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Reflections on the Writer by His Longtime Majordomo

René Villarreal and Raúl Villarreal
HEMINGWAY’S CUBAN SON

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He was stiff and sore now and his wounds and all of the strained parts of his body hurt with the cold of the night. I hope I do not have to fight again, he thought. I hope so much I do not have to fight again.

—Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*

My father, René Villarreal, first wrote his memoirs in the mid-1960s when he was serving as the director and administrator of the Hemingway Museum in Havana, Cuba. However, that manuscript was either lost or stolen—we’re not sure which, because those involved and the events that followed remain vague and elusive to this day. It wasn’t until the summer of 1996, at the age of sixty-six, that my father agreed to rewrite his memoirs. But his mindset was different then, following the sudden death of a son. As he mourned in silence, he read his favorite work by Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*, a book he has turned to at different stages in his life. The story of the old Cuban fisherman took on new meaning for him. He identified with Santiago’s struggle against the big fish and the loss of the fish to the sharks. But it was not a brother he had lost, as Santiago refers to the big fish in the novella; it was a son. Certain passages in *The Old Man and the Sea* gave my father the strength and determination to begin and complete this project. Some years later, and dealing with numerous health issues, the old man is tired but still alive with lucid memories of his life at the Finca Vigía.
Although I was not born until 1964, I grew up with Hemingway. As a young child, I visited the Finca Vigía in the afternoons with my two older brothers, quietly observing our father guide tour after tour and observe visitors take pictures of him, shake his hand, and ask for autographs. Throughout our house in San Francisco de Paula, just a few blocks from the Finca, Papa Hemingway was present—in photographs, books, and letters. And there were the wonderful stories my father and others in our small village told.

We left Cuba in 1972 for Madrid, Spain. Life there was very different from what we had known, but we assimilated and settled into a good and happy life. During the 1970s other families settled in the surrounding neighborhoods, and a small Cuban community formed. However, in 1974, with the changing political climate in Spain, my father moved the family to the United States, where we settled in Union City, New Jersey, once referred to as “Havana on the Hudson” because of its large population of Cuban exiles (second only to Miami, Florida).

I never discussed with my father why he remained quiet on the subject of Ernest Hemingway in public and refused to give any interviews after 1973. For decades he was sought after for interviews, and for years rumors of his whereabouts placed him in Florida, Costa Rica, Canada, and even back in Cuba. I thought he simply wanted to put the memories of life at the Finca Vigía and Hemingway behind him. Perhaps, I thought, deep inside it hurt him to talk about those years.

But after my brother’s death, I began to ask my father more questions. I must have sensed his need to reconsider the past. Or maybe I, the youngest son, needed to pull him out of grief and back to us. And so during that summer of 1996, I began interviewing him. Over the course of two years, usually on weekends, we sat down and shared a glass of good Spanish wine and Montecristos, our favorite Cuban cigars. I clicked on the tape recorder and asked a question or two. It took nothing more for the stories I had listened to throughout my childhood to flow out, richly detailed and descriptive, something much more than mere anecdotes or musings. Those insightful accounts of his life at the Finca Vigía offered a unique perspective on a man known for his writing as well as his passion. My father’s is a story very different from what others have written about Ernest Hemingway.

This memoir shines light on Hemingway’s life in Cuba—his working habits, his state of mind, and his love for the island and its people. We do not intend to defend or criticize the man but to detail the events of the time and the place as my father perceived and remembered them.
Also, this is a book about my father’s childhood and young manhood, about his home, his land. It is an account of two very different lives connected by a chance encounter in 1939.

My father has the gifts of a keen memory and artful storytelling, a great Cuban tradition that was surely sharpened and honed during his years with Papa Hemingway. He closes his eyes and relives the scenes with great detail, with all of his senses, with his whole being. I found very little discrepancy between the interview recordings and what he wrote down with pencil and paper. He recalled names and dates immediately and accurately. In researching biographical details, I checked dates and names against reputable biographies. When I found discrepancies between my father’s memory and the texts, I pressed him for even more details and points of reference, which he delivered without hesitation, maintaining his original statements and date. He proved to be my most consistently reliable source.

