues of a periodical entitled *El Habanero*, which contained treatises on politics and philosophy which Varela had penned, a book entitled *Abridger and Annotator to The Protestant*, which was printed in English, and a three-volume series of essays entitled *Cartes a Elipidio, sobre la Impiedad, la Superstición, y el Fanatismo en sus Relaciones con la Sociedad*. As far as Andres could tell, Varela believed that philosophy and theology were two separate disciplines, which meant that you could believe in God

and still work to change the order of things in a country (any country, all countries) that cared little for the welfare of ordinary citizens.

Naturally, Andres applauded this line of thinking on theoretical grounds, although as a practical matter, well, he did not believe that most people thought deeply about such distinctions or even knew they existed, though it should be noted that his views of 'most people' were shaped to a large extent by what he read in books. He paid scant attention to the opinions of those who worked for him at his café or those who owned the various shops downtown and whom he had talked with every once in a while when they came into his cafe for some supper, and not since his first few years in Cuba had he had any contact whatsoever with the vast, actual majority of Cubans who lived on the island, the mestizos and the mulattos and mulattas and the isleños, descendants of slaves and mixed bloods (who had been born in the dozens of tiny prehistoric villages that dotted the landscape, such as the village near El Cobre where his wife had come from), peasants all of them (with the obvious exception of his wife and her immediate family) who were now infiltrating the towns and the cities like a plague of rats. He was convinced that for the majority of Cubans, the disciplines of philosophy and theology were identical threads woven into the inarticulate fabric of their dreams, and so were difficult if next to impossible to untangle.

The second philosopher who captured Andres' fancy (and who was by far his favorite) was José Cipriano de la Luz y Caballero. He owned one massive volume entitled *The Works of don José de la Luz Caballero*, compiled by Alfredo Zayas, no less, and published in 1890. Andres saw in Luz a kindred spirit who believed that freedom meant the freedom to think creatively, without anyone telling you what to think, and without this freedom, people were no better than zombies, what space junkies and conspiracy theorists would later call automatons, though perhaps these words were not in Luz's dictionary, as they were certainly not in any of the dictionaries possessed by Andres Ordóñez Escoraz.

The third philosopher to occupy space on the shelf was Enrique José Varona, who had once come into Andres' café, before Andres knew who he was, with a group of young men, students perhaps, or budding revolutionaries. Varona had looked like a walrus with his thick bushy moustache, or at least a caricature of a walrus the way he was blustering on about that damn tyrant Machado and how it was every young Cuban's duty to take up arms against his regime, and the young students (or revolutionaries) lapping up every blustery, walrusey word. Still, Andres didn't know who he was, even at that point, and then Varona sat down at the bar and the young men spread out among the tables and everyone ordered beers or whiskey, and some ordered cocktails, like Daiquiris or Santiago cocktails, and a few ordered a fancy cocktail called a Cuban President, which Andres did his best to make, though he didn't have any Noilly Prat Vermouth, and he was also out of Curacao, so it didn't really taste like a Cuban, and when he brought out the drinks, the ones who had ordered the Cuban Presidents all held their drinks up in the air in honor of the blustery walrus, who was still talking, and they were calling him don Enrique or El Vicepresidente, and it was only then that Andres realized who this fat walrus actually was. Then Varona saw the poster of Carranza and started talking about the first bullfight he ever saw, the year was 1915, it was when President Menocal had sent him to Mexico City to meet with the new President there, Venustiano Carranza de la Garza, who became President simply by declaring the office was his.

'You would not believe what a stubborn bastard Carranza was,' Varona had said, 'arrogant, sadistic, without any sense of humor or humility, but he was a big man. He towered over the rest of those

