

## PART ONE

---



## *The Ring and the Altar*

EVERYONE WANTS THE HOUSE IN TOWN. Ten half siblings have claim to it, and the fight goes back a long time now, to 1998. A deed to the house would help, as would a will from their deceased mother, Vicenta Petrona Sáez, but the house has neither. Vicenta Petrona, whom everyone, including her children, called Cucusa, bore ten children to five common law spouses over her lifetime. The third of these spouses was Orfilio Ruíz, the love of her life, with whom she had five children. By the standards of her day this was Vicenta Petrona's most successful relationship, lasting over a decade and including the acquisition of the house in which she lived the rest of her life. Cucusa and Orfilio's five children consider the house theirs, purchased by their mother and father in 1940, but their half siblings see it differently.

One of them has lived in the house as a squatter for a decade. Getting her out will be very hard. This is revolutionary Cuba, where housing is guaranteed and tenants have rights to the spaces they occupy, even when their status is poorly documented. Furthermore, the missing deed and lack of instructions from Cucusa give the squatting half sister a unique opportunity to call the place her own. Housing in Cuba is very tight, adding to the difficulty of coaxing someone to voluntarily leave a spacious ranch house. It would be possible to sell the house with a new deed, but revolutionary housing regulations don't allow one to be issued without the consent of the squatting half sister. House sales in Cuba are incredibly complicated anyway, so things are stuck.

The house is in the town of Sierra Morena, on Cuba's north coast, between touristy Varadero Beach and the town of Sagua la Grande, to the east. A highway called the North Circuit travels this coast, which is mostly fallow sugar country. Sierra Morena has the good fortune to sit on the North

Circuit, and all around are farmers trying to figure out how to make the best of the quickly shifting economy. The only thing happening there is the highway itself, and even that is pretty dead.

Local dump trucks, tractors, and other diesel vehicles, most of them government property, are what rattle along the North Circuit today. But when I first visited in 1999, at the end of a decade of crushing shortages, you could spend most of a morning sitting on the side of the road and not see a single vehicle. There were horses and horse-drawn carts and plenty of people walking, but no vehicles. Nearly twenty years later, maybe ten cars go past in an hour, most of them “company cars” ferrying people midway up the ladder at the Ministry of Agriculture (MINAG) or the Ministry of the Interior (MININT). The MINAG guys, dressed in snappy polo shirts and artificially distressed jeans, chase elusive government quotas for grapefruit and pineapple production at repurposed sugar cooperatives. The MININT people, in their two-tone olive uniforms, hunt among the coastal mangroves for the equally elusive, though more frequently found, would-be inner tube refugee. Gas is short in Sierra Morena, but these days you can hire a local driver to take you to Havana for \$80, which is madness only a foreign visitor like me could afford. Locals have a hard time getting farther than three kilometers west, to the municipal seat of Corralillo, because bus tickets anywhere else have gotten so expensive over the last decade.

Sierra Morena sits on a little steppe on a low hill, for which the term *mountain* [*sierra*] is tongue in cheek, the joke long lost. The town overlooks a lagoon twelve miles wide, on the far side of which are sandy keys and the open sea of Cuba’s north shore. At Sierra Morena, the North Circuit seeks high ground as it dodges farmland that was once swampland and still goes under when a hurricane hits, which is pretty regularly. Hurricane Irma blew through in 2017, causing serious damage. Hurricane Michelle was significant in 2001, and Kate, in November 1985, is remembered with dread. Hurricane after hurricane is remembered before that. Climbing the low hill, the highway runs straight at town before veering back toward the sea, ultimately acknowledging Sierra Morena at but a glancing point. The town is just out of view.

