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The Southernmost Point

IT'S THE SOUTHERNMOST POINT. THE PLACE CLOSEST TO HAVANA. A LANDMARK of black stone in the shape of a bullet where an inscription reads: 90 miles to Cuba. The closest point. You can take a boat in the morning knowing full well that by noon you'll disembark in Havana. From here, Cuba is so close yet so remote.

Tourists snap photos to take home. A Cuban sells ice cones on the corner. Some Haitians hack at coconuts with machetes.

A woman walking on the beach loses her balance and falls down into the sand. She begins to wipe off her skin. She scrubs her pores hard, reinventing the old formula of deep cleansing. I walk toward her; I want to see her up close. I'm a little more curious. I try to focus on her face blurred by the distance. She decides to stand up. She puts on a see-through tunic. She loses her balance again. She looks straight at me and disappears. I walk to the exact spot where she was. All that's left is a depression in the sand where she was sitting imprinted by her behind and thighs. I turn around and see she's decided to return. Has she forgotten something? Does she wish to ask a question? I want to hide. I feel embarrassed that she's found me inspecting the imprint she's left. I hurry off. I feel tense.

In the distance are some boats named affectionately after women, a country that's longed for, the patron saint of the sea, or special emotions. The fishermen are pulling up their nets full of shellfish and the sky of pale blue reflects on the emerald-colored water. Cuban men continue selling ice cones on the corner as more tourists arrive to ponder the fact — 90 miles to Cuba. Cuba really is so close.

At first sight, this speck of a town is one of narrow streets, vintage houses and hotels situated side-by-side; hippies, ailing and past their prime, into reading fortunes, tattoo artists, Rock-n-Roll clubs, souvenir shops, gay bars, and drunks sleeping in the alleys. Then there are muscle men with serpents coiled around their necks as if they're the ultimate accessories, men with birds sitting on their shoulders and way too many tourists.

The name of this place is Key West — “Cayo Hueso” or Bone Island. That's what the Spaniards found when they arrive—an immense number of human bones scattered all over the island and not a single witness to tell the story. Here time passes slowly. As we meander, the leaves of the breadfruit

Calabash

tree fall to the ground. We smell the leaves of the key lime trees, and the azucenas-lilies bordering the sidewalk. The houses of high ceilings, the mingling of the mango, avocado and rubber trees all reaching different heights. Looking up, we see electric wires, seagulls and pelicans perched on them and falcons nesting on the tops of the poles. I pass through quite a number of narrow streets before I happen upon a cemetery. A stone reads, "I told you I was sick." Because of the island's rocky terrain, practically all the mausoleums are above ground. A door to one is slightly ajar. Its inscription states: "Here is what remains of Elena Hoyos Mesa, seven years dead and dressed in her wedding dress." Finally, I come across a posthumous memorial, a kind of an elegy for the sailors who died in Havana harbor in 1898.

I decide to go back to the hotel. There are flowers in the bedroom. A divider of big glass blocks separates the shower from the rest of the bathroom. I notice squares of soap and immaculate white towels. My lover awaits me taking a nap. After I shower I cuddle up next to his side. He touches my breasts and begins to kiss me.

He finds my lips
And his start to travel
The encounter more
And more of my body
He kisses my total universe.

Late afternoon, we walk to Sloppy Joes. I want to see the bar where Hemingway got drunk and shout indignities. In the bar, the walls of natural wood extend to a high ceiling with old fans that still work. Two walls are covered in black and white photos. Hemingway with Cary Grant in Havana. Hemingway with Ingrid Bergman. Hemingway with a young Fidel Castro, both showing off their catch.

We decide to go to the writer's house, the one built under the supervision of Pauline, one of his wives. It was the first house with a swimming pool in all of Key West. Then, like now, it was completely overrun by cats, cats with six toes. This genetic mutation continues to afflict Hemingway's cats. They urinate in Pauline's swimming pool, irreverent as ever; they lounge on the couple's bed, sleep on the furniture, and in the library on the showcases where the manuscripts of the author are exhibited.

I went to the public bathroom to splash a little water on myself. I turned on the faucet and tossed water on my face, neck and arms. As I left the bathroom, there she was. The young woman from the beach, walking on Hemingway's patio. It seemed as though she hardly touched the ground, that she was swaying in the early evening air. She saw me and stopped. Without saying a word, she froze. Her eyes fixed on me, but they gazed at the horizon within me. I was scared. I took off looking for my lover, I found him petting one of the cats.

"Did you see that woman?" I asked.

“Which woman?” he asked.

We decide to walk to a restaurant named Cuba-Cuba. They serve the most exquisite oysters with lemon, empanadas filled with ham, conch balls, white rice, black beans, chicken soup, and the dessert everyone associate with that region — key lime pie.

“Fly to Havana. \$10 only 30 minutes on Q Airlines.” The restaurant served as the local travel agency to buy plane tickets to Havana. One of the ads decorated a wall of the restaurant. In a photo, the owner of the “Fly to Havana” enterprise in front of the door to the establishment wore a white guayabera. His son Bert stood to his right, I smile at my lover pleased with our vacation, then in the distance I spot her again. It is she, the young woman who was on the beach. Her black hair cut short shines like lighting bugs in the night. This young woman, the form of her slowly approached. I thought, why does this woman create so much tension? At the same moment, I said to my lover “I think it’s time to go to the Institute San Carlos.”

We paid the bill and made our way through a maze of tourists, jugglers, street vendors, magicians, fire eaters, the ‘believe it or not’ theater, T-shirt stands, and balconies where women were twisting extensions into the hair of customers.

