



The Long Goodbye



My family's Cuban exile and the world we built

TERESITA VARGAS



PINAR DEL RÍO, CUBA · 1957

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MY FAMILY'S CUBAN EXILE
AND THE WORLD WE BUILT

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PRIVATELY PRINTED FOR THE VARGAS FAMILY · MIAMI

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Standing, left to right: Rafael, Mercedes, Elena, and Alejandro Vargas, with Teresita in front. The vega, Pinar del Río, circa 1957.

INTRODUCTION

I am seventy-five now, an age at which people expect you to have made your peace with things. What I have not made peace with is how little of this my grandchildren actually know, versus how much they think they know. That gap is the whole reason this book exists.

I've told this story before, at christenings and anniversaries, once at a quinceañera nobody had asked me to speak at. I tell it the way my mother taught me without meaning to teach me anything: compressed, exact, landing on whichever detail carries the most weight and stopping there. The farm. The trucks. Two suitcases and a wicker basket. A widow at forty-four who turned a coffee can of savings into a restaurant nobody thought would survive its first year on Calle Ocho. You have all heard some version of this at some table, over some flan, and you have filed it away the way you file away a fact about a relative — true, but flat, the way a photograph is true but flat. This book is my attempt to give you the other three dimensions before I am no longer available to be asked.

Here is the shape of it, so we can dispense with it and get to the part that matters. My family had a tobacco farm in Pinar del Río that three generations had built and that a government took in a single night in 1961 — politely, with a knock on the door before the confiscation, a detail I still can't decide is civilized or obscene. We left the country a year and a half later, on a morning when two hundred people stood in a glass room dressed for church at five a.m., pretending it was an ordinary trip. We arrived in a Miami that smelled like jet fuel and cut

grass and did not know what to do with us. My father died on a Tuesday in March 1963, of a heart he'd been ignoring for years, buried under four lines in a weekly paper that never knew what he had once owned, because we hadn't told it. My mother, Elena, was forty-four and widowed with three children and a savings she had never mentioned to anyone, including my father, and out of it she built El Rincón Cubano, which by 1976 had a neon sign over Calle Ocho and, some years later, lines out the door on Sundays that the city eventually sent a police officer to manage.

That is the shape. It fits on a card. What I want you to have is the weather inside it.

WHAT THE INDEX CARD LEAVES OUT

It leaves out that my mother ironed our clothes at eleven at night before we left Havana, so we would not arrive in a new country looking like people things had happened to. It leaves out that a woman in olive green took her wedding ring at the airport and that my mother said thank you, in a voice with no face behind it, because she had decided in advance that thank you was the correct move on a board she had not chosen to play on. It leaves out that my father, who had run sixty families' livelihoods and a bank account most of the province envied, spent his first eighteen months in Miami asking men he barely knew for work, and coming back most days with nothing. It leaves out that my mother did not cry at his funeral where anyone could see her, and that I have spent five drafts trying to name the look on her face instead.

None of that is on the card. None of it was on the card at your weddings either — not because I was hiding it, but because a toast

isn't built to hold it, and neither, it turns out, is a family's oral history after enough retelling. Facts survive; the feel of things does not, unless somebody does the unglamorous work of getting it onto the page before it's gone. I am doing that work now because seventy-five is an honest age to notice you are the last one who remembers what the dogs sounded like before the soldiers.

If there is one person I most want you to understand by the last page, it is my mother. Not the woman in the photograph behind the register at El Rincón Cubano, gracious and camera-ready, but the one who counted eighty dollars off a casket the morning she buried her husband and never mentioned it again, though eighty dollars was never small to a woman who had once sewn her own rings into a hem. She rebuilt a life for four people out of a country that no longer had a place for her, using nothing but a ledger, a good memory for prices, and a refusal to let anyone watch her do the arithmetic. Whatever my own life became afterward — and you know something of what your grandfather and I built, brick by literal brick — the arithmetic was hers first. I only learned to read it by watching over her shoulder.

This is that watching, written down. It is not the sentimental version. She would not have wanted that, and neither, honestly, do I.

Teresita Vargas

I

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SALIDA DEFINITIVA

BEFORE 1957–JUNE 1961

The Night the Trucks Came

Three generations of Vargas tobacco ended in the time it took four men to walk from the road to the gate.

