

## *BARBARA SOUTHARD*

### **Heavy Downpour**



A sudden gust of wind lifted the exam papers on the coffee table and scattered them at my feet. I rushed to the balcony that overlooked the Atlantic. In the tropical sunshine, the waves close to shore were bright turquoise fading into deep blue as the eye moved further out. Billowing gray clouds were piling up on the horizon, streaked with rain. After each dart of lightning, I counted the seconds to see how long it would take to hear the boom of thunder.

The runners of the sliding windows were corroded by the salt air. By the time I had closed them and sat back down to finish correcting exams, I was dripping with sweat, my thin blouse sticking to my skin. I went down the hallway to check on my five-year old daughter who was fast asleep in the bedroom. The intercom buzzer rang. I rushed to answer before she woke up, thinking it could be the postman with the parcel my mother had sent special delivery for her birthday.

“Hola. ¿Quién es?”

“Soy yo. Mike.”

I rang the buzzer to let him in. I hadn't seen Michael Pierce for about a year. I used to see him and Estella every month or so, but he had disappeared from those American parties in Puerto Rico, not that I could blame him. There was entirely too much drinking and constant whining about the heat, the traffic, and the general lack of efficiency. At one of these parties, Mike had proposed a toast, “To Puerto Rico! Love it or leave it!” An uneasy silence followed. When we got home my husband Jeff told me, “Of course, he's right, but it's hard to leave when Pfizer pays better here than in the States.”

When I opened the door, I noticed Mike's curly hair was disheveled and wet, but that wasn't surprising because the storm had moved in to shore, and the rain was pounding on the balcony windows. He wore shorts, long socks and beaten up tennis shoes. I ushered him into the living room.

"What a beautiful view," he said, running his fingers through his hair and gazing through the balcony window facing the ocean. I followed his eyes and saw that the storm had kicked up furious whitecaps.

"Sit down," I told him.

"I'm kind of sweaty from running," he said.

"Don't worry about it. I'll get you something cool to drink."

I left him perched gingerly on the sofa, and went into the kitchen.

As I was getting out the ice from the fridge, I thought about Mike. His full name was Michael Pierce Ramírez, son of an American father and a Puerto Rican mother. I had first met him in college in the late sixties. He was very much involved in radical movements just as I had been in those days. He often spoke to meetings of the Students for a Democratic Society about imperialism in his native land of Puerto Rico.

I myself had become disillusioned with the SDS and had moved into a women's consciousness-raising group. I was going out with a very domineering political type who constantly berated me for being a timid WASP with middle class values. The feminist group helped me navigate my way out of *that* relationship. I found Mike more sympathetic than the guy I was going out with, but somehow nothing worked out romantically. We picked up our friendship again in the early seventies when I moved to the island with my husband.

I placed a pitcher of lemonade on the coffee table and poured two glasses. Mike drank thirstily and asked for more. He downed the second glass in several gulps, picked up some exam papers, and glanced through them.

"I see you're still teaching English."

"Yeah."

"Your students aren't doing too well." He held up an exam covered with red marks.

"It's tough for them when they get to the University," I replied. "English isn't taught well in the public schools."

“That’s not the real problem,” said Mike.

It didn’t surprise me that Mike thought he knew more about the problem than I did although he had no teaching experience. He was that kind of guy, extraordinarily bright and well read, but opinionated as hell.

“Well, of course, English is not their native tongue,” I said.

“Exactly,” said Mike. “They see it as an imposition of the colonial power.”

“I don’t know. Most of my students want to learn English to get ahead in the world.”

“That’s what colonialism does. It undermines the worth of native language and culture.”

I didn’t reply. He had a point, but it was a job with flexible hours that meant I could spend quality time with my daughter. Besides, I enjoyed teaching and my students liked me.

“Beautiful apartment you’ve got here,” Mike remarked. “Pfizer must be doing very well.”

I ignored this.

“If what you’re saying is that anyone teaching English is an agent of U.S. imperialism,” I said, “why are you working for an English-language newspaper?”

“I’m not working for the San Juan Star anymore.”

Come to think of it, I had not noticed Mike’s byline recently. I wondered what had happened.

