chapter 1

Batista's Coup d'État

I looked up from the drawing and stared out the window of my classroom. On benches under the trees, students sat and talked or read between classes. I looked back at the drawing board. I took out a T-square and went over the plan: the parking was off; not enough cars would fit. I would have to redo part of it to enlarge the parking lot. I scanned the drawing, trying out different proportions, reviewing the requirements. No use! My head was pounding, and sweat was pouring off of me. I checked my watch: the bell was about to ring. I lit a cigar and stared out the window again.

It was early March, 1952—only three months until summer vacation at the University of Miami. Then I could go back to Cuba. I pictured the airplane making its descent to Rancho Boyeros Airport. Soon the coastline would appear and then Havana, block after block of streets and buildings, as orderly as a map. Then bright green fields of sugarcane, studded with royal palms, the rows interrupted by fields.

I would go straight to Santa Clara, the capital of the province of Las Villas in the central part of Cuba, about two hundred miles east of Havana. I would stay home a few weeks, get spoiled by my mother. I would spend the day in bed, reading the many books I had acquired over the course of the year.

Afterward I would start going out, visiting my friends. We would spend evenings in the park, talking about a thousand things: school, politics, girls. Then a month in Varadero: the beach and nights at the Bolera.

And what was I doing here? Whatever possessed me to go to school in the North? How could I have left Cuba!

The bell rang. I packed up my drafting tools, rolled up the drawings, and went down the stairs. Beyond the shade of the huge trees, the glare of midday awaited me. The street was in the sun. I hurried along to the student apartment I lived in just a block and a half away. When I got there, the living room was full of students, most of them Cuban. They were all silent, listening to the radio.

My roommate Manolo, a young man from Havana, turned to me and said, "Did you hear the news? Batista has taken power!"

In those days there was no large or vocal community of Cuban exiles in Miami. Only a few Cubans were living there at that time, most of whom were young and impoverished. They had come to the States in the hope of finding more economic opportunities to improve their financial condition than they could in the oppressive, corrupt, and discriminatory society of Cuba. And of course there was also a handful of Cuban students, such as myself and my friends, who were studying at the university.

Two days later, the Cuban students were still talking about Batista's coup. I joined a group standing around the living room sofa. At its center, Manolo was leafing through *Bohemia,* a magazine just in from Cuba. It had pages of pictures. There was one of officials at the presidential palace surrounded by tanks. Another was captioned, "The president leaving the palace." It showed President Prío—who had been a distinguished student leader in his youth but had become just another corrupt politician when he achieved office—with a worried expression. During those terrible moments, he looked ridiculous wrapped up in a teenager's sweater. His brothers Paco and Antonio were with him. For some reason Prío was smiling in one of the pictures.

Manolo finished looking at those pages and started reading the section "On Cuba."

> The third Sunday of Carnival, with its popular celebrations, was over. Just after midnight, on the 10th, the Havana night seemed quiet as usual.
>
> But it didn't last: some people were not sleeping. Shortly after 2 A.M. a pair of cars pulled out of a well-known estate in Arroyo Arenas. The first car held armed men in civilian clothing; in the second, accompanied by an army officer, was a medium-sized, dark-skinned man dressed in sports clothes.

"What a son of a bitch!" someone shouted.
Manolo continued reading:

> A few blocks before arriving at the Columbia National Military Headquarters—where the general staff of the army was located—the mystery man ordered the escort car preceding him to stop, telling his companion:
>
> "Captain Robaina, we'll change cars here."
>
> "But General, they're expecting us to be in this car . . ."
>
> "Yes, but we'll take the other."
>
> The order of General Fulgencio Batista was carried out before the vehicles drove on.
>
> His co-conspirators inside the garrison—lieutenants and captains—welcomed their old boss, who did not conceal his emotion, his gratitude for their show of enthusiasm.

Manolo read on, interrupted constantly by comments and exclamations from his companions.

> At 4 A.M. the presidential palace learned that Batista was at the military base. Paco and Antonio Prío hurried to alert their brother, quietly sleeping in La Chata, the presidential retreat on the outskirts of Havana where he usually spent the weekend with his family. A few minutes after five, a worried-looking Carlos Prío arrived at the palace, accompanied by his brothers and several friends and government officials.