I can still tell you what the dogs sounded like before I can tell you what the soldiers said.

That is how memory kept it — the barking first, then the light swinging across the ceiling of the room I shared with Mercedes, then everything else arriving after, in no order I trust completely. I was eight. I have spent forty years being told, gently, by people who love me, that a child that age cannot really remember a night like this one. I have stopped arguing with them. I only know what came back when I closed my eyes to write it down, and it came back whole.

We had not been waiting for that exact night, but we had been waiting. That much I understood even at eight, the way children understand weather before they know the word for it. Since spring the grownups had stopped finishing sentences in front of us. Two



PASSPORT ISSUED TO THE AUTHOR · HAVANA · JUNE 1961

1959-1961

- 1959 The government changes hands.
- 1960 The first land-reform law reaches Pinar del Río.
- SEP 1961 The trucks come for the Vargas finca.

farms over, the Alonsos’ sheds had been inventoried by men with clipboards who called my father “compañero” like an accusation. My mother had begun sewing her rings into the hem of a good dress. I watched her do it without being told why, only that I should not mention it to my aunt, who talked.

So when the trucks came, past midnight in September, headlights cut, only their engines giving them away on the last stretch of the drive, some part of the house was already braced. But knowing a storm is coming and standing in it are different things. Nobody was ready for the sound of two flatbed trucks stopping on the gravel below our window.

They did not run. That surprised me even then. In my imagination, built from stories I’d overheard, I had made them into something closer to a storm than to men. Instead they walked up our front steps almost carefully, rifles slung rather than raised, and the one in front — older, with a clipboard of his own — knocked. He knocked. My father told me years later that this was the detail that undid him most: a man come to take everything he owned, and still, from some leftover manners, knocking first.

WHAT EACH OF THEM DID NEXT

My father met them on the porch in his undershirt, trousers pulled on but not his shirt, and I remember thinking he looked unprotected in a way I’d never seen, though I couldn’t have said protected from what. The man with the clipboard read from it in the flat voice of someone reading a thing he’d already read many times that week. The finca, the curing barns, the equipment, the accounts at the bank in Pinar del Río — none of it belonged to my father any longer. It belonged, he said, to

the people, of which we were still nominally a part, though nobody believed that including us was the point.

My mother did not scream and she did not weep, not then. She came down already dressed, hair already pinned, as though she’d gotten ready for a visit rather than been woken from sleep. I understood only much later that this was deliberate — that she had decided, before she ever left the bedroom, what kind of woman these men were going to see. She asked, in the tone she used for asking the grocer about the price of rice, how much time we’d be given. Until first light, the man said, without apology for the hour.

It was the mention of the workers that moved my father, not the loss of the land. He had already made his peace with that somewhere in the preceding weeks, the way you make peace with a diagnosis before the doctor says the word. Sixty families lived on that land, some for my grandfather before him, and the man with the clipboard had found exactly the right lever. My father went inside and began, quietly, telling my mother which drawers to empty. He did not raise his voice again that night.

Rafael, thirteen, wanted to fight — not literally, though at thirteen the distance between wanting to fight and doing something foolish isn’t far. My mother crossed the room, put both hands on his shoulders, and told him that his job tonight was to carry things, not to be brave. Mercedes, sixteen, went straight to dressing me, working the buttons with hands that shook only slightly, humming a lullaby our mother used to sing us, repurposed into something to keep two girls’ hands busy in the dark.

We were allowed to take what we could carry to my uncle’s house in

AS HE REMEMBERS IT

***“A name shouted,
a rifle raised
rather than
slung.”***

RAFAEL VARGAS

town by sunrise, no more. My mother chose with a ruthlessness that still startles me — the christening gown but not the good china, the photographs but not the silver, a single framed drawing I'd made of the house.

My father went out barefoot to speak to the workers gathered at the sound of the trucks. I only remember that Eusebio, who had cured tobacco on that land since before I was born, would not meet his eyes, and that his wife was crying without hiding it.

We left in the bed of my father's own truck — the one thing they let him keep, because, the man with the clipboard said, someone needed to get the family off the property before the hour was up. Mercedes held me on her lap into town. I remember the smell of diesel and my mother's perfume, put on that morning as though it were any other day, and the particular silence of four people who have each decided, separately, not to be the first one to speak.

