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CUBA  
*Straits*



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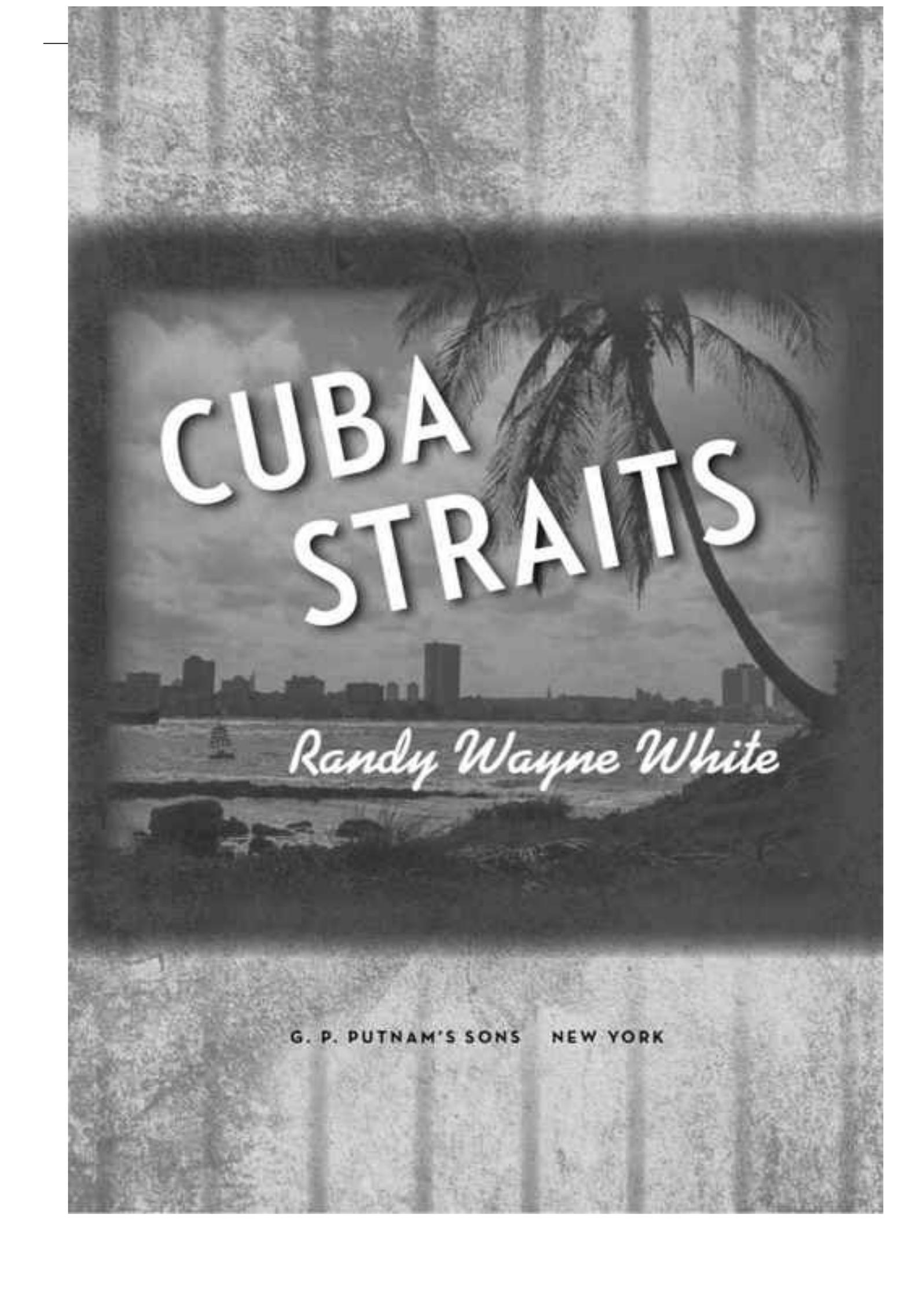
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# CUBA STRAITS

*Randy Wayne White*

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS    NEW YORK

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G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

*Publishers Since 1838*

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) LLC

375 Hudson Street

New York, New York 10014



USA • Canada • UK • Ireland • Australia • New Zealand • India • South Africa • China

[penguin.com](http://penguin.com)

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ISBN 978-0-698-18435-0

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Version\_1

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*For Bill and Dia*

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*Amor cuerdo, no es amor.*  
(Sane love, is not love.)  
—JOSÉ MARTÍ

You should enter a ballpark the way you enter a church.  
—BILL “SPACEMAN” LEE

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Sanibel and Captiva Islands are real places, faithfully described, but used fictitiously in this novel. The same is true of certain businesses, marinas, bars, and other places frequented by Doc Ford, Tomlinson, and pals.