In working with my father in writing this memoir, I came to better understand him, to more fully appreciate and respect his life. He entrusted me with his treasured accounts of his life at the Finca Vigía, and I wanted his story to be told with his voice and through his eyes. The stories are not from any single interview or translation. Rather, they grow out of all the material I have gathered from my father and researched myself. It was a difficult task selecting from so many wonderful stories which ones would best tell his story, which would best represent his life.

Helping me to understand that time in my father’s life, that world, were the many photographs in my family’s possession. A few my father had well before Papa’s death; most Mary Hemingway gave him before burning the others. Sadly, many, many more—pictures of my father boxing with Papa, playing baseball, feeding the cats—were lost in Cuba, along with the manuscript and other personal items. The images that now make up the Villarreal Family Collection were scattered among family members in Cuba and slowly, painstakingly recovered. Where photographers’ names were listed or known, I received permission from survivors to reprint here. I received permission from the estates of George Leavans and Earl Theisen, who beautifully photographed Hemingway’s life in Cuba.

This is the story of a poor, young Cuban boy who grew into a man and gained the trust, respect, and love of a famous American writer, a man he called Papa.

Raúl Villarreal
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my father, I extend my sincere gratitude, love, and great admiration for sharing his incredible life with me and for recognizing that his youngest son is a dreamer. My soul-felt gratitude to my mother for her love and strength throughout the years and to my brother René Jr., my dear sisters Fanny and Martha, and all my nieces and nephews.

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Finally, I must thank my beautiful and adventurous wife, Rita, for her neverending love and support and for sharing the madness with me for all these wonderful years.

Raúl Villarreal
Fours years had passed since my last trip to Cuba, and I thought this one would be my last. This trip was supposed to give me the opportunity to say good-bye, to see my brothers, sister, and old friends one last time. I wanted to see Cuba once more. I wanted to see again the place where I had lived the best years of my life. Even in exile, I always considered Cuba my home.

In the years since I was last there, life had fundamentally changed. I lost a son. I became a changed man, hollow, empty. The pain of losing Rodolfo a couple of months after his thirty-sixth birthday was too much to endure. Even though I had a wonderful wife, four loving children, and eight beautiful grandchildren, I could hardly stand the pain. I had lost my desire to live. I would have offered my life a thousand times for his, but life betrayed me. A lifetime ago Fanny, my dear wife, and I had to endure the loss of another child, a son who died just days after he was born. It was very painful then, but we were young and full of life. Five more children were born afterward to help us with our loss. But we lost Rodolfo after seeing him become a man.

Fanny found comfort in the constant love and attention from the kids and grandchildren, but I still saw the hurt in her eyes. I found no comfort, not in anything. I love all my children dearly, but Rodolfo had a special place in my heart. He reminded me of my oldest brother, Heliodoro. Rodolfo was charismatic, full of life, adventurous, and he had a mischievous streak that captured my heart.

I was blessed with a beautiful family. René Jr. turned out to be the responsible, serious, “father” type, often looking after his younger
siblings. Fanny, the oldest of the girls, named after her mother, is quiet, sweet, and very protective. Martha, the youngest, is the independent career woman who solves the family’s problems. Raúl, the youngest of the boys, is the artist. My family always makes me proud. Fanny and I raised them well. We tried to teach them right from wrong, to teach them all we could, to raise them the same way our parents raised us. I realized how fortunate my life had been. I had a wonderful family, a good decent life, and the privilege of knowing one of the great American writers of the twentieth century. I had been Ernest Hemingway’s friend—su hombre de confianza, his right-hand man, su hijo cubano.

The children urged us to make the trip to Cuba, hoping it would help after Rodolfo’s death. Raúl said he would accompany us. He didn’t want us to travel alone. His brother and sisters made him promise he would take good care of us. I invited Rosa Santurces to join us on the trip. Though a distant relative by marriage, most of my family referred to her as Aunt Rosa. She had left Cuba in 1968. She was now eighty-four years old, twice widowed, and very independent. She had refused to move to Miami, Florida, with her blood relatives and lived alone in a small apartment in New York City. At her age, she was happy to be going home once more.