My uncle Ramón was waiting in his doorway when we pulled up, and I have never forgotten that he did not ask a single question. He took the boxes out of Rafael's arms, showed my parents which room was theirs, and put water on for coffee, because it was nearly five and there was no sense in anyone pretending to go back to bed. The house had four rooms and now held eleven people. Someone gave up a bed for us that night and I never learned who, though I have always suspected my aunt, who slept the rest of that year in a chair by the window and told everyone she preferred it.

My father sat at that kitchen table until the sun came up. He had carried out the ledger, though the ledger recorded a crop that was no longer his and moisture readings for barns he would not enter again.

He opened it anyway, out of habit, and read back what he had written the previous week in his own unhurried hand. Then he closed it, squared it against the edge of the table the way he squared everything he ever set down, and asked my mother what time the bank in town opened.

By seven that morning the town knew. People came to my uncle's door in ones and twos with things they thought we might need — a sack of rice, a cooking pot, a boy's shirt that would fit Rafael by the fall — and my mother thanked each of them at the threshold without once inviting anyone inside, because inviting them in would have meant letting them see the boxes stacked against the wall. She had already begun the work of deciding what our family would look like from the outside. My father did not come to the door at all. He had gone out early to see a man he knew at the cooperative, came back at noon with nothing, and went out again after lunch to see another one. That became the shape of the weeks that followed: my father leaving to ask, my mother staying to arrange, and the rest of us learning, slowly and without anyone explaining it, the difference between what is taken from you and what is merely gone.

Leaving the farm, we would learn in the weeks that followed, was not the same as leaving the country, and that the second leaving would take another eighteen months to arrive. But that is its own chapter.

II

THE OTHER SIDE

NOVEMBER 1961–FEBRUARY 1963



05 NOVEMBER 1961

Two Suitcases and a Wicker Basket

We landed as exiles, a word that fit the paperwork and nothing else about that day.

I woke before anyone called me, in the room off the kitchen in Havana where we had been living since September, and I knew from the quality of the quiet that this was the day. My good dress was already laid across the foot of the bed. My mother had pressed it the night before with a borrowed iron, and she had pressed my father's shirt too, and Rafael's, and Mercedes's blouse, because she had decided that we were not going to arrive in a new country looking like people things had happened to. I have thought about that decision my whole life. We had two suitcases, a wicker basket of kitchen things she refused to leave behind, and the clothes we stood in, and she ironed all of it at eleven o'clock at night.

We left for Rancho Boyeros in the dark, in a car my father borrowed

MIAMI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT · NOVEMBER 1961

Not the Vargas family. A family like them, in a week when the gate saw hundreds.

from a man he did not introduce to us. Nobody spoke the whole way. When we arrived the terminal was already full of people dressed exactly as we were dressed, in their good clothes, at five in the morning. That was the first thing that frightened me. Not the militia at the doors, not the rifles, which by then I had seen. It was two hundred people in their Sunday clothes before dawn, all pretending this was an ordinary trip.

A woman in olive green took my mother into a side room, and my mother came out without her wedding ring and without the small gold earrings she had worn since she was seventeen. She had prepared us for it, telling Mercedes and me on the walk in from the car, in the light voice she used for reminding us to be polite to an aunt, that they would take whatever they wanted and that we were to say thank you. My mother said thank you. I remember her face when she said it, which was no face at all, the same one she had worn on the porch in June, the one she could put on like a hat.

WHAT I REMEMBER OF THE WAITING

Then they put us in the glass room. Everyone called it la pecera, the fishbowl, because the people who had come to see you off could stand on the other side and look at you, and you could look back, and nobody could hear anything. We were in there most of the morning. My uncle and two of my cousins stood against that glass and my father would not raise his eyes to them, not once. Rafael counted our suitcases so many times that Mercedes finally laid her hand flat on the top of his head, the way you settle a dog, and he stopped.

The flight took forty-five minutes. I had never been on an airplane. I remember that the seat was scratchy against the backs of my legs,

that my mother held my hand the whole way and looked straight ahead at nothing, and that out the window the water changed from one blue into a different blue and I could not have said where one country ended and the other began. Someone behind us was crying. Someone else laughed once, too loudly, and stopped. Mercedes put her mouth against my ear and said that when we landed I was not to say anything to anybody, and I did not.