“Estella left me,” Mike added.

“I’m sorry.”

“She thought she was the wife of a future Pulitzer Prize winner. But she made a mistake.”

“Mike, that’s not fair.”

Mike shrugged.

Estella, a poet and an independentista, had never struck me as a woman looking to snare a man with prospects. She was petite with a ready smile and a great sense of humor.

“Estella was in love with you,” I told him.

Mike frowned. “She wanted to have a baby.”

“But you didn’t?”

“It’s not that I don’t like kids. But it’s crazy to want to bring another human being into this miserable fucking world.”

Ten years ago I might have agreed with him, but not since my daughter Karen was born. Her existence made up for whatever was wrong with the world. Besides, if Mike had really cared about Estella, he wouldn’t be hiding behind leftwing clichés when the woman he loved wanted a baby. But it was no use trying to explain this to him.

“Why did you leave the Star?” I asked.

“I just couldn’t hack it any more. They wouldn’t let me work on an important story.”

Mike paused and began to run his fingers along the embroidered Guatemalan designs of the throw cushions on the sofa where he was seated.

“We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to,” I said.

“I want to, but you never know who’s listening.”

I looked at him. He had not changed expression.

“There’s no one here but me and my daughter,” I told him. “Jeff’s in New Orleans.”

Mike got up and in a business like fashion removed the cushions, running his fingers around each one and then around the sofa frame, before replacing them neatly.

“Mike, what are you doing?”

“It could be bugged.”

“Don’t be silly.”

He walked over to a painting by Roberto Moya depicting a mother bending over her child on a tricycle and peered at it. For a moment, I thought he was thinking about the baby he could have had with Estella.

“Moya has a special way with children,” I remarked.

“Sentimental bullshit,” said Mike. “He’s gone commercial.”

Still staring at the painting, he ran his fingers lightly round the frame. Then he removed the picture and examined the back. I noticed his right hand was shaking when he tried to replace it on the hook on the wall.

“Watch out!” I yelled, just as the picture fell with a thud. Luckily it was an oil painting that had been framed without glass.

“Calm down,” said Mike. “It didn’t break.”

“Mike, what’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing.”

“That’s OK. Just leave it there. I’ll hang it again later,” I told him.

Mike propped up the picture against the wall and sat down on the sofa.

“Carrie, I have to be careful. You remember Alfredo Jiménez, the independentista lawyer who was murdered?”

“You mean the one that defended the Teamster boss?”

“Yeah. Luis Santander.”

I nodded, remembering that Santander had been charged with corruption.

“Alfredo did a beautiful job proving his innocence,” said Mike.

He was right about the lawyer’s skill. I had followed the drama of the trial in the newspapers. Jiménez had won the case by convincing the jury that the chief witness against the labor leader, the one that alleged he saw money changing hands, was an underworld figure himself who would testify to anything the government asked to get off drug charges.

“Alfredo’s death is a great loss,” Mike continued, shaking his head. “La pérdida de un gran patriota. Did you know he lived across the street?”

“Yes. I knew him to say hello. I couldn’t believe it when he was killed. I saw the blood on the sidewalk for days.”

“Yeah. They said it was a carjacking.”

“The other theory was that Jiménez himself was involved with drug trafficking.” I pointed out.

“It’s a smear campaign.” Mike raised his voice. “The dead can’t defend themselves.”

“I never believed a word of it,” I replied. “He was such a nice man. Always smiled and asked after my daughter.”

“He became too popular after winning the case,” said Mike. “Jiménez was the only man that could have forged an effective alliance between labor and pro-independence forces. They had to cut him down.”

“So you wanted the San Juan Star to dig further?”

“Yes, but I’m telling you this in confidence.”

“I won’t tell anyone, except Jeff, of course.”

“Not even Jeff,” Mike barked.

“OK,” I replied, thinking it was best to go along. Mike was really agitated.

“I was getting close to the truth. That’s why they fired me.”

“What are you doing now?”

“I launched my own investigation a year ago. I’m close to a major breakthrough,” Mike said loudly, clenching his fist. “Someday justice will be done.”

He brought his fist down hard on the coffee table. I reached out with one hand to steady his teetering lemonade glass.