Cucusa’s house is close to the highway, with only a row of structures and a playground separating it from the rattle of the road. It sits on a paved street and has a red tile roof and long front veranda. Tall windows dressed in painted iron bars run the length of the veranda, and in their midst is the double front door. Inside this door is the central room of the house, which is both a dining room and living space. The ceilings go right up to the rafters,

which are bare. In the corner facing the street is an altar devoted to San Lázaro—Lazarus the Beggar. The inside walls have no paneling, and you can see the siding is rough-milled wood. Bedrooms lie to either side of the great room. At the back is a kitchen that is attached to the house and enclosed; many in town are not. The cement floor, an important in-town detail, made Cucusa's daughter, Isidra, especially proud. An ample yard, with fruit trees and an open well once topped with a winch, is beyond the kitchen. Sitting on its hill, the house has suffered little lasting harm from hurricanes over the eighty years the family has owned it. Ultimately, the house couldn't withstand the storm that followed Cucusa's death.

The house was probably built between 1910 and 1920, though I do not know for sure. Sierra Morena itself was established in 1888, when a hurricane wiped out settlements on the shore of the lagoon.<sup>1</sup> The house was decades old when Cucusa and Orfilio bought it in 1940, shortly after the birth of their fourth child, Isidra. They were thirty-some years old, and it was the year Orfilio won a huge purse in the numbers game. "He loved gambling of all sorts," said Isidra. "If he could have, he would have bet us children on the numbers game. My father, Orfilio, bought the house with the winnings. He paid cash." Orfilio wasn't alone in his love of gambling, and even today, despite government persecution, the numbers game thrives in revolutionary Cuba. It is called *la bolita*, or *charada china*, and its numbers runners work in every neighborhood of every town and city in Cuba. Their daily rounds take them to nearly every house in the country. Orfilio bought the house because it was in town, close to the highway, had a solid roof, a well, and room for his growing family. "But more than anything," said Isidra, "he bought it for the cockfighting ring behind the house. He loved cockfights more than he loved the numbers game."

On fight days, back before the revolution came and the cockfighting went underground, the house became an appendage of the ring. Orfilio would preside, betting and drinking, while Cucusa, her mother, and her children, sold concessions. "It was the 1940s," said Isidra, "and Sierra Morena was socially segregated, with separate social clubs in town. The Lyceum was there for whites, and Union and Brotherhood for Blacks." Orfilio was one of the lightest people anyone could imagine calling "Black," so he was called *mulato*. He was light even for those called mulato, and so he was referred to as *mulato claro*, or "light mulatto." This is the way Cuban people racialize one another, adding to "Black" and "white" a palette of browns, whites, yellows, reds, and even blues. These are then mixed with shadings of great variety, from "dark"

to “light” to “light-light.” A person is eyed from head to foot, and in a breath’s time their skin, hair, lips, eyes, and nose are combined into a racialized description like “a reddish-white guy with bad-ish [frizzy] hair and a *nose that, well, you know . . .*” [*un blanco rojizo con pelo medio malo y una nariz que ya tu sabes . . .*]. That is how I am generally described. Lighter, slender features are valued, and darker, fuller features are denigrated in a vocabulary at once explicit and rich in the powers of insinuation.

In this hyper skin-conscious and feature-conscious world, the cockfights were special. “They were one of the few gatherings in town where people of all shades could mingle,” said Isidra. “Some with linen suits and shined shoes, others with muddy boots and clothes from working their fields.” Better-dressed folks would have come from nearby Corralillo, the municipal seat, while the others would have come from the surrounding hills. In the 1940s, the Corralillo folks would have lined the street with Buick Roadmasters, Chrysler Highlanders, and Dodge Coronets, while locals would have tied their horses to the veranda posts. The Corralillo folks would have been lighter, if not to say whiter, while folks from town would have been darker, if not more Black. “Everyone talked, played, and mingled,” she said.

“Orfilio left my mother and five young children for a lover he had in Havana. He left us the cockfighting ring,” Isidra remembers it in the middle of the yard. To one side was the well, to the other a wing comprising two rooms and an outhouse. Banks of bleachers, four seats high, surrounded the ring. “The fruit trees you see there now? My mother took care of those trees, so the ring was shaded, and during most of the year there was food: oranges in spring, mangoes and guavas in summer, tangerines in fall, *fruta bomba* [papaya], and coconuts all year round.