When they opened the door of the airplane the heat came in, and with it a smell I have never been able to describe to anyone who was not there: jet fuel and cut grass and hot asphalt and, underneath all of it, something sweet, like syrup left in the bottom of a cup. Miami smelled sweet. Inside, the building was so cold that Mercedes put both arms around me. There were men in short sleeves with clipboards. There was a great deal of English, which I had studied for two years and could not hear as words, only as a long ribbon of sound. A man stamped a paper, and said something, and my father said yes, sir. That is what I remember of becoming a refugee: a rubber stamp, and my father saying yes, sir in a language he did not have.

Our cousin Nena was waving before we were through the doors, both arms over her head, calling my mother's name across everyone. She had come the year before and had spent two weeks getting the apartment ready for people she had last seen at a wedding. She drove us in her husband's Chevrolet, green and white, with seats that burned the backs of my knees, and the city went past the window in pieces I could not assemble: billboards in English, a hamburger stand built like a little castle, gas stations strung with paper flags, a man watering his lawn in the afternoon. And palm trees. I knew palm trees. Somehow that was worse than if every single thing had been strange.

AS SHE REMEMBERED IT

***“Teresita thinks
she remembers
the airplane.
What she
remembers is me
telling her about
it.”***

MERCEDES VARGAS, RECORDED
2019

The apartment was on Southwest Eighth Street, above a shop, up an outside staircase painted the color of the inside of a shell. Four rooms. It smelled of fresh paint and bleach, and under that, from somewhere in the building, onions going soft in oil, which was the first thing since the airplane that smelled like our own kitchen. Nena had put down three mattresses, a pot, a bag of rice, a tin of coffee, and a jar with four flowers on the windowsill, because she said a house without something living in it is not a house.

My mother set the basket on the counter, took out her coffee pot, the one she had carried across the water on her lap, and filled it at the sink. I remember the sound of the water going into it. That was the first sound I heard in that apartment, and I heard it every morning after for eleven years.

III



RESURRECTION

1963–1976

What Elena Did Not Say at the Funeral Mass

My mother did not weep at my father’s funeral. It took me forty years to understand what she was doing instead.

My father was buried on a Thursday in February, out of a church where nobody knew how to say our name. I was eleven. I have spent sixty years trying to describe my mother’s face during that mass, and the closest I have come is this: she had the look of a woman doing arithmetic.

I was eleven. I have spent sixty years trying to describe my mother’s face during that mass, and the closest I have come is this: she had the look of a woman doing arithmetic. The priest read my father’s name off an index card, and he read it the American way, with the stress in the wrong place, and I felt Mercedes flinch beside me as though



ALEJANDRO'S FUNERAL MASS · MIAMI, FEBRUARY 1963

My mother kept this photograph for forty years and never once put it out.

1963–1964

- FEB 1963 Alejandro is buried in Miami.
- 1963 Elena takes in sewing and keeps saving.
- SPRING 1964 She shows the children a shuttered Calle Ocho storefront.

someone had knocked into her. There were perhaps thirty people. Three women from our building. Our cousin Nena and her husband. Six or seven men from the docks in clean shirts, standing at the back the way men stand when they are not certain they belong at the front. Nobody from Pinar del Río. Every person who had known my father as a young man was ninety miles away and might as well have been on the other side of the world, and my mother had spent the two days before the mass writing letters that would take six weeks to arrive and could not be answered.

Rafael wore a borrowed jacket with the cuffs an inch short of his wrists. Mercedes held my hand so tightly through all of it that I complained about it afterward, which I have regretted ever since. My mother sat between us in the dress she had sponged clean the night before, and she did not cry. Not at the church, not at the cemetery, not afterward in our apartment when the women from the building covered our table with food we could not have afforded to buy. I was eleven, and what I remember of the mass itself is nearly all wrong things.

I remember that the kneeler was cracked and pinched the back of my leg. I remember counting the candles twice and getting a different number each time. I remember being furious at a man two rows ahead who kept clearing his throat, thinking with the whole force of my chest that he should stop, that he was ruining it, though I could not have told you what it was he was ruining. I did not cry either. I have wondered since whether I was imitating my mother, or whether it is only that at eleven the thing has not arrived yet.