In all other respects, however, this novel is a work of fiction. Names (unless used by permission), characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or to actual events or locales is unintentional and coincidental.

Contact Mr. White at [WWW.DOCFORD.COM](http://WWW.DOCFORD.COM).

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I do not pretend to be an expert on Cuba, but I have a patchwork knowledge—the equivalent of personal snapshots assembled from many trips over a period of thirty-eight years. My Spanish on a good day is poor, my understanding of lingual nuances is nonexistent. My admiration for Cubans and Cuban Americans, however, is limitless. I am devoted to my Cuban friends, and sensitive to their circumstances, which is why we never mention, let alone discuss, politics, the embargo, or Fidel and Raúl Castro. They are as patriotic and loyal to their country as I am to mine. It has never been an issue on an island where there are better things to talk about, such as baseball, fishing, literature, and the ingredients of a good mojito. All references to politics in this book reflect the opinions of two fictional characters who are always at opposition: Marion D. Ford and Sighurdhr Tomlinson. Blame them or blame me. My friends were not consulted, and they played no role whatsoever in writing this book.

The reader doesn't need to know this to enjoy *Cuba Straits*, I hope, but I want these facts and a few others out there.

My first visit to Cuba was in 1977, when, after a stop in Havana, I flew to the Isle of Pines, where I was lucky enough (sort of) to visit the prison where the Castros were imprisoned from 1953 to '55. Letters written from that prison, as you will discover, are key to the plotline of this book. I then enjoyed scuba diving reefs and wrecks that, at the time, were unexplored. The only disappointment of the trip, as I recollect, was using Soviet tanks and regulators that were prone to malfunction at inopportune times—at a hundred-plus feet on one occasion, although I'm guessing. We hadn't been issued depth gauges, let alone pressure gauges, so I'm still not sure where or why I ran out of air.

Nineteen eighty was a formative year for me, and thousands of Cuban refugees. For complicated reasons, Fidel Castro told his people that if the "blood of the Revolution" wasn't in their hearts, all they had to do was sign a paper and they were free to leave the island. When word reached the U.S., hundreds of private vessels mustered in Key West for the 112-mile trip to Mariel Harbor. I was aboard one of them. I spent more than a week in Mariel, and returned on a 55-foot grouper boat overloaded with 147 people, who, when we raised Boca Chica, took up this chant: *Libertad . . . Libertad* (Liberty . . . Liberty).

Witness such purpose and bravery, your life changes.

As a columnist for *Outside* magazine, I returned to the island many times afterward. Nineteen ninety-one was the beginning of what Cubans called the Special Time. The Soviet Union's collapse, and the U.S. embargo, multiplied the island's already considerable economic woes, and I remember renting a car at José Martí International, then being told, "We don't provide fuel," after I'd run out of gas within a few hundred yards of the airport. Even now, car traffic outside Havana is sparse, but, in those years, roads were deserted but for a half a million Chinese bicycles the government had purchased to solve the island's transportation problems. On that trip, I first saw children playing baseball with bats they'd carved by hand, and balls made of asphalt and wrapped with twine.

The pure joy with which they played—wow.

The memory stuck with me. In high school, I was a mediocre catcher (as my venerated coach, Bill Freese, will confirm), but I loved the game. My pal Gene Lamont (American League Manager of the Year, White Sox; now a Detroit icon) managed Kansas City's single A team at the time, and Geno came through in a big way. On my next visit, I brought along a hundred balls, my catcher's gear, and bags of bats and gloves, mostly major league quality. I returned to Florida with an empty backpack and bigger plans for the future. Enter William Francis Lee III—the “Spaceman” of Red Sox and Expo fame. I met Bill in 1989 when I was a bull pen catcher for a team in the short-lived Senior Professional League. I remember him walking onto the field in Winter Haven, spikes over his shoulder, wearing a Chairman Mao T-shirt, and me thinking, *Who is this left-wing loony?* but saying, at some later date, “Comrade, you'd fit right in playing ball in Cuba.”

“Just got back” was his reply.

Bill is a genuinely brilliant man, and as generous as he is eclectic. Thanks to his contacts in Cuba, and those of Luis Tiant, we began taking our own team to the island along with busloads of baseball gear to give away to kids. We even made a documentary, *Gift of the Game*, that premiered at Fenway Park, and was issued by WGBH, Boston. It is a sweet, honest film that I recommend. Bill and Jon Warden (pitched for Detroit) are hilarious; Cuba's children, unforgettable.

Baseball, as you might guess, plays a role in this novel. My love of Cuba and Cubans, same thing.