“Orfilio left her in 1943, and Cucusa made the most of it. Sundays would roll around and the yard would fill up, first with the men who brought their roosters, then with betting fans, and finally the spectators.” As a child, Isidra remembers running around playing tricks on her siblings and mother and, when she got older, on the bettors themselves. “I was a handful! The smartest of us all! I was as fast as anyone. I had a runaway [*traviesa*] streak and loved messing with people. I was too much for my mother and my grandmother, Ma’ Isidra, and I did what I wanted. They needed my help, but did I care?” She would use the crowd to vanish. “I would run to visit cousins or friends, or simply hide. Once, I made it all the way to the beach and played a trick on one of Batista’s bosses. Once, from one of my hiding places, I saw my father at the ring, with his lover from Havana. After he left us, he came back once

or twice, to bet.” In my years of listening to Isidra, I have pictured this wild little girl many times.

Her sister, Eulalia, was two years younger and followed Isidra loyally. They were the two youngest, the girls. Their brothers were formidable figures; the eldest, Orfilito, had traveled as far as Camagüey looking for work in the *zafra* [sugar harvest] and eventually settled there. During the late 1950s, when the anti-Batista struggle was in full swing, the next two oldest brothers got involved. Máximo and Roberto were militants in the local clandestine organization. They talk about it now, as do their sisters; in fact, they boast about it, because in Cuba the clandestine movement came to power. After 1959, Máximo and Roberto were town heroes for their roles in supporting Fidel Castro’s 26th of July Movement and toppling Batista and his local bosses.

Cucusa and Ma’ Isidra worked the concessions that made a chunk of money when the ring was open. “They sold sandwiches, whatever was on the fruit trees, and sips of aguardiente [cane liquor]. Otherwise, they watched the ring, the couples, the people from far away, and us kids.

“They needed my help, but I was always on the loose. Cucusa was pulled away by visitors who wanted her attention in the living room, at the altar to San Lázaro [Lazarus the Beggar]. They would ask her permission to approach it and ask her for the proper way to address San Lázaro, or ask if they could make a donation. These were people who had come a distance to the fights, who couldn’t drop by whenever, people from Corralillo, or farmers on horseback from farther inland or from the next hill over, which everyone in town considered far enough to be *monte* [wild]. My mother helped all these people who were looking for comfort in times of illness. She healed them.

“Local folks were here all the time because Cucusa left the door to the house open so that people could drop in. This town knew Cucusa’s San Lázaro, and she would find them any time of day kneeling right there, where you see the altar today.” These people knew Cucusa’s San Lázaro from his appearances at feasts Cucusa held for him, where they also called him Babalú Ayé.

On the altar were two statues of San Lázaro. The Catholic-inspired figurines show Lazarus the Beggar as a scraggly-haired pauper with spindly limbs. His legs are bloodied with open sores, which also mar his chest, Jesus-like. Dogs gather around him, to lick his wounds. His shoulders are hunched over crutches, and he leans weakly to one side. He wears only a tattered purple tunic tied around his waist as a loincloth. In other versions of this figure the tunic is made of burlap sackcloth. Despite his privation, his expression is serene. His eyes stare forward blankly, focused not on his discomfort but on

the future that awaits him, which is at the side of Abraham the Father in heaven. A halo sometimes crowns his head. Those who keep statues of Lazarus the Beggar sometimes make little purple capes for them, to emphasize the exalted status of the saint.

Cucusa's altar had two statues of San Lázaro. The smaller one was nearly hidden in the back corner of the high shelf of the altar, surrounded by a frill of paper flowers. This little San Lázaro was the shabbier of the two, though this was hidden by a homemade cape of purple satin.

The larger statue of San Lázaro was on the lowest shelf. Both figurines were dressed in burlap pants, chests bare, their capes covering their shoulders. Their faces were losing their contours, blurred as if corroded, and whatever paint might have once defined eyes, lips, cheeks, and beards now ran in brownish streaks.

The two San Lázaro statuettes shared the altar with other Catholic-inspired figurines. On the lowest shelf next to the figure of San Lázaro was a statue of the Virgin of Charity—La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre—Cuba's patroness. She was dressed in homemade capes and shawls of light blue and golden satin and lace. On the middle shelf, in a place of honor, was a statuette of Santa Bárbara—Saint Barbara—with her crown, her red dress, and her white lace shawls, her chalice and her sword. Santa Bárbara's place alone in the middle of the altar spoke to the central role she occupied in Cucusa's healing, especially when she feasted San Lázaro and her other santos.<sup>2</sup> Each shelf was set with lace cloths and outlined by plastic and paper flowers.