She thanked every one of them at the door. She used their names. She

asked after their children. Watching her, I believed she was being strong for us, and for years that is how I described it to people: my mother was strong. I was wrong about what I was seeing. She was not being strong. She was deciding.

She said one thing that afternoon that I have never forgotten, and it was not about my father. One of the women from the building told her she should not think about anything for a while, that there would be time later for thinking. My mother answered, in the same pleasant voice she had used all day, that she had already thought. The woman took it for grief talking. I took it for nothing at all, because I was eleven. Mercedes, who was eighteen and had spent that whole year watching our mother the way you watch weather, told me forty years later that she went cold when she heard it.

WHAT SHE DID NOT SAY

She did not say that the mass and the plot had been paid for out of a collection the men at the docks took up in a coffee can, that she had accepted it, and what accepting it cost her. She did not say that there was no insurance, no pension, no account, nothing at all in my father's name but a job that had ended the moment he stopped arriving for it. She did not say that she was forty-four years old and had never in her life been paid money for work. She did not say the words go back, which had been in every conversation in that apartment for two years and were never spoken in it again after that Thursday.

And she did not say — not that day, not for another year — that in the bottom of a suitcase nobody else opened there was an envelope, and that the envelope had been getting thicker every week since our first

month in Miami.

I have thought a great deal about that envelope. She began it while my father was still alive and working, while there was still reason to believe things might come right on their own. Sixty dollars a week, some weeks less, taken out of the grocery money before the grocery money was spent, and later out of what Mercedes brought home from the shoe store on Flagler. My mother fed four people on what was left and not one of us noticed. I have asked myself whether that was thrift or whether it was fear, and I have decided it was neither. She had been a farmer's wife. She had spent her whole adult life inside a business where you put part of every crop back for the next planting — in the bad years, and especially in the good ones.

For a year after the funeral she said nothing about any of it. That year is a blur to me. I know we moved once, to a smaller apartment on the same street. I know Mercedes gave up whatever she had been imagining for herself and went to full days. I know Rafael came home smelling of the grocery where he stacked crates after school, and that he was angry in the way boys are angry when they are not allowed to say what they are actually frightened of. I know my mother took in sewing, because I can still hear the machine going through the wall at eleven at night. What I did not know was that she had begun walking a particular block of Calle Ocho on Sunday afternoons.

In the spring of 1964 she brought the three of us with her. She stopped in front of a storefront that had been a dry cleaner and had stood shuttered for eight months, the ghost of the old lettering still on the glass, a smell of chemicals coming from under the door, and she asked us what we thought. Rafael asked what exactly there was to

think about. And my mother said a number out loud, the number in the envelope, and I watched my brother's face change and my sister put her hand over her mouth, and I understood, in the way children understand things a beat late, that she had known that number at the funeral mass.

She had been sitting in that church with the number already in her head. Not that she was frightened, which she was. Not that she missed him, which she did every day of the thirty-one years she outlived him. What she did not say was that she had already begun.

For the rest of her life my mother told the story of that funeral in about four sentences, and the four sentences never changed. The priest was kind. The men from the docks came. There was too much food afterward and we ate it for a week. Your father would have hated the flowers. She could deliver all four at a table of twenty people and then ask someone to pass the bread, and the subject was closed. It took me until my fifties to understand that this was not avoidance. It was a woman protecting a decision she had made by herself, in a pew, before any of the rest of us knew there was a decision to be made.

When people ask me now how my mother found the nerve to sign a lease in a language she could barely read, I tell them about the index card, and about the priest saying my father's name wrong, and they usually decide I have misunderstood the question. I have not. That was the morning she stopped waiting for the world to be arranged on her behalf. Everything that came after — the sign in the window, the eleven dollars in the register at closing, the forty years of it — began in a pew on a Thursday with a woman doing arithmetic.

WHAT SHE DID NOT SAY

“She had been sitting in that church with the number already in her head.”

IV



WHAT REMAINS

TODAY

Two Ledgers

My mother kept two ledgers her whole life. She only ever let anyone see the one made of numbers.

I found out what year is on my father's headstone the way you find out most facts about your own family: by accident, doing something else. I was helping my daughter clean out a storage unit in Homestead two years ago and came across a folder of my mother's papers that nobody had ever organized, because organizing them would have meant deciding they were finished, and none of us were quite ready to decide that. Nineteen sixty-three, on his stone. Nineteen ninety-four, on hers. Thirty-one years, same as she always said. She never got the arithmetic wrong in her life, so I don't know why I was surprised.

