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My Mother in Two Photographs,  
Among Other Things

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There she is, standing next to her own mother, behind the symmetrical and somewhat religious arrangement of two Coca-Cola bottles flanking a birthday cake on a small table. If you look closely, it's really the sewing machine shut down, the cake on the slightly raised platform in the center, where the machine part turns upside down into its cabinet: a little altar for an impromptu picture of "just the family."

It is December 1962, my cousin María's eighth birthday. My brother, my sister, and I were sent five months earlier to a foreign country, so we are not in the picture. In two days, my grandmother will die, and on the right side of the photograph, directly opposite her, forming a Rorschach double, lurks the dark figure of the guide who came to lead her away. The shadow's hand is on its hip, its face swirls in a smoke that obscures the features. My grandmother is the only one not looking—even the baby held up by Panchito is—into the camera, the eye of the future. She seems distracted, as though she is contemplating an answer. Two

My Mother in Two Photographs

days after her party, María and Panchito wake up in bed with our grandmother, who has wet the bed and will not rouse.

But what about my mother? Like opposite aspects of the same person: my mother, my grandmother's shadow. Here, she's smiling, though not broadly. Her children are gone, but her mother's there, telling her *aguántate, cálmate*, as they sit over *café*. Or maybe she's relieved. It is, after all, the first time since their marriage that she and my father are alone, like newlyweds. But suddenly a kitchen towel, embroidered with the day of the week, *martes*, and smeared with another woman's lipstick, flies from my mother's hand, lands like an open book by my father's mud-caked boots.

In this photograph, a coffee-dark V shows through the collar of her dress, evidence of the enforced labor in the cane fields since the revolution. Above her head is a wall vase filled with plastic flowers, hanging under the framed painting of a saint, who can't be seen above the melted-chocolate folds of a robe, and above that, perhaps, two hands are held palms up, checking the spiritual weather. But the hands are outside the photograph, just like my hands, which can't touch my mother at that brief oasis, or my grandmother, right before she turned and left with the shadow.

Grandmother left so abruptly, left my mother in mid-sentence, fingering the legendary length of fabric her mother had once transformed into The Miracle of the Three Dresses. Alone, she collapsed into her mother's absence like a slave into bed at the end of the day.

Then one afternoon two years later the air of her kitchen spun like someone whirling toward her, and she knew something had happened to her son: locked in a mental ward at sixteen after chasing his foster mother around the block with a kitchen knife. He had dropped out of high school, washed dishes for a living. Sporting long sideburns, he rewarded himself first with a round-backed two-toned Chevy then a series of garish Mustangs. Married to his fate, he left a trail of cars, each wrapped like a wedding ring around a telephone pole.

A vision of her oldest daughter—forever regretting she hadn't been born into a TV family—flashed thin against the white walls of college, her body a blade sharpened to sever the question from the answer. Her face a glossy ad of the ideal American living room.

In the newspaper photo above the caption "Family of Cuban Expatriates Reunited Here," I am the only one gazing at the camera, my face twisted into a complex curiosity. Two years on my own among strangers had only taught me how to be one. I stood, my first tongue ripped out, with my mother's wet, round cheek pressed to the top of my head. The dark flag of her mustache. Their sour smell, like clothes trapped in a hamper. Emblems of the exile. While bureaucrats toyed with their time and their fate, my parents had waited, uncomplaining, afraid.

But I didn't know that back then. I placed myself instead in the camera lens, looking back at the spectacle we made in the bus station. Under my skin, the rice fields of my hometown were

flooding the place of language. Though my mother pulled me toward her with one arm, she scooped up only watery absence; my body had long drifted downriver. My mother's face in this photograph, captured by a stranger, betrays the weight of emptiness in her arms.