All of them realized the gravity of the situation, and each offered his advice to the shaky president.

"What you should do, Carlos," one suggested, "is move your government to some province that is still loyal and put up a fight. The people will follow you."

Shouts of opposition went up, arguments arose, and Prío looked around the group indecisively.

"Gentlemen," said Eduardo Suárez Rivas, "let us think carefully before we act."

"What a bunch of jerks!" Everyone talked at once. Manolo yelled, "Let me go on."

At 7:30 A.M., a committee from the Students Federation (known as the FEU) arrived at the door of the presidential palace. They were worried about the national situation. The delegation of students was anxious to speak with the president:

"Mr. President, as you know the FEU has sometimes disapproved of your acts and has often criticized your government, but we are here today to offer our help. The university, faithful to its revolutionary tradition, must uphold democratic rights, and so we will support you."

Prío seemed moved by their generous offer, but made some vague response. One of the student leaders asked:

"Mr. President, are you going to lead the fight?"

"Yes, I am going to fight, of course."

"Do you have a plan to develop resistance?"

"We are studying the situation."

The students pressed him: "Mr. President, we are here to discuss ways to resist the takeover. We don't have any weapons. They should be distributed at the university. We want to fight!"

Carlos Prío tried to shake off his inertia: "Yes, that's right, we will send guns where they're needed." The students set off for the university.

The telephone rang: a long-distance call. Prío took it. Then, without emotion: "The city of Matanzas still supports us."

> "Let's get out of here!" A hysterical shout from Paco Prío.
>
> Prío was stunned again. Finally they left. The head of the palace guard asked for instructions. One of Prío's aides answered in a low voice: "Do not fight."
>
> Prío then left the presidential palace, sought refuge in a foreign embassy, and finally left the country, heading for Miami.

"Holy Mary, what faggots!" Again everyone talked at once. Manolo turned the page. Close-ups of Batista. More photos. The Havana candidate for governor, Partido Accion Unitaria leader Alberto Salas Amaro, talking to Batista. General Batista surrounded by sympathizers. Papo, son of the new head of the state, standing by his father, wearing a smug smile. The first meeting of the new cabinet at the military headquarters. Batista giving them a little lecture. Politicians and friends arriving on the scene. The wife of General Batista, with several friends, entering the garrison. The offices of the general staff, all abustle.

All of us were truly disgusted with what we saw. Once again the forces of corruption, greed, and violence had been victorious in our nation.

We had founded a fraternity not too long before. Superficially a social group, it brought together students from every country in Latin America. Our hero was the great South American revolutionary Simón Bolívar, and our objective was to unite all the Latin peoples of the continent into a great nation or federation of states. The organization had certain conspiratorial aspects. Some members came from the highest ranks of the Latin American bourgeoisie. Others, like me, came from backgrounds that had been originally quite humble but had gradually achieved the wealth, status, and education that led us to cross the line in social standing and qualify for a North American university.

My parents had married in Poland when they were nineteen years old. Cousins who had already emigrated to Cuba wrote to them about the beauties of the island and the opportunities for work. As Jews in Poland, they were discriminated against and isolated in ghettos, so they left for the New World, arriving in the year 1929.

My father, Bernardo Oltuski, was an enterprising man; in Cuba, beginning as a simple shoemaker, he rose to become the owner of several shoe factories, retail stores, warehouses, and tanneries. His brand of footwear was distributed all over the country, and he had as many as two hundred employees. He was never a millionaire, but he had achieved some hundreds of thousands of dollars in capital, which was a huge amount of money at that time. Because upper-middle-class people were accustomed to sending their children to study "in the North," I went along with the idea and came to the University of Miami in Florida, where the weather was similar to that of Cuba.

We Latin American students were split in two groups: the majority, from the upper class, were reactionaries and recalcitrant Catholics; the minority group, which I led, was middle class, containing business and professional people. What united us was a strong nationalistic sentiment, our language, our customs, and the distance from home.

A few days after Batista's coup, I was straightening the bow tie on my dinner jacket when I heard Manolo's croon: "Let's go, let's go, let's go, get into the conga line, get into the conga line . . ."