We left from Kennedy Airport early on the morning of Friday, May 10, 1996, landing in Nassau close to noon. As the passengers destined for Cuba entered the terminal, the band that had been playing island music started to play La Guantanamera. I felt a rush of emotion and understood why I was making this trip. Most of the passengers were like me—Cubans returning home—and we all sat together in the hot, humid airport terminal waiting for the connecting flight to Havana. I studied the faces of my fellow passengers, looking to distinguish between the non-Cubans traveling for pleasure and Cubans traveling to visit family. Those of us visiting family all had the same look of worry, anticipation, uncertainty. We had worked hard all year to save money for this trip, to buy clothes, shoes, eyeglasses, toys—anything a family member had asked for in a letter or over the phone. But we now wondered what to expect when the bags are weighed, how much money it would take to get the luggage through. And we were nervous because we didn’t know how customs would treat us, how long it would take before we saw our loved ones, what we would find when we got there.

Sitting there among my own, I had renewed appreciation for the strength and beauty of the Cuban people. Most of the passengers were
my age. The few young passengers, wide-eyed and eager, were probably visiting Cuba for the first time, traveling with their parents to finally meet a cousin, aunt, or uncle they had only seen in photographs, known through correspondence, or spoken with on the telephone. Respect and love for family has kept all of us together, even across great distances and through difficult times. Fanny and I work all year without taking vacations, saving every penny in order to make this trip and spend two weeks with our family and childhood friends. The sacrifices are worth it, for we know that in these two weeks we can forget about our aches and troubles and remember the old days and good times. These short weeks warm our hearts until the next time we visit.

I looked at Fanny. I saw the sadness in her eyes. It was two days before Mother's Day. I caught her glance and smiled. She smiled back and asked if I had my heart pills at hand. That was the third time she had asked me. I showed her the pill bottle again, and she nodded. Five months had passed since our son's death, and we still walked in a trance of disbelief. Fanny is a strong woman. I was blessed when I met her. I love her now more than ever.

Raúl scratched his head as he walked around our luggage and smiled at us. He was only seven when we left Cuba, but he remembers quite a lot. We knew we couldn't have made the trip without him. He took care of all the details at the airports, completing all the paperwork, bringing cold drinks when we were thirsty, and taking care of our luggage. God knows there was a lot of luggage! He was very excited about bringing back my manuscripts and starting work on the memoir. I planned to give him the manuscript, the photographs, and my blessing. I knew I couldn't commit myself to writing a book.

We waited hours for the plane to arrive from Cuba. Finally, at a little past three in the afternoon, we were ready to board. Three lines formed at the weigh-in counter. Even after the wait and the heat, there were no arguments or even much impatience among the passengers. After all, most of us had spent countless hours of our lives waiting in long lines for rations and to have the libretas stamped, one for clothes and shoes and the other for milk, meat, rice, beans, oil, or soap. Once everyone had checked their luggage and payed the excess baggage fees—we were allowed 44 pounds of checked luggage, but most of us had over 80 pounds' worth—we boarded the small Aerolinea Cubana airplane and, without much preflight preparation from the crew, took off.

The start of the flight was entertaining. After quickly dispensing
with the safety instructions, the flight attendants became mile-high flea market merchants, peddling bottles of dark and light Havana Club Rum, Montecristo and Cohiba cigars, Marlboro and Salem cigarettes, Alicia Alonso perfume, and audiotapes of recent Cuban hits. The rum, cigars, cigarettes, and music were the best sellers; no one asked for the Alicia Alonso fragrance. We passengers enjoyed ourselves and relaxed, drinking Cuba libres or, as some quietly called them, mentiritas, which means “little lie.” There was much laughing and stories told about family members they were visiting. I overheard a businessman tell the man sitting next to him of a place in Havana where he could have the best massage in the world for only ten American dollars. He could have the “full treatment,” and it would be “out of this world.” He advised his friend that no matter how satisfied he would be, he was not to pay more than ten dollars.

