La Cortada

All those memoirs that begin with the author's recollections of life at age three, I never trust them. Never. What baloney, I think to myself, who is the author fooling, for heaven's sakes?

Sometimes I wonder if I had a childhood. My mother tells me I was a very happy child. Especially in Cuba. I was born in Havana. I lived there until I was nearly five. But I can't recall a thing. It's as if I sprang to life when we arrived in New York--for that is my earliest memory, the moment of arriving, of docking. If only I could remember the early years of my life, my mother says, I would know for myself how happy I was in Cuba. I wouldn't have to take her word for it.

So many of my Cuban friends, who left the island around the same age as me, recall perfectly the trauma of their departure, the sense of expulsion from paradise. But I don't recall leaving Cuba, either.

There's a term for my condition. I am cortada. Call me La Cortada. I grew up hearing that term as a description of my Aunt Silvia, my mother's older sister. When my mother would talk to her friends about my aunt's shyness, she would explain, Es que se siente cortada. Cortar means to cut, and to feel cortada is to feel cut short, at a loss. You freeze when you need to speak; you can't get out what you need to say because something holds you back, something makes you feel you would have to shout beyond the capacity of your own voice in order to be heard. It is as if you have forgotten how to speak, or why speaking is even necessary.

When I was in college I had such trouble speaking in class I became convinced I was suffering from aphasia. I spent days at the library reading the psychology manuals,
trying to figure out which region of my brain might be impaired. Afraid to grow dumber if I left school, I never let myself out for recess, I became a professor. Now the shy quiet girl in the back of the room sits in the front playing teacher. I am thankful for the talkative students, who save me from having to lecture. I avoid the gaze of the shy quiet students. The mirror of their silence terrifies me.

At a Lego Fair at my son Gabriel's school, I run into the mother of one of his friends. Her arm is in a sling. She's broken her elbow cross-country skiing. The doctors, she tells me, needed for her to be awake while they set her arm, so they injected her with a drug that would induce amnesia, selectively, in her brain. That way she'd just forget the pain, the blood, the doctors' faces. She'd never remember what it felt like to have her arm set.

Who injected me? Who cut me short? Why did I forget?

I embark upon a series of return trips to Cuba. Over and over again I go. I keep returning to the same places, I keep retracing my steps, looking for a memory. I want to find the girl who used to chatter happily, the girl who was not yet cortada, and especially the girl who rode around in taxi cabs by herself at age three, four. You see, my mother always told me it was so safe in the old days in Cuba that she'd send me by taxi from our apartment in El Vedado to my Aunt Zoila's house in Miramar. Alone? I would ask, amazed. Yes, she'd say, alone. There were never any problems. In our sad brick apartment in New York, sitting by the picture window staring at the moon, I grew up enamored of the image of the precocious bourgeois girl in her party dress riding around in taxi cabs, passing the sea on her way from El Vedado to Miramar.

And now, years later, in the course of my return journeys to Cuba, I have become close again to Caro, the black woman who took care of me as a child. She retains a crystal sharp image of my young girlhood, such a sharp image that I think she still sees little white Ruti in her wind-puffed party dress when she looks at me.

One day she says, "I ran into the taxi driver again."
I have no idea what she is talking about. "What taxi driver?"
"You don't remember?"
I shake my head mournfully. "No. Caro, please tell me. I don't remember anything from my childhood here."
She looks at me with curiosity. "I wouldn't tell him," she says. "And he still wanted to know. Would you believe that after thirty-five years he still wanted to know?"
"Know what?"
"Why you wouldn't ride in the taxi cab with him."

And finally Caro tells me: When I was a little girl I told her the man pinched my thighs and I didn't like that. He'd pinch them all the way to my Aunt Zoila's house and back. That's why I wouldn't get into his car again, no matter what my mother or anyone said.

After Caro tells me this story, I realize that for me leaving Cuba was like crossing the river Lethe. I entered the otherworld. I was stripped of memory, stripped of speech, cortada, cut to the quick. I forgot all the happiness, but also all the sadness. I forgot all the things I failed to understand, like why the taxi driver wanted to pinch my thighs and why I told Caro but not my mother.

But I am learning that memories don't disappear. They leave traces. They make their way back to this world in subtle, yet insistent ways. For example, I have a horrible sense of direction. I cannot read a map to save my life. I find it a chore to have to distinguish between north and south. And now, after numerous return trips, I still just barely know my way around the city of Havana. The only method I have for learning my way around a city is to use intuition, to wander, to get lost. But I am afraid to get too lost in Havana. So I never take long walks there by myself. I am always walking with someone. Or being driven around by someone. I have many fears, but none is more terrible than my fear of getting too lost in the city of my birth and never being heard from again.