For many years after meeting the two San Lázaro figurines, I figured they were redundant, the older and more deteriorated one replaced by the newer, larger figurine; the older then removed to the top shelf. That was before I could see the two statues as "doubled," that they were versions of more than one saint. The New Testament gives us two Lazaruses. There is Lazarus the Beggar, who is sick and pleads at the gate of a rich man while dogs lick his sores. The beggar dies, but angels carry him to the side of Abraham the Father in heaven, while the rich man dies and goes to hell. This is the Lazarus pictured in the statues—crippled, afflicted, and wretched, along with his dogs. The New Testament depicts another Lazarus, one who dies but is then resurrected by Jesus after four days in the tomb. This is Lazarus of Bethany, who was himself wealthy enough to turn beggars away. The crucial difference between the two stories for Cubans—not just those who frequented Cucusa's altar but Cubans all over—is that Lazarus the Beggar overcomes death by going to heaven, while Lazarus of Bethany overcomes death by being resur-



rected to life on earth. In Cuban popular religion, the beggar Lazarus does not go to heaven but survives death to return to life on earth.

The statues on Cucusa's altar were a compound of these two biblical figures, a resurrected beggar who overcame death twice (once by going to heaven, then once by returning to life on earth). In Cuban popular praise for San Lázaro there is never any mention of Lazarus of Bethany, the resurrected. The inflection is emphatically on the adversity of poverty and illness, and the tenacity to survive shown by the beggar Lazarus. Lazarus of Bethany disappears in Cuba, and so does the rich man who goes to hell in the story of Lazarus the Beggar. In Isidra's understanding of San Lázaro, it was all about life in the here and now—no one goes to heaven, no one goes to hell, and San Lázaro was a power to help people thrive in life. The Cuban version is the braiding together of the two stories, the combination of poverty, illness, death, and return—to this life. But these two Lazarus stories are not the reason there were two statuettes on Cucusa's altar. As I said, no one ever speaks about Lazarus of Bethany.

This doubled resurrected santo, triumphant over illness and the grave, was added to yet again in Cuba and made more. The doubled santo became a "compounded" entity, because to the resurrected beggar was added the magnificent and forbidding person of Babalú Ayé, sovereign of illness and healing. Babalú Ayé commanded illness and healing for people who came to Cuba as slaves from West Africa, especially for the Ewe and Fon peoples of Old Dahomey from whom Cucusa and her neighbors were descended. Babalú Ayé bears the title *orísá*, meaning "law giver" or "sovereign." He presides over illness and healing and decides exceptions to the rules of sickness and recovery.

Babalú Ayé came to Cuba with people who were enslaved in what are today Benin, Togo, and Nigeria. In the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, these were lands known for great cities and royal courts that impressed European navigators, explorers, traders, and slavers. These were the city-states and kingdoms of Allada, Oyo, and Dahomey, the latter of which is sung about energetically in Sierra Morena. The city-states were rivals, and each sold the other's people as slaves to Europeans, who only exacerbated their enmities.<sup>3</sup> Allada, Oyo, and Dahomey provided Spanish Cuba with over three hundred and fifty thousand enslaved people over three centuries, most of them forcibly brought to Cuba late in the European trade, in the 1800s.<sup>4</sup> The fall of Oyo in 1834, for example, led to thousands of refugees and defenseless people being enslaved and shipped to the Western Hemisphere, especially

Cuba and Brazil.<sup>5</sup> In Cuba in the nineteenth century, these people and hundreds of thousands of others were enslaved on the vast sugar plain just to the south of Sierra Morena.<sup>6</sup> To these people, and their descendants, Babalú Ayé was also known as Asojano and Sakpata, names used today in Sierra Morena.