mealy-mouthed peons, so he could do whatever he wanted, what could they do, there wasn't a thing they could do, so they waited like dead men, fawning over everything Carranza said, shrugging their shoulders in defeat when he wasn't looking, flattering him with all sorts of mealy-mouthed platitudes. I didn't like the man all that much. I didn't like the rest of them either, but I had to go, you see we were all set to recognize the Carranza government, in spite of the energetic pressure from those who supported Zapata, primarily because Wilson was leaning in Carranza's direction, which you might say had a great impact on the position we took, but you knew that was coming because you knew Wilson didn't like the smell of peasants and you couldn't scrub the peasant smell from Zapata's skin, that was never going to happen. So that's how things were, but we didn't talk politics at all. Carranza took us to a bullfight instead. What an extravagant social event that was. We were sitting up in a balcony and just below there was a sea of beautiful, high society women dressed in flowing white dresses and white lace headpieces, as if they had just come from church. I asked Carranza why there were so many women at the bullfight, and he laughed and said because they are all in love with the matadors, or with him, or both, did I not see they were all wearing white, it is really too funny, Carranza said, they are all hoping that the afternoon will end with a marriage proposal, and then he laughed again. That was the only time I heard him laugh, although it wasn't much of a laugh. It sounded more like a bull being run over by a train (the young men sitting at the tables now laughing). Then Carranza said the best way to see a bullfight was down close, so we left the balcony and the sea of hopeful women in white and took seats down along the rail, where you could smell the heavy horse smell of the picadores and some of them blinking happily, lazily, because they were drunk, and you could smell the thin smell of the alcohol too, like a gauze bandage wrapped around their faces, because we were close to where they were waiting, and Carranza said it was going to be a spectacular show, and it is true our view was unimpeded, but it was a horrible spectacle, a tragedy, truly. We were sitting in the grey bull ring of dreams with willows in the barreras, as the poet says. It was all very sad, but it was also heroic. The bull didn't die the way it was supposed to. There were maybe half a dozen spears stuck in its hump and it was wheezing and then its front legs collapsed and it looked like it was praying. My God it was a sight. Then the matador came with his sword, but then the bull seemed to resurrect itself and it stood up and roared like a great wind. It was very majestic. And then it charged straight through the matador as easily as charging through a rain cloud and we all watched as the matador's body flipped up into the air and came down on top of the bull, and you could see that one of the bull's horns had caught the man in the stomach, a terrible, piercing wound on the left side, and then the bull shook his massive head, which some said was a premeditated act of murder, but others said it was instead a desperate apology, like offering up a sacrifice to God in the hopes of a good harvest, which has always been part of the problem with religion, if you ask me, the reliance on mystical interpretations to whitewash simple human depravity, it is our Achilles heel, though in this case, I am sure you'll agree, the depravity belonged to the bull, and for a time nobody moved or said a word, and in the stillness of that moment you could hear the small, whimpering, plaintive cries of the matador, who was clinging to this horn of the lily as he was clinging to life, like the sound of rain falling on water somewhere in the distance, and then the bull flung the matador to the ground with an expression that could only be described as one of disgust. We could all see the matador's intestines spilling out, an absolute fatal wound if you have ever seen one, a most horrible way to die, and believe me, I have seen death in all of its forms, at least on the battlefield, where death is always an intensely personal, private agony, but this was a thousand times worse, for we were sitting in a public arena beneath a sky that turned the color of gangrene and nobody could do a thing to save the man. Then the bull charged at the picadores and gored a horse to death, and the sea of women in white were crying out behind us, above us, like angels desperate to intervene, praying an endless storm of rosaries and Hail Mary's, evoking the names of the saints and

long dead husbands, a hurricane of religious despair, and then finally Carranza nodded and they sent in a handful of soldiers and butchered the beast with bullets, and the splatter from the bull reached the front row, where I was sitting with Carranza.'

Then Varona had stopped talking, his voice trailing off, as if he were trying to remember what time of day the bull had died, and then he looked at the poster again and laughed and remarked on the coincidence of the names, 'they are both Carranza,' he had said, 'so I suppose they are related,' and one of the young men from the tables laughed and said 'we are all Spanish, we are all related,' and then the young men laughed, but Varona wasn't laughing.

After that night Andres purchased *Estudios literarios y filosóficos*, the only book by Varona he could find in the bookshop on the corner, but after reading the book, Andres was not sure what to make of this man with the walrus moustache. He seemed to Andres overtly radical, even for a modernist, for he seemed to believe that knowledge was a tool to be used in the battle to overthrow mysticism, and Andres was puzzled by the very notion of doing battle against mysticism, so he poured over the text again and again, but he was never quite satisfied with any of his conclusions, and he had, in fact, on the very night before the last time his wife kissed him on the lips, been re-reading Varona, looking for things he had missed the other times and wondering how any of these philosophers defined knowledge in the first place, for it seemed to him that mysticism was also a kind of knowledge, though who was he to say, and before he went to bed that night he went over his business ledger to determine if he had saved enough money (a full bank account was also a sort of knowledge, he thought) to add on to their house that once overlooked the river, for in the years between the time he had started building the house and the day he encountered Varona, the city had engulfed them all around and their view of the river was diminished.

It was shortly after he had met Varona (though whether Varona was the cause, or the timing was mere coincidence, he did not know) that he concocted the idea of adding a third story to their neo-classical Baroque style house and so restore their appreciation of the Almendares (and also to provide additional bedrooms for their grandchildren, which is how he had pitched the idea to his wife). But he did not act on this idea until the spring of 1940, when he contacted a company in New Orleans that specialized in decorative elements and ordered two dozen wrought iron railings for the balcony windows that would adorn the third-story bedrooms he was going to build, one bedroom for his grandson, Andres Escoraz Silvestre, who was already attending law school at the University of Havana, one for his son José Luis and his wife, Nuria, a beautiful mulatta girl from Eastern Cuba, who had moved into the house in Miramar when José Luis had given up playing baseball for Santa Clara, and a third bedroom for their son, also named José Luis, who at the age of nine was already a holy terror with a baseball bat.

Of course these mythical rooms did not yet exist, and now would never exist, because this was Andres' last evening before his last day, and when he was getting ready to leave the next morning he was still thinking about the wrought iron balconies, but also about Enrique José Varona, for the two seemed somehow connected, as if you could not have one without the other, at least in Havana, a strange, unsettling notion at the very least.

Then Ana had kissed him, but it was a short kiss because she wanted to remind him to come home early for supper, she was making chicken and tomatoes and rice, but could he please remember to

bring home a jar of peach jam, which was getting harder and harder to come by, and also that yellow cheese that came from Miami, she had a hankering for that, and her words were tumbling out of her mouth even while he was trying to finish kissing her, and he laughed and said he would remember, and she was laughing as well, but she was also deathly serious about the peach jam and the yellow cheese, and then he gave her a poem he had written that very morning expressing his eternal devotion to her, which she said she would read later and slipped it into the front pocket of her apron, and then he left and it was still dark and the sun wouldn't be up for another twenty minutes.