I settled into my own reverie. I thought of Cuba, my childhood, my family and friends, my life at the Finca Vigía with Papa Hemingway, and then Rodolfo. As much as I tried, I could not help but think of him. In under an hour’s time, the plane began its descent. I watched out the window as the clouds gave way to the beautiful terra-cotta earth and emerald-green vegetation. My heart pounded. Fanny gently told me to place a heart pill under my tongue. With a thrilling bump and a cheer in the cabin, we landed in José Martí International airport, the very same airport I had left Cuba from with my wife and five children in 1972. Ignoring instructions, most of the excited passengers were out of their seats, retrieving their carry-on bags, and securing their rum and cigarettes well before the plane came to a complete stop.

When I stepped out of the plane onto the tarmac, I felt the warm Cuban breeze gently caress my face. With a deep breath, I took it all in. The sweet smell of mi Cuba. How I had missed it!

Three long, red buses took us passengers and our luggage to the customs office. There, we got off the bus and walked inside the building. Raúl carried most of the luggage, with me and Fanny seeing to our carry-on bags and one large suitcase with wheels. Raúl told us to wait with the luggage and went to talk to a customs agent about our entry visas. Our visas had not arrived in the United States on time, so we had been instructed by our travel agent to retrieve them at the customs office in Cuba. In a few minutes, Raúl returned holding our visas. I saw the look of relief on his face. I was relieved myself,
because when traveling to Cuba you never know what problems or complications may surface. We gathered ourselves and all our bags and went to the customs room.

We were happy to learn that a family member who held a job in the airport had saved our luggage from a search and made sure we weren’t charged excess weight fees. But we were not spared the security check. Fanny, who had in her carry-on the oil paint set Raúl was taking to my brother Oscar, was stopped by one of the customs agents. The paint tubes and palette knives must have looked suspicious in the antiquated X-ray machine. Opening the wooden case, the agent saw twelve sets of oil colors, several painting brushes, and palette knives. Nervously, I tried to hand the man twenty American dollars so he would leave my wife alone. Raúl told me to put the money away. He explained to the man that the oil set was a present for his uncle. There was no doubt the man had his eye on the paint set. Perhaps he had a relative who was an artist and wished to get the set for him, or perhaps he wanted to sell it on the street. He could live half a year on the money he would get for it on the black market. At that moment, our cousin came over and persuaded the customs agent to leave us alone. Then we were free to proceed. It had only taken a short fifteen minutes. I remember previous visits when we had been detained in customs for well over two hours.

Three porters came with carts to relieve us of the bags. Raúl carried a large bag and walked behind all of us, making sure the porters didn’t take anything. As we walked out, I looked back. The rest of the passengers were going through the degrading procedure of having to bargain and haggle for the belongings in their luggage. I felt bad, wishing I could somehow help, but I knew there was nothing I could do.

We walked out of the noisy and crowded terminal. I heard my sister’s voice calling out to me. I heard other voices calling out to us. I looked around and finally saw Nilda, my sister, and her oldest daughter, Elvira. Then I saw my two brothers Luis and Oscar. Every time we visited, the family somehow managed to provide transportation—but certainly at great expense. People who owned cars made more money driving tourists around than working in their profession, even engineers or doctors.

Twelve family members were there to greet us. The affection was overwhelming. We spent a full fifteen minutes just hugging and kissing. I looked at my sister and tears welled in my eyes. She squeezed my hand and whispered, “Aqui no,” not here. My twin brother, Luis,
cried when we looked into each other’s eyes. He had lost his youngest son almost ten years ago in a train accident. He knew what I was going through.

When the hugs were shared and the initial greetings were said, we all got into the four hired cars—all of them big old American “classic” cars that seemed to belong to an era long gone—and headed to San Francisco de Paula, the village that was my family’s home.

From the airport we took the road to Rancho Boyeros. For me, the busy, happy chatter receded into the background as I looked out the window. It was late in the afternoon, but the sun had not gone down yet. The day was still bright. Along the bumpy, dusty road were young and old folk alike riding bicycles or waiting to be picked up by a good samaritan with a truck or car. I saw a man wearing a straw hat riding a horse bareback, a shirtless barefooted child riding behind, holding tightly to his father’s waist. The boy’s hair was covered with dust. This was my Cuba—the Cuba of men on horses, of fiestas and serenatas, of a simpler, slower way of life. I knew that many things had changed in Cuba, but much remained the same.