In Cuba the West African god of mortal illness—be it smallpox, leprosy, or cancer—became Babalú Ayé, sovereign of illness and healing, master of pestilence and recovery. Babalú Ayé can deploy illness, and he can withdraw it. Babalú Ayé is pestilence itself, and also the sovereign power to overcome it. By commanding illness inside and out, he decides exceptions to the incontrovertible course of disease and suffering. For this Babalú Ayé bears the title *orisá*.

“But Babalú Ayé doesn’t ask for much,” said Isidra. “A yearly feast, pennies in alms, and that you never forget, or look aside, from the afflicted and ill. Not a lot to ask. But if you do forget illness, yours or the illness from which your parents suffered, or from which your own children suffer, forget so that you turn away from the ill around you—for *that* Babalú Ayé will bring illness to you again. And who will you turn to then? Back to Babalú Ayé. So why suffer the long way around? Stay with Babalú Ayé, with the ill, with illness, and he will always be at your side.”

A compound santo, now adding the *orisá* Babalú Ayé to San Lázaro the Doubled. The santo who overcomes death is joined to the *orisá* of illness and healing. A beggar sovereign, a santo-*orisá*: San Lázaro–Babalú Ayé. It was this compound entity of which the two statues spoke, but I was able to arrive at this view of things only with time spent in orbit of that altar, in stories and as he appeared at parties thrown in his honor in Sierra Morena every December 17. These parties are called *bembés*, and Cucusa started hosting one in honor of San Lázaro–Babalú Ayé in 1943. Those who attended Cucusa’s *bembé* hoped for a face-to-face encounter with San Lázaro–Babalú Ayé, to place their worries personally at his feet.

Broken, infested, worn down to a pair of sackcloth pants, the Beggar Sovereign is whom visitors sought at Cucusa’s altar. They sought the leper-*orisá* humbly, lowly, as low as the Pestilent One himself, with his sores and dogs. His leprosy endears him to those afflicted with less terrible illness. In 1950, when Isidra was a child running past the altar, children were dying in their first months of life; the whole island was sick with malaria, worms, toothaches, arthritis, and leprosy itself. Nine years later the revolution would set out to change all that.

Visitors to Cucusa’s house could encounter San Lázaro–Babalú Ayé at the altar, perhaps on their way to bet on a bird or have a few sips of cane liquor

with acquaintances from the town over. They might be moved to leave a penny at the altar, perhaps with the thought of an ill parent or child back home. If Cucusa tended to them, which meant bringing them close to the assurances only San Lázaro–Babalú Ayé could provide, she would invite them to her bembé on December 17, San Lázaro's Day. If they accepted, they might promise a bottle of aguardiente or a cake for the bembé. More serious cases promised a goat or ram to offer the santo-orisá or one of his peers on his day. On December 17, they would be brought face to face with the santo-orisá and his healing touch.

Her children, her cockfighting ring, and tending to people at her altar kept Cucusa busy. But it was the bembé she hosted for San Lázaro–Babalú Ayé that she worked for the year through. It was a promise she made to the sovereign of illness one day in 1943 when she almost lost a second child to fever and asthma. Every year on December 17 she would gather her community to sing his praises, and from that year forward she never missed a December 17 as long as she lived. The party grew until it became the only bembé for San Lázaro–Babalú Ayé worth attending in town. The fate of her household, of her children, of her community, rode on the love and discipline Cucusa brought to tending San Lázaro–Babalú Ayé and those who sought him every day.

The year Cucusa died, 1998, there was no bembé for San Lázaro–Babalú Ayé at her house, but the next year, 1999, her daughter Isidra successfully hosted the feast there. Notwithstanding Isidra's best efforts since then, over the next decade other feasts sprang up on December 17 to fill the void left by Cucusa in Sierra Morena, and by 2009 the feud between Cucusa's children had their bembé teetering on the brink of collapse. Isidra was determined to keep the bembé going, and she often turned to memories of Cucusa and those who came before her to help steer the bembé forward. She recalled specific bembés from her childhood, and time and again sought a figure alongside her mother. This was Tomasa Cairo, Sierra Morena's beloved hostess of bembé parties. It was Tomasa Cairo who brought bembés out of nineteenth-century slavery and gave the santos-orisás a twentieth-century life.