I learned long ago, whether writing fiction or nonfiction, an author loses credibility if he's caught in a factual error. I take research seriously, and am lucky to benefit from the kindness of experts in varied fields. Before recognizing those who provided assistance, though, I would like to remind the reader that all errors, exaggerations, and/or misinterpretations of fact, if any, are entirely the fault of the author.

My attorney friend Temis Giraudy López, of DeLand, Florida, and my nephew Justin White, Ph.D. were helpful in many ways, including offering their insights into Cuba and nuances of speech when translating Spanish to English. Much thanks goes to friends and advisers Bill Hauff, Ismael Sene, Capt. Tony Johnson, Dr. Brian Hummel, Dr. Dan White, Stu Johnson, Victor Candalaria, Dr. Marybe B. Saunders, Dr. Peggy C. Kalkounos, Ron Iossi, Jerry Rehfuss, and Dr. Quirkous Miller. Sports Psychologist Don Carman, once again, contributed unerring insights into human behavior, aberrant and otherwise, and his advice regarding Marion Ford's fitness routine is much appreciated.

Bill Lee, and his orbiting star, Diana, as always, have guided the author—safely, for the most part—into the strange but fun and enlightened world of our mutual friend, the Rev. Sighurdhr M. Tomlinson. Equal thanks go to Gary and Donna Terwilliger; Wendy Webb, my wife and trusted friend; Stephen Grendon, my devoted SOB; the angelic Mrs. Iris Tanner; and my partners and pals, Mark Marinello, Marty and Brenda Harrity.

Much of this novel was written at corner tables before and after hours at Doc Ford's Rum Bar and Grille on Sanibel Island and San Carlos Island, where staff were tolerant beyond the call of duty. Thanks go to Liz Harris Barker, Bryce Randall, Madonna Donna Butz, Capt. Jeffery Kelley, Chef Ren Ramirez, Amanda Rodriguez, Kim McGonnell, Superstar Ashley Rodeheffer, Christine Keller, Amazing Cindy Porter, Desiree Olson, Gabby Moschitta, Sam Ismatullaev, Mary McBeath, Michelle Gallagher, Mitch Larson, Twin Cities Rachael Okerstrom, Detroit Rachel Songalewski, Becca Harris Sarah Carnithian, Cool Tyler Wussler, Yakh'yo Yakubov, Darlene Mazzulo, Jamie Kennedy, Tall Sean, Tall Shane, Boston Brian Cunningham, Becca Conroy, Lisa Kendrick, and Maria Jimenez.

At Doc Ford's on Fort Myers Beach: Lovely Kandice Salvador, Charity Owen, John Goetz, Deon Schoeman, Heriberto Ramos, Efrain Gonzalez, Jamie Allen, Capt. Corey Allen, Dear Nora Billheime Kasseo Buonano, Angi Chapman, Astrid Cobble, Allison Dell, Mike Dewitt, Jessica Foster, Stephen Hansman, Jenna Hocking, Anthony Howes, Janell Jambon, Chris James, Kelsey King, Netta Kramb,

Chad Mason, Bobby Matthews, Meredith Mullins, Katy Forret, Christiana McCrimmon, Kylie Pyrrl, Reyes Ramos, Natalie Ramos, Dustin Rickards, Timothy Riggs, Sandy Rodriguez, Kim Ruth, Thomas Skehan, Heidi Stacy, Daniel Troxell, David Werner, Melissa Alleva, Eric Hines, Erin Montgomery, A. Pereira, Brett Vermeul, Molly Brewer, Katie Kovacs, Erin Fagan, Taylor Recny, Matthew Deverteu, Nick Howes, Andres Ramos, Brandon Patton, Justin Voskulh, Ethan Janey, and Adrian Medina.

At Doc Ford's on Captiva Island: Lovely Julie Grzeszak, Hi Shawn Scott, Mario Zanolli, Alexis Marcinkowski, Adam Traum, Chris Orr, Erica Debacker, Heather Walk, Holly Emmons, Josie Lombardo, Joy Schawalder, Kelcie Fulkerson, Lenar Gabdrakhmanov, Spiking Nick Miller, Patti McGowan, Patti Tesche, Paul Orr, Ryan Body, Ryan Cook, Scott Hamilton, Shelbi Muske, Sonya Bizuka, Brilliant Ashley Foster, Cheryl Erickson, Mojito Greg Barker, Capt. Stephen Day, Yamily Fernandez, Hope McNulty, and Chelsea Bennett.

Finally, I would like to thank my sons, Rogan and Lee White, for helping me finish *Cuba Straits*, which is among my all-time favorite Doc Ford novels.