In no time we were driving west past El Cotorro via La Carretera Central, and I could see the first hints of capitalism in this village just east of San Francisco de Paula. Cafes and grocery stores stood along the side of the road. They had not been there on my last trip. I looked for paladares but saw none. A successful paladar, a private home that opened its dining rooms to tourists and locals who paid for the homey fare, could have a regular clientele and make a decent living for the family.

We passed the old Cervecería Hatuey factory, which meant we were getting closer to San Francisco de Paula. And in no time we turned off the highway and entered my old hometown. Here, little had changed over the last four years. San Francisco de Paula had remained a simple, humble, and poor town. On a little hilltop overlooking town, a sign read “Reparto la Prosperidad,” but prosperity had not reached San Francisco de Paula.

The side road was in worse condition than the main highway, and our driver had a difficult time maneuvering around the large ditches and rocks. He drove slowly to avoid the large holes in the road. People stopped to watch the parade of cars—people from the pueblo, people I knew. They recognized me and waved. They knew we were coming. Like in every small town, word gets out fast.
We arrived at Nilda’s house and were among family. Raúl allowed his uncles and cousins to carry the bags. In the welcoming, modest house, I sat down on a chair by the door and sighed in relief. Raúl, with new energy, walked around greeting people. Nilda told the drivers that she would take care of them later and they left. One of my nieces brought me cold bottled water. I had gotten sick on the last trip when I drank the water from the faucet, so they had bought bottled water. The money I sent every two months helped my family get through the rough times, and they more than paid us back on our visits.

“I missed you so much,” I said to Nilda when she returned from the kitchen with café for Fanny and Aunt Rosa.

“I missed you too.” She started to cry.

“I wanted to see you one last time before . . .” I hesitated, now sobbing. Fanny cried too. The room grew quiet.

“I didn’t come all the way here to have you both crying! You could have stayed in Jersey for that!” Raúl scolded, upset. “I wanted you to be happy. Don’t start talking nonsense!”

Raúl had never spoken to us like that before, but he knew it was the only way to snap me out of my gloomy frame of mind. My sister and brothers agreed; they didn’t want the visit to turn into twelve days of mourning. Raúl was right. We had not come to Cuba to cry.

And soon I did feel better. I watched Fanny smile and laugh as she talked to her sisters and nieces. Aunt Rosa forgot the aches and pains of old age. We talked late into the night telling them about the children and grandchildren, about their jobs and our lives. We talked about Rodolfo and other family members who had passed away. Raúl and I told them about our plans to write a book about my time with Papa Hemingway, news that was met with cheers. I knew that they all thought I should have done it long ago. I had only agreed to it now because Raúl would see the project through to completion. More importantly, I knew that he would never twist my words or make up lies the way others who have interviewed me have done through the years.

We talked and reminisced until we could no longer keep our eyes open. My sister had made sleeping arrangements for us in the house. [Aunt Rosa went to stay with relatives in El Cotorro.] We never stayed in a hotel. That was unthinkable. It meant inconveniences, but no one minded. Raúl took the small middle bedroom. Fanny and I slept in the larger bedroom at the front of the house. My sister, her husband, two of their daughters, and their husbands slept in the third, and largest,
bedroom at the rear of the house. I knew it was a big sacrifice on their part, but they wouldn’t have it any other way.

As we settled into bed, the warm breeze carried the sweet scent of mi Cuba into the bedroom. That night, back home among family, I slept better than I had in five months.

After a few days of rest, my brothers, Raúl, and I went to the Finca Vigía, the estate that was once the home of Ernest Hemingway—the place where I had worked since childhood, the place where I grew from a boy into a man. This was my other home. The Finca had been donated to the Cuban people by Mary Welsh Hemingway in 1961 and been designated a museum by the Cuban government. In December 1979, the first year the Cuban government allowed exiles who had family to visit the island, Fanny, Raúl, and I spent a week in Cuba, but I was not allowed to visit the Finca. It was not until my visit in 1983 that I was invited to step onto the Finca grounds again, after fifteen years away.