Mike took my hand in his and looked into my eyes. “Carrie, there are dark forces blocking the light of truth.”

Although the rainstorm had brought cooling breezes that took the edge off the glaring heat, he was sweating profusely. Mike had always been a man intensely absorbed in whatever interested him in the moment, it was part of his charm, but I had never seen him quite like this. I withdrew my hand. He continued talking.

“They’re following me, but I’m not afraid. They will never be able to get me. I guess they won’t be looking for me at the luxury Condado apartment of Pfizer’s Vice President for Operations in Puerto Rico,” he said with a smile.

“Mike, *who* do you think is following you?”

“Don’t worry, Carrie. I lost them just before coming here. I would never do anything to put you in danger.”

“Do you want some more lemonade?” I asked, reaching for the pitcher. Mike didn’t answer. I spilled some on the table while pouring.

“I’ll get a sponge from the kitchen,” I said, rising from my chair.

“NO, don’t go. Carrie, look at me.”

He was watching me intently.

“What is it?” I asked, sitting down again.

A streak of lightning was followed by a quick boom of thunder, loud and close. In the silence that followed came the question, “You weren’t going to make a phone call, were you, to tell them I’m here?”

“Mike, don’t talk nonsense. I’m your friend. And I don’t even know who *they* are.”

“I carry this.” Mike drew out a knife that had been concealed in his thick running sock. “Just in case.”

I sat very still, my eyes fixed on the pitcher, but I could see the knife in his hand.

“I’m a non-violent man,” continued Mike, “but I’m not stupid. The CIA caught Alfredo unarmed, but not me.”

The knife had a short handle but the blade was long and sharp.

“I can defend myself. Like this.” Mike lunged, his knife tracing an arc through the air.

I heard a wail from the back bedroom. My little girl must have been awakened by the thunder. I froze. The cries rose and fell, like the crescendos of a symphony. “Mommy, MOMMY, mommy, MOMMYYYYY!”

Mike laid the knife in front of him on the table. “What’s wrong?” he asked. “Sounds like a baby crying.”

“That’s my daughter. She’ll be five the day after tomorrow.”

“Why don’t you pick it up?” he asked, looking puzzled, as though he hadn’t heard me, and didn’t remember Karen or the lovely hand-crocheted baby dress with matching booties he and Estella had given me when she was born.

“My daughter has a fever,” I told him. “Now that she’s awake I’ve got to take her to the doctor. We have to leave now.” My fingers gripped the wooden arms of the chair to stop the shaking of my hands.

“I can take a hint,” said Mike. “Far be it from me to make you neglect your motherly duties.”

He smiled at me, slipped the knife back in his thick sock and got up.

I rose from my chair. “It’s been so nice seeing you again,” I said, giving him a peck on the cheek. “Take care of yourself.”

“Don’t worry, I will.” He glanced down at his bulging sock.

I said goodbye and let him out. My daughter was still screaming, but I waited until I heard the elevator open and close. Then I latched and bolted the door.

I had to sit down for a moment on the chair in the foyer until my knees stopped shaking before running down the hallway to my daughter’s room. I lifted her into my arms, balancing her weight on my hip, cuddling her head against my shoulder. She quieted immediately. Her

body was warm. For a moment I thought that the lie I told Mike about Karen having a fever had become a self-fulfilling prophecy, but then I realized that it was just the normal warmth of a child waking from her nap. I could smell the sweet sweat on her hair. Still holding her tight, I reached over and bent one of the bedroom blinds down with my finger to look out the window that faced the street.

Water from the heavy downpour was still rushing along the gutters. Mike emerged from under the canopy that shaded the entrance to my building onto the sidewalk. He stopped at the curb, and looked to the right and the left before crossing the street to the other side. I watched him walk toward the traffic light at the corner, with that loping gait I knew so well. He still looked like a college kid with shorts, old tennis shoes and a tangled mop of curly hair. Just as I was about to let the blinds close, a well-dressed man in a suit crossed over to the same side of the street and walked in the same direction, about ten paces behind Mike. They both disappeared round the corner. I shuddered and held my daughter closer.