—Randy Wayne White  
Telegraph Creek Gun Club  
Babcock Ranch  
Central Florida



*Fidel Castro*

*Lo.  
CENSURADO  
29/7/54*

25 Mayo, 1954

*Isle de Pinos, Isla de Pinos*

(From Raúl Castro  
Prisión Federal  
Isle de Pinos, Cuba)

**My Querida Elma**

. . . the censor's stamp must approve every letter that leaves here so I feel comfortable reaching out to you about a mutual friend. You will recognize the signature of the person I refer to. Over the years you and I have exchanged many letters including frivolous discussions of sports and baseball yet, at this time in history, nothing is frivolous. I am sure you understand why our previous correspondence in this matter must be kept in your secret heart, a place reserved only for me. My dear girl, yesterday we played the prison guards in the game all Cubans love, and it did not go well for my competitive brother, Fidelito . . .

*Raúl Castro  
R. Nacional  
Isla de Pinos  
# 3137*



*SECRET*





**A**t sunrise in November, Marion D. Ford, wearing shorts and jungle boots, jogged the tide line where Sanibel Island crescents north, and finally said, “*Screw it,*” tired of wind and pelting sand. To his right were colorful cottages—red, yellow, green—The Castaways, a popular resort during season, but this was Tuesday and a slow time of year. He went to the outdoor shower, thinking he’d hide his boots and swim through the breakers. He was ten pounds overweight and sick of his own excuses.

A porch door opened: a woman backlit by clouds of cinnamon, the sun up but not hot enough to burn through. “Want some coffee?” She cupped her hands to be heard. “Your dog’s welcome, if he’s sociable.”

No idea who the woman was. Wearing a sweatshirt, with an articulate, strong voice that suggested Midwestern genetics: a descendant of dairymaids good at sports and baking pies. Late thirties, a rental compact in the drive, only one pair of sandals outside the door: a woman on a budget vacationing alone.

Ford said, “Can’t. I’m punishing myself.”

The woman replied, “You, too?” and walked toward him, started to speak but stopped, got up on her toes, focusing on something out there in the waves. “What in the world . . . Is that someone drowning?”

Beyond the sandbar, Ford saw what might have been a barrel but one thrashing appendage told him it was not. He removed his glasses. “A loggerhead, I think. This isn’t mating season, so it must be hurt.”

“Logger-what?”

“A sea turtle.” Ford handed her his glasses, jogged to the breakers, and duck-dived, still wearing his damn boots. The dog, which was a retriever but not a Lab or golden, swam after him. That was a mistake, too.

The turtle, barnacles on its back, was tangled in fishing line, and, yes, drowning. Ford had to alternately battle his dog, then the turtle, which hissed and struck like a snake while he maneuvered the thing through waves into the shallows. The woman was impressed. “You seem to know what you’re doing.”

“On rare occasions. Do you have a knife?”

“You’re not going to . . . ?”

“Of course not.”

The woman galloped to the cottage, her sweatshirt bouncing in counter-synch, legs not long but solid. *Nice*. She watched Ford cut the turtle free, inspect it for cuts, then nurse the animal back through the surf, where he side-stroked alongside for a while.

The woman was waiting with a towel, coffee in a mug, and water for the dog.

“Why not come inside and dry off? Or a hot shower, if you like, but you’ll have to forgive the mess.” The look the woman gave him was unmistakable—not that Ford often got that look from women he didn’t know. “Three mornings straight I’ve watched you run past here”—an awkward smile—“so I finally worked up the nerve. Is it always this windy in November?”

Ford cleaned his glasses with the towel. “Nerve?”

“Old-fashioned, I guess. You know, speaking to strange men and all that.” Another look, eyes aware, before she added, “I’m here all alone.”

Ford tested several excuses before he followed the woman inside. He was thinking, *Why do the lonely ones choose islands?*

. . .

**THAT NIGHT IN FORT MYERS**, off Daniels Parkway, he was at Hammond Stadium, where the Minnesota Twins train, one of the practice fields, listening to his friend Tomlinson ramble on about something, but not really listening.

“Which is why,” his friend concluded, “I won’t even watch a game on TV without wearing the ol’ codpiece.”

Mentioning fish got Ford’s attention. “You caught a cod? They don’t migrate this far south.”

“No, man—*my cup*. Until a woman finds an expiration date on my dick, I simply will not risk the Hat Trick Twins.” Tomlinson rapped three bell tones from between his legs to illustrate, which proved nothing, because they were sitting in a dugout, under lights, wearing baseball uniforms, not in a bar watching TV. On the field was a Senior League team from Orlando, a left-hander warming up while the umpires kibitzed, game time stalled for no apparent reason.

Tomlinson muttered, “Geezus, what’s the holdup?” He grabbed the fence, yelled, “Hey, blue—while we’re still young, okay?” before returning to Ford. “You seem distracted, ol’ buddy. Romantic problems or is it something unusual?”