We entered the Institute. I walked to the end of the hallway while my lover sniffed around the different galleries. I walked into an auditorium. It was dark. I followed the wall with my fingers until I found a switch and turned on the light. I walked around, lit a cigarette, and sat in one seat after another. Occasionally, I went into the hallway to get a drink from the water fountain. I was tense. I remembered studying nights at the university for a whole semester devoting myself entirely to José Martí — his essays and a volume of poetry titled *Versos sencillos*. I thought of my son listening, over and over again, to the rap of Guajira Guantanamera by the Fugees. I could almost feel the energy of Martí and that of the Cuban men and women who had frequented this place.

I told myself “Here I am, close to Martí, yet it cannot be because to be closer to Martí would bring the sensation of absorbing a buzz from the hot tunnels of these streets, a buzz that would build up inside of me until I myself would burst with excitement.”

I was sure that I saw her on the stage, or was it a reflection of my imagination or a shadow? A deep horrific terror invaded me, and I placed my hand over my heart. Naturally it was beating hard, very very hard. My hands froze, and each second seemed like an hour. Out of instinct I fled the room before I suffocated. I looked around for my lover. I found him in one of the galleries. To please me, he caressed my head. He embraced me and said “That’s enough for museums today, but before we leave I want you to see this last exhibit.” He took my arm and off we went.

“Key West: Images of the Past.” There were photos of a procession. Cubans moving toward a cemetery celebrating “El Grito de Yara;” the Cuban Club on Duval Street; two black boys selling lemons; Hemingway posing with his family in a rare intimate photo; more black kids diving into the sea with the intention of bringing up the coins tossed to the bottom by the tourists. One photo was

of Elena Hoyos Mesa. Her remains had been found in her lover's house seven years after her death, she'd been buried in her wedding dress.

I was surprised to see a photo of some people in Smokey Joe's around the 1940's. There were drinking double martinis and offering toasts for a Merry Christmas. There were nearly twenty men: the only woman was Chichi Navarro who was dressed in a white see-through tunic very much in the style of the day. Chichi Navarro, was the woman on the beach.

"Do you know who she is?" I asked my lover.

"No. And you?" he asked.

I said. "Yes."

That night we made love, not once but several times. I adored the taste of his skin. There isn't a man existing on the face of the earth who doesn't radiate a glow when you suck his skin with the tongue, lips and whole mouth. He fell asleep, serene and happy. I was exhausted but I still couldn't sleep. I turned on the television and watched the weather report. It was announced that rains and thunderstorms were on the way from the Gulf of Mexico. I closed the windows and I went to sleep. In the middle of the night a thunderstorm erupted and then the lights went out.

The next day we went to have breakfast at a restaurant with a huge patio and thick old trees. A few looked a little pitiful, others were robust and healthy. In the center of the patio, parrots screeched in a cage. Plastic tables and chairs were scattered across the spacious patio. The bar was made from zinc — it was really chic. We decided to have breakfast on the patio. A gay Cuban waiter took our order. He was overweight, outgoing, and cute. We ate glorified hotdogs with coleslaw and drank coffee. The morning was already hot and extremely humid. I felt sleepy.

I decided to go the bathroom to refresh myself. I turned on the facet and splashed water on my face, neck and arms. When I lifted my head, I felt her presence. She was there. I couldn't see her, but I was sure of her presence just as I'm sure of my own existence. I turned around and there she was. Chichi Navarro with black hair, wearing a white tunic. I opened my lips and forced my best smile. The parrots started screeching loudly.

I went to our table and devoured my food. We drank cranberry juice with rum and lime. We ate key lime pie with two inches of meringue, and then I asked my lover, "Do you want to go to the Southernmost Point?"

"Sure," he said, and off we started.

We walked the length of Duval Street to the end of the sidewalk until we found the black landmark. The Southernmost Point.

Out there, tourists for its plazas, fortresses, convents, monasteries, churches and its lack of everything are admiring 90 miles away, faithful Havana. Here we are wishing to be there.

My lover bought an ice cone and began to converse with some tourist. I headed for the beach; I wanted to find her again. I walked out onto the hot sand, and there she was cleansing her skin the

old-fashioned way. She saw me. She pointed at the horizon and said:

“On the horizon you will see the Cuban map under a glistening sun surrounded by water clear and deep. You will see the eleven thousand little islands, cays, and rocks that dot the coastline. All the many swamps and caves. I have forgotten the countryside — the rivers and the mountains — but I haven’t forgotten its dreams.

“You have a lover whom I covet. I envy you because you have him so close — you can touch him and have him whenever you please. Meanwhile, there on the other side of the horizon, my lover is trapped in time, and I’m trapped here on this island of tourists and bones, under this gleaming sun, and with all this immense love.

“If you go to Havana, please tell him I am waiting for him — here at this landmark of black stone.”

The next day, we left Key West. We were happy and had beautiful suntans. We made various stops along the road. We promised ourselves that we would return to that same room with white towels and squares of fragrant soap. We crossed the seven-mile bridge. From the road, the manatees could be seen looking for food near the swamps. Deer were pursuing swamp birds. We discovered Annie’s Beach, a small cove at the edge of the swamp. There we dove into the tepid waters.

A typical American family arrived in a van with a dog, old folks, and the kids. My lover came upon some fishermen and started a conversation with them. I just continued to float on the water. With the sky arched over me, I felt happy and optimistic. I wanted to go back to the Southernmost Point. I wanted to go back to look for her. To find her.