Carlito, a friend of the family, drove us there in his orange VW beetle, a vehicle he maintained with spare parts from a different array of cars. (Carlito had been a mechanical engineer, but now he made more money driving tourists around Havana.) We drove up to the large white gate at the front of the property. Two teenage girls dressed in school uniforms sitting inside a white wooden booth confirmed who we were and waved us in with warm smiles. We drove up the road and parked by the garage. The director of the museum arranged to meet us in what used to be the garage and which now served as an exhibition space. After formal greetings, we sat and spoke for a few minutes before beginning a tour of the estate.

I could see the excitement in Raúl’s eyes. During the years I worked as administrator of the museum, from 1962 to 1968, my sons regularly visited me after school. They played and roamed around the Finca as if it was their own home. Raúl was not yet in school, so sometimes I took him with me after lunch, carrying him on my shoulders all the way up to the house. My eyes and legs were better then. He remembers all of that. But then, the Finca is a hard place to forget.

We left the garage and headed to the main house, walking up the terraced concrete steps. Right off I noticed a smaller ceiba tree in the place where a large, old ceiba used to be. It had been Papa’s favorite tree. The director told me it had been cut down because the tree’s
branches were damaging the roof and its roots pushing up the floor tiles inside the house.

We entered through the front door and met several of the employees, all women. Outside, peering through the windows, several tourists stared at us, clearly wondering why we had been allowed inside (most visitors are only allowed to look into the house through the windows). We walked from room to room, and the museum director asked me questions, pencil and notepad in hand. I felt at home and glad to be there. I answered her questions without having to force my mind. I caught Raúl smiling at me. I knew he was proud of my memory, as was I.

In the Venetian Room, the guest room, Raúl photographed me and my brothers standing under the portrait of Papa Hemingway that my younger brother, Oscar, had painted in the late 1940s. It had been many years since the three of us stood inside this house together. We also took pictures under the massive buffalo trophy on the wall. All the while the curious, nosey tourists followed us, straining to hear our conversation through the windows. I heard one say loudly, “That’s Hemingway’s Cuban son” and felt a quick flush of pride.

From the dining room we went out to the terrace. I discreetly pointed out to Raúl only where the cats’ cemetery was. Papa had always wanted the cat cemetery to remain a secret. We walked over to the white tower building that was completed in 1949 to see a photography exhibit entitled “Hemingway in Venice,” which featured large black-and-white shots of Hemingway and his fourth wife, Mary Welsh, in Venice in 1948. As we left the tower, several tourists approached and asked me to autograph their exhibit pamphlets. The last was a young Cuban man who wasn’t concerned at all about the rain that had started to fall. After I signed his pamphlet, he thanked me several times, shaking my hand vigorously. I was surprised that people still remembered who I was. I thought that, after so many years living outside Cuba, my connection to Papa Hemingway would have been forgotten.

Back inside the garage, the director asked me more questions, specifically regarding Papa Hemingway’s daily routine of recording his weight and writing down comments on his bathroom walls. She took notes.

The rain finally stopped, and it was time to go. Before leaving, the director asked us all to sign the guest book. Carlito, our driver, had been with us the whole time, and as he signed the book, on his face I
saw the great joy and pride of being part of this exclusive tour. I was the last one to sign. The Finca had been my home, and it felt strange signing the book. For many years I witnessed guest after guest sign the book, and now my signature was among them. How many names were in that book!

During the years I worked for Ernest Hemingway, I met many famous people. The Finca Vigía hosted visitors from all over the world. After Papa’s death, I became director of the museum, and then I met many other great writers, such as Camilo José Cela, Alberto Moravia, and Alejo Carpentier, who extended their hands to me in friendship. In 1965 I had the pleasure of meeting and spending the afternoon with Cuban artist Wifredo Lam, drinking rum under the giant ceiba tree.