Ford replied, “This morning I found a turtle tangled in fishing line—one of those crimped-wire leaders tourists buy at Walgreens. I assumed it was a loggerhead because they’re so common. Now I don’t think so.”

“Was it dead? Goddamn pharmaceutical companies. They’d sell Pop-Tarts to diabetics if it bumped their numbers.”

“The turtle was only about fifty pounds but already had barnacles growing. See what I’m getting at. Even a young loggerhead or hawksbill would be closer to a hundred. Or maybe I’m wrong about that, too. I had him in my hands but didn’t bother to notice details. Embarrassing, how little I know about sea turtles. Wouldn’t you expect a biologist to notice what the hell species it was?”

Tomlinson knew the pitcher from Orlando or would not have yelled, “Joe . . . Hey, Joey—put some color in that rainbow. Slow-pitch is for commies, dude.” This ultra-left-wing Zen Buddhist priest

(he'd been ordained in Japan) and dope-smoking boat bum was a different person when he exited reality and entered a baseball field.

Joey flipped Tomlinson the bird.

Ford mused, "Now I'm thinking it might have been a Kemp's Ridley turtle, or even a Pacific Ridley. Two of the rarest in the world—the thing snapped at me like a dog, which is typical according to the literature. And its shell was too round. Had it right there in my hands; swam with it and still didn't dawn on me. If that's not a metaphor for something, I don't know what the hell is."

Ford hunched forward and retied his spikes, Tomlinson saying, "I should've never gotten rid of my old Kangaroos. These new Mizunos pinch my toe rings. I hate that." Then hollered through the screen "Oh great, now I've got to piss *again*. Guys . . . I have a Masonic meeting tomorrow. Any chance we'll be done?"

Ford sat up. "Know what's odd? Two days ago, I was reading about sightings of Pacific Ridelys in the Cuba Straits. I just remembered. Olive Ridelys, actually, but they're the same thing. A few nests documented along this coast, too. Even north of Sarasota."

Tomlinson reverted to his role as Zen master. "Nothing accidental about coincidence, Doc. Hey—just listen, for once. You're being nudged toward something. Or away. Or into a new avenue of study. Karma seldom grabs a rational man by the balls."

"I didn't say it was a coincidence."

"Oh?"

"Not the Cuba part." Ford checked the bleachers—only a couple of wives in attendance—then found the main field, where stadium lights created a silver dome. Minnesota's minor league team, the Miracle, was playing St. Pete, a few hundred fans in attendance. He said, "You'll see when he gets here."

"Who?"

"*If* he shows up," Ford said, "you'll understand. A friend from Central America. He was drunk when he called, which might explain why he's late. Or might not."

That made perfect sense to Tomlinson. He nodded, fingering a scar on his temple hidden by scraggly hair—a figure eight that he insisted was an infinity symbol.

"Saving that Ridley is the coincidence. If it was a Ridley. The data goes back to 1953—one was caught in nets off Pinar del Río on Cuba's western coast. A few years back, a Ridley was photographed laying eggs near Sarasota. They're not supposed to be in the Gulf or Caribbean, but sea turtles are like underwater birds. They travel anywhere they want; flawless navigation systems, which suggests a magnetic sensitivity that's still not understood. It crossed my mind I've never actually seen a Ridley. Not confirmed anyway, which is why I'm pissed at myself about this morning."

Tomlinson's attention focused. "*Really?* You sure that's the only reason?" He said it as if envisioning a woman who was lonely and alone in her vacation cottage. Then added, "I hope you're not thinking about going back to Cuba. That's risking jail, man; a firing squad, from what I remember. Or has something changed?"

Ford shrugged, adjusted his protective gear, and buckled his pants. "I'll ask Victor to catch the first few innings. He might have gone to the wrong field."

"Vic? No . . . he went to his car to get eye black. What about Cuba? You know I'm right."

"Not him. The guy I was talking about."

Tomlinson said to Ford, whose spikes clicked as he walked away, "Not if I'm called in to pitch, you're not leaving. Hey . . . *Whoa!* Do you have a death wish or get dumped again? Dude . . . I can talk you through this."

. . .

**THERE IS A FINE LINE** between getting dumped and a relationship ended by the unanimous vote of one

Ford thought about that as he walked past the spring training clubhouse, across the parking lot to the stadium, into a tunnel of noise and odors: popcorn, beer, and grilled brats. Cuba was also on his mind. What Tomlinson said would've been true a few years ago but might be okay now with the right cover story—or a companion with the right political ties.

The man he was searching for had those ties.

Ford spotted him in the outfield cheap seats, alone above the bull pen. The nearest cluster of fans was three sections closer to third base. The man had been watching relief pitchers warm up, not the game, but was now arguing with two security cops.

No doubt who it was, even from a distance. The man's size and his choice of seats would have been enough.