I am the last one who remembers the vega with the leaves still in it, and not just the name of it. Rafael remembers it too, though he'll tell you he doesn't, mostly because he moved to New York in his thirties and has spent forty years cultivating the idea that he is a New Yorker now, orange groves be damned. Mercedes never left Miami, and never really left the restaurant either, not all the way, even years after she stopped working there — she still walks into any Cuban restaurant in this city like she's inspecting someone else's kitchen. Between the two of them and me, we have covered a fair amount of ground since a

soldier knocked on our door in the dark. I'm not going to catalog what each of us built. My mother didn't announce her ledger, and I don't see why I should announce ours. I will say that none of the three of us ended up doing what anyone in Pinar del Río would have predicted for a tobacco family's children, and I think that would have pleased my father more than it would have surprised him. He was, underneath the manners, a man who read a room for what was coming next. He read the wrong room once, in 1961, or maybe he read it exactly right and simply ran out of time to act on it. Either way, I don't think he'd have wanted us farming.

WHAT WE INHERITED

Here is the ledger I actually want to leave you, since the financial one was never mine to give and isn't the interesting one anyway. What we inherited was not the vega, which we never saw again, and not the restaurant, which my mother sold in 1988 to a nice couple from Camagüey who kept the name and, I am told, still make a decent croqueta. What we inherited was a particular, specific competence at losing things. I don't mean that as a complaint. I mean it as a skill, the way you'd say someone has a good ear, or steady hands. My mother lost a country, a husband, and a station in life inside of two years, and what she did with that was open a ledger and start writing numbers in it. That is not resilience in the greeting-card sense. It is closer to what my father did the morning after the trucks came, when he opened his own ledger, read back what he'd written the week before about a crop that no longer belonged to him, closed it, squared it against the table the way he squared everything, and asked what time the bank opened. Neither of them mistook grief for an excuse. They didn't have the luxury, and by the time they might have earned that

luxury back, it had become a habit not to take it.

None of them knew they had that in them until the week required it. I've come to think that's true of most inner strength — you don't get to find out what's there until the day the rest of your life depends on it, and most people go their whole lives without that day arriving. Mine didn't arrive the way theirs did. I've had it easier than any of them, by a wide margin, which is a strange thing to feel grateful for and guilty about in the same breath, and I feel both, most days.

I used to think I'd inherited my mother's nerve and my father's manners, and that seemed like the better half of the split. I'm less sure now. I think what actually passed down — to all three of us, and now to their children — is much plainer than nerve: the flat, almost boring understanding that you can lose everything that anchors you and still be standing at the end of the week, doing arithmetic, asking what time something opens. That is not a very cinematic inheritance. Nobody puts it on a headstone. But I have watched my own children build things — different things, none of them related to tobacco or croquetas or, as far as I can tell, real estate — with a steadiness I recognize completely, and that they will probably tell you they invented themselves. Let them think that. My mother let us think it too. My husband and I built something of our own as well, out of buildings instead of farmland, and I notice I still keep a ledger the old-fashioned way, by hand, in a notebook, not because I need to anymore but because apparently it's genetic.

I am seventy-five, which is old enough to know a family story doesn't actually end — it just stops being narrated. Someone is always still walking around inside it. My grandchildren will never hear the sound

of a coffee pot filling at a sink in an apartment on Southwest Eighth Street, because I am the last one for whom that sound means anything, and one of the quieter reasons I wrote this book is so it can mean something to them anyway, secondhand, which is the only way memory is ever actually passed to anybody. I don't need them to grieve a farm they never stood on. I need them to know that the people whose name they carry were handed nothing, more than once, and were not impressed by that, and built lives anyway out of whatever happened to be in the room.

My mother kept the real ledger in a drawer and let people believe it held only numbers. I have written mine down. I find I am not half as private about it as she was, which she would have found soft of me. She would not have been wrong.

WHAT SHE CAME TO
UNDERSTAND

“You can lose everything that anchors you and still be standing at the end of the week, doing arithmetic, asking what time something opens.”



MIAMI · NOVEMBER 2019



RAFAEL, MERCEDES, AND TERESITA