I was glad the government had tried to keep things as I left them. They still had Hemingway’s yacht, the *Pilar*, on display by the pool, his typewriter and reading glasses in his bedroom, and the hunting trophies throughout the house. During the years I worked as administrator of the museum, I spoke to thousands of people who admired Ernest Hemingway, the man and his work. With great interest, they listened to my stories and anecdotes, to my lists of his likes and dislikes, to my chronicling of day-in-day-out activities. While I described many details of Papa’s life in Cuba, many more stories and anecdotes I kept to myself, the memories too personal and meaningful to share with the too curious or with reporters or biographers. It was a job I loved.

Standing on the grounds of this familiar place, enjoying the scent of orchid trees, hibiscus, and jasmin trumpets, brought back many memories of the happy times of my life alongside Papa Hemingway. But it also brought back some of the bitterness over why I left.

In the late 1960s, the Ministry of National Culture started to make my life difficult because I shied away from joining any one political group. El Ministerio Nacional de Cultura refused to accept my non-involvement. By 1968 the situation had become unbearable. The constant spying on me and my family as well as the lack of proper materials and trained personnel to maintain the museum forced me to present my papers requesting to leave my beloved Cuba. El Ministerio willingly terminated my position as administrator and director of the Ernest Hemingway Museum. As punishment for my uncooperativeness, they sent me to work two years of hard labor cutting sugar cane in the fields in the province of Camagüey, on the other side of the island, far away from my family. I lived in overcrowded camps
filled with men like me who simply wanted to take our families and leave the country. The government was determined to humiliate us, to break our spirits—“apatria” (stateless) or “gusano” (worm) were the common terms for anyone who wished to leave Cuba. But most of us persevered, and in the end we got out.

Before leaving the Finca, I stopped and turned back and took it all in—the house, the gardens, the garage, the small ceiba tree. They should have never cut down the old tree. I’m glad I wasn’t there when it happened.

That evening Raúl and I learned that the manuscript and photographs I had left behind with a friend had been lost. We were devastated. My blood pressure rose, and I had to take a heart pill. Always my caretaker, Raúl walked me to the bedroom and sat me on the bed. He tried to calm me down, encouraging me not to give up.

“We have other photographs. And you still have your memory,” he said.

“Pero, estoy viejo y cansado,” I said. I told him I was old and tired. I didn’t want to disappoint him. I always told him to never give up. So how could I? He had been so wonderful these past five months, always at our sides, speaking to us on the telephone every day and visiting on the weekends. I knew it would break his heart if I gave up.

“We can start from scratch. It will be better than what you had,” Raúl said, looking into my eyes. “Remember what Papa Hemingway always told you: ‘A man can be destroyed but not defeated.’”

He knew just what to say. He remembers every word I say and knows when to use them on me. Raúl also knows my stories by heart. We would do it for the family, he said. We would do it for Rodolfo, and especially for his girls. He knew I would respond to this. Yes, the family—what is most important in a person’s life.

That night I couldn’t sleep. Years of my own writing, countless precious photographs, and a wealth of autographed books from Papa Hemingway had been lost forever. Why had I not claimed them sooner? I was a fool to put such trust in a friend. The only reason I didn’t leave them with my family was because I feared that if the government found out about their existence, they would search my family’s home and confiscate them. For that reason only I entrusted them to a friend, not family. And now all those stories and evidence of wonderful, cherished moments were lost.
Lying in bed I felt my heart pound with rage. I was not going to let life cheat me again. I still remembered everything—crystal-clear recollections from the first day I met Hemingway to the last time I saw him and throughout the dark days following his death. I remembered it all—and no one could ever take those memories from me.

Then I remembered Papa’s advice on reading and writing: when he was reading and writing, he preferred to stop at an important point in the story. For reading, he had explained to me, it made him want to go back and pick up the book again with interest and enthusiasm. If he stopped writing at a point where it was good and he knew exactly what was going to happen, at a point of high interest, it made his next day’s work start easier. And I remembered how he liked to write in the mornings because, he said, his mind was clear and fresh from a night’s rest.

I was relieved recalling his advice and eased into sleep.