Baseball spikes are tricky on aluminum. It took Ford a while to get to left field and intervene on behalf of the man who was an old enemy and sometimes a friend—General Juan Simón Rivera, recently arrived from Central America via Havana.

“Tell them,” Rivera said in English when he spotted Ford. “Tell them who I am. Perhaps they will understand that diplomatic immunity includes baseball and cigars.”

He'd been smoking a Cohiba, that was the problem.

Ford replied in Spanish. “You want me to blow your cover, General?” This was safe to ask in front of two Anglo sheriff's deputies who resembled farmhands.

Rivera, the former dictator of Masagua, a tiny country that exported bananas and revolution, got control of himself. Decided, “Hmm. A man of my intellect is seldom a donkey's ass, but good point. Yes . . . better to indulge these fascists—for now.” Spoke loudly in slang Spanish, then waited with regal impatience while Ford pacified the cops.

When they were gone, Ford endured a bear hug; they exchanged pleasantries—who was married, how many wives, how many kids. Rivera, finally getting to it, said, “I'm surprised you recognized me. I've come incognito for a reason.”

Instead of signature khakis and boots, he wore a yellow Hawaiian shirt, a Disney visor, and flip-flops. Not enough to disguise a husky Latino with a gray-splotched beard and wild Russian hair, but Ford played along.

“A European tourist, General, that's what I thought at first. Very clever.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Oh, it took me a while.”

Rivera expected that. It was a game they played, informal formality, but each man knew the truth about the other. He said, “Sometimes a wolf must blend with the sheep. Yet, not clever enough to fool you, my old catcher friend.” He noticed Ford's uniform. “Why are you not on the field? I might even agree to pitch a few innings . . . if you have a large uniform. It doesn't have to be clean, but it cannot be an even number. I'm partial to the numbers three, nine, and thirty-seven.” With his hands, he gestured *I think you understand*.

Santería, a mix of Catholicism and voodoo, was big on numerology, especially when it came to baseball. Rivera was devoted to the game. In Central America, he had built his own field in the rainforest and drafted soldiers based on their batting averages. He fancied himself a great pitcher whose politics had ruined his shot at the major leagues.

Ford replied, “General, my teammates would be honored. But, first . . . why are you here?”

“Always the same with you, Marion. Rush, rush, rush. Only bachelorhood has spared you ulcers, I think.” Rivera nodded to the bull pen, where a pitcher who looked sixteen but was almost seven feet tall, sat with his hat askew. “That is Ruben. He's one of my protégés. The Twins have offered him a tryout, but a mere formality. Ruben's fastball rivals my own, yet he is a southpaw, as you can tell

from his sombrero.”

A joke. *Gorro* was Spanish for “cap.” The general was in a pawky mood.

“He can’t be from Masagua. I never saw anyone from Masagua much over six feet—except for you. Are you his agent?”

Rivera touched an index finger to his lips. “Unfortunately, the situation requires that Ruben pretends he doesn’t know me. I can’t explain right now.”

Ford could guess where this was going but waited.

“I have an interesting proposition, Marion.”

Ford said, “In Cuba.”

“I told you as much on the phone. A nice chunk of silver in U.S. dollars if you agree.”

Ford sensed trouble but also escape: turtles, isolated beaches, a land without cell phones—if he wasn’t arrested. “I’ll listen, but I don’t do that sort of work anymore. Not if it’s dangerous. Or political work—count me out if politics are involved.” He hadn’t ruled out human trafficking in deference to his own curiosity.

“Politics?” Rivera said. “I spit on the word. I piss on their speeches. To hell with their silly games. I am a freedom fighter—always—but have learned there are benefits to this free enterprise system of yours. A man is allowed to change, isn’t he?”

“Only the small-minded hate change, General.”

In clumsy English, Rivera replied, “You can say that twice. We will feast ourselves several days in Cuba. A week at most, every expense paid. But, first”—he hesitated while shifting to Spanish—“I have a little problem here that must be dealt with.”

“In Florida?”

“Let us hope so.” Rivera leaned closer to speak over the noise of the PA system. “I have lost a baseball player. Temporarily, I’m sure, but it would be unwise to contact your police.”

“How long has he been missing?”

“Not ‘missing’; ‘wandered off.’ Since this morning, when I visited his motel—a place not far from here, with a large red sign. Without shoes or money, the lunatic could not have gone far.”

“He’s crazy?”

“Well . . . no more than most, but he’s not as smart as normal men. And honest, very honest, which makes him unpredictable.”

Ford had spent much of his life on the water and in baseball dugouts, which is why he asked, “Were his glove and bat missing? He could have worn spikes instead of shoes.”