We got into Roberto's Oldsmobile convertible and drove off. We were going out with the three Urdaneta sisters. They were daughters of a former minister of Pérez Jiménez—the horrible Venezuelan dictator who had stolen millions. Mr. Urdaneta had bought a small palace on Biscayne Boulevard, joined the flourishing Miami social

scene, and became a developer, building new homes on the islands around the city.

I had some qualms about dating the Urdaneta sisters. But they were so pretty! Tonight I was taking Ana, the oldest sister, who was twenty, almost as old as me, at twenty-two. There was an unspoken affection between us. We waited in the living room for the girls to come down. Finally they appeared at the top of the stairs.

It was the usual fraternity party. A lot of drinking and fooling around. A few people were already dancing. The band started playing "Autumn Leaves," and Ana and I got up to dance. We made a smooth couple, dancing with eyes closed, just barely avoiding bumping into the other couples. The music stopped, and I took her hand and led her out to the garden.

When we came back, the party was in full swing. My fraternity brothers were in charge, and the band was playing Latin American music. I saw Manolo at the head of a conga line, which immediately surrounded me and separated me from Ana. We kept changing partners. One of the turns threw me together with Peggy.

"Enrique," she said, "I'll be waiting for you at home after the dance."

"I'm going with Manolo and Roberto."

"Bring them along, but only men."

"Only men for lonely women?"

"Yes, single men for single women." And she smiled with pleasure, in anticipation.

The party was almost over when Ana and I got back together. At our table there were a few jokes about our new relationships. When we dropped off the sisters, I passed along Peggy's invitation to Robert and Manolo.

"That American is too much!" Manolo declared, rubbing his hands together.

We put the roof of the car down and sped off to the south. The early morning air could not dry our sweaty faces. Robert stopped

the car in front of the huge white building. We went into the house. There were several girls, and Roberto and Manolo stayed in the living room while I went to the kitchen in search of a drink. It was warm, and I went out to the large patio. A quiet splash caught my attention—somebody was swimming in the pool.

"Come on in!" I heard Peggy's voice.

"I don't have a swimsuit," I replied.

"That doesn't matter. Come on!" Peggy repeated.

I undressed quickly and dove into the water. When I came up, a body encircled me.

Now it was June, and the summer vacation was approaching. On one Sunday, my friends and I were watching a baseball game on television.

"Strike two!" the announcer said.

"Miñosa slugged it," Roberto exclaimed.

"Incredible! That black put a lot on the ball," said Manolo.

Between innings, Manolo said, "Gentlemen, vacation time at last. We were always talking about it, and now it's here. I'm looking forward to three months of fishing!"

"For what?" Roberto asked.

"Boy, all kinds of fish. But the one I like best is the marlin."

"This summer I am going to spend some time with you, Manolo," I said.

"Of course! We'll have some fun." He thought for a while. "If Batista lets us. There have already been some protests, and the University of Havana is fired up."

"Good, but I don't think it will go any further," Roberto said. "Batista is Batista. He'll crush them."

"Maybe you're right, " Manolo replied, "but what I want is to catch some marlin."

I couldn't contain myself: "Christ, what a conformist!"

Manolo gave me a surprised look. "Hey, watch it! And what have you done for the betterment of mankind lately?"

I felt an impotent rage. "Nothing . . . yet."

Roberto added, "That's what everybody says, but real revolutionaries are a different thing. They are extinct in Cuba." He gave me a scornful look. "Would you give up this fine life you lead?"

"Of course I would!" I said, excitedly. "Don't think my father was born rich. When he was young, he was just a shoemaker."

"And mine sold tobacco," Manolo said with a smile, "but I have acquired a taste for marlin fishing, and I'm not about to give it up."

Unlike Manolo, I grew more heated: "The life I lead has not sealed my eyes. This is an unjust society, and Batista has done what he has because many people are as lazy as you. You are the one who can't see straight!"

Manolo got serious: "God damn it, who do you think you are? You spend your life screwing around, and now you get all patriotic. You couldn't take candy from a baby."

"You shithead!" I shouted.

"Fag!" shot back Manolo.

"Son of a bitch!"

We began to fight until friends separated us and things quieted down.