“I didn’t think to check. I was too angry because a briefcase I entrusted to him was also gone. Nothing of value—some letters, a few photos. What I think is, the crazy fool took my orders to protect the case too seriously and carried it with him when he wandered off.” Rivera demonstrated the size of the case by holding his hands apart. “An old leather briefcase. Not big, but well sewn.”

Ford wondered about that, looking down into the bull pen, where the seven-foot-tall pitching prospect, sitting alone, was scrutinizing a Gatorade label. “Well . . . if the kid looks anything like Ruben, he shouldn’t be too hard to find.”

“No, he is a shortstop, and not so young. There is no birth certificate to prove his age, but his brain has not matured. Figueroa Casanova is the name he uses—but we are wasting time. Tomorrow, we will find Figuerito. Tonight, we must discuss this trip I’ve proposed.”

Ford’s mind returned to Cuba. The government there respected Juan Rivera; with Rivera, he’d probably be safe. But there were other concerns. “Would we be traveling . . . together?”

Rivera misread Ford’s wariness and was insulted. “In my country, *generalissimos* do not travel like Yankee flamenco dancers or *maricóns*. Separately, of course, so bring a woman—two or three—all you want. I will provide you with a rental car and gas. Details can wait, but on a certain day we will

rendezvous in the west of Cuba. A day or two there, shake a few hands, then back to Havana. Have you traveled the Pinar del Río region?"

---

Ford knew what "shaking hands" meant but pictured dirt roads and rainforest when he replied, "I'd have to think back."

"Magnificent countryside, and vegetables from the garden. There, every village has its own baseball *campo*, so you will have many opportunities to swing the bat." Rivera removed a cigar from his shirt, bit the tip off, chewed and swallowed. "Inferior pitching, of course, but on an island ruled by Fidel for fifty years, what do you expect?"

That was an odd thing for Rivera to say, and it would have been heresy in Cuba, but Ford was warming to the idea. He'd felt restless for weeks, but still had to say, "This can't be legal."

No, it wasn't. He could tell by Rivera's attempt to skirt the subject, which is when Ford decided, "Tell me anyway."



In his lab, Ford dropped three brine shrimp pellets into an aquarium while speaking to Tomlinson, who had an ice pack bag on his knee and a pitcher of beer on his lap. There had been a collision at home plate, but just bruises.

Ford said, “Rivera is smuggling Cuban baseball players into the U.S. He didn’t admit it, of course. He came up with another story—a bizarre one you’ll like—but I’m sure that’s what he’s doing. Now the heat’s on in Cuba and Rivera wants me to go along, probably as a beard. Or who knows, with him

“How bizarre?”

“The cover story? Just so-so, by your standards. He says in the late fifties, three American ballplayers buried their motorcycles and some guns the day Fidel Castro came to power. You know, rather than have their valuables confiscated. Thompson submachines, presentation-grade. But let’s stick with the smuggling thread and I’ll fill you in later.”

Tomlinson moved the ice pack, fidgeting. “Were the bikes Harleys? If they were Harleys, the story is bullshit. No ballplayer would bury his Harley.”

Ford took a patient breath. “Anyway . . . the U.S. has loosened sanctions, but Cuban players still need legal asylum from a third country before Major League Baseball will sign a contract. Most escape through Mexico. The drug cartels handle everything—boats, papers, even sports agents. But now Rivera has set up his own cut-rate version through contacts in Masagua. Or could be Nicaragua. Pretty much the same political players both countries. Oh—get this—for start-up money, he’s been smuggling Cuban hard goods: cigars, paintings, historical items. Anything he can sell on the Internet while the Castro regime collapses.”

Wind slapped waves against the pilings, sifting odors of saltwater and iodine through the floor. Tomlinson was still wearing baseball pants but had traded his spikes for Birkenstocks. He adjusted the ice pack and wiggled his toes as if they were cold. “For a while,” he said, “I thought you were talking

about the Juan Rivera I know—big guy from Masagua, a pitcher with a decent slider? The famous general. It's such a common name."

"That's him. You were pissed because he wouldn't give you a uniform when we were down there, then almost hit one out. That was more than, what, ten years ago? Now Rivera's caught in a squeeze between the Cuban government for stealing players and the Mexican cartels for horning in on their business. That's why he wants help, I think."

Tomlinson smiled, gave a sideways look. "Naw, you're messing with my head."

"Ask him tomorrow when he shows up. If he shows. We're supposed to help him find a shortstop who wandered off this morning."

"You're serious."

"After all your cracks about my lack of imagination, what do you think?"

That clinched it. Tomlinson placed the beer pitcher on the floor—a man trying to control his temper. "You're telling me that Juan Simón Rivera, the Maximum Leader of the Masaguan Revolution . . . the *generalissimo* of the goddamn People's Army . . . is smuggling ballplayers and selling shit on eBay—"

"On the Internet . . . Yeah, he admitted that much—"

"And profiting from the flesh trade? Gad, that's freakin' human trafficking, man."

"Well, depends on the ballplayer, I suppose." Ford thought that might get a smile. It didn't. "I could be wrong. Like I said, he gave me that story about motorcycles and machine guns. I can tell you the rest now or wait until we drive in to look for his missing shortstop."

Tomlinson didn't hear the last part. He got to his feet, chewed at a string of hair while he paced, limping a little. "That *bastard*. Is there not a shred of Euro socialist integrity left in our leaders? A feeding frenzy of mobster behavior—that's what's happening. Even to advance Utopian goals, it is totally bogus." He cringed and sighed. "Thank god Fidel and François Mitterrand aren't alive to see this day."

Ford, attempting subtlety, replied, "A lot of people would agree." He flicked on the aquarium's lights and noted movement among clusters of oysters at the bottom of the tank that had appeared lifeless but were now coming alive. "Watch this. It took only two days to condition the stone crabs—see that big female creeping out? Lights mean it's feeding time. At five days, even the barnacles started to respond."

Among the oysters, a mini-forest of lace blooms were sprouting, robotic fans that sifted amid a sudden flurry of crabs—dozens of crabs—most of them tiny.

Tomlinson said, "There you go—a feeding frenzy. I rest my case. Living entities perverted by the system to hide from the light—at least until some poor, innocent shortstop walks into the money trap. Now I understand why Rivera didn't have the balls to look me in the face tonight and say hello. Which is why I assumed it was a different guy."

Instead of pitching for Ford's team, the *generalissimo* had remained in the main stadium but was gone by the end of the game—a game they might have won if, in the ninth inning, down by two runs, Tomlinson hadn't tried to steal home. By all standards, a truly boneheaded play.

Ford asked, "Are you mad at the general or still mad at yourself?"

"Sure, rub it in. I didn't buy a plane ticket to fly back here and lose. Be aggressive—that's just smart baseball."

In October, Tomlinson had sailed his boat, *No Más*, to Key West for the Halloween freak show known as Fantasy Fest. That was three weeks ago, but he couldn't resist returning for a tournament that attracted teams from around the country, games played day and night at the best fields in South Florida.

"Stealing home with two outs? Down two runs?" Ford tried to sound neutral.

“Surprised everyone but the damn umpires, didn’t I? Dude, spontaneity, that’s just who I am.” Tomlinson looked into the empty pitcher. “You’re out of beer, Doc. Hate to say it, but I warned you this morning. Me sleeping outside in a hammock takes at least a six-pack—and that’s before I knew we’d be searching for some poor dugout refugee from the slave trade. What’s the shortstop’s name? Just from how the name flows, I can tell you if he’s any good.”

Ford, walking toward the door, replied, “The 7-Eleven’s still open, if you’re desperate. I’ve got to find my dog.”

. . .

**FORD’S LAB** was an old house on pilings in the shallows of Dinkin’s Bay, just down from the marina, where, on this Tuesday night, people who lived on boats were buttoned in tight but still awake, watching monitors that brightened the cabins along A dock.

The dog was there, curled up next to the bait tank, probably tired from swimming all day. A picnic table allowed a view of the bay. Ford sat, opened his laptop while explaining to the dog, “I didn’t renew my Internet service because it’s so damn intrusive. And I don’t want to be there when Tomlinson sneaks a joint. Or comes back with more beer.”

The dog’s eyes sagged open. His tail thumped once. He went back to sleep.

“People say you need Internet for research? What the hell’s wrong with going to the library? I like libraries—or used to.” Ford, using two fingers, banged at the keys. “Next time—I mean this, by god—Tomlinson is getting a hotel room and he can either ride his bike or call a cab. What kind of grown man asks to do a sleepover? His exact word: *sleepover*. Then bitches at me about not buying enough beer.”

More hammering on the keys before he scanned the boats, some held together by epoxy and tape, others expensive yachts. “Crappy reception out here. You’d think one of these people could afford a decent router. Hey”—he was speaking to the dog—“*Hey*, if I’ve got to sleep in the same house with him, you do, too. Your too-tired-to-walk crap isn’t going to fool me twice. The way he snores, I get it but I’m the one who needs sleep.”

Ford zipped the laptop into its case, loaded the dog into his truck, and drove to Blind Pass, telling himself he would cast for snook along the beach on the good outgoing tide despite a waxing moon.

From the parking lot of Santiva General Store he could look across the road to the beach and colorful cottages of The Castaways, red, green, and yellow, although they appeared gray at eleven p.m. on this breezy night.

From the back of the truck, Ford selected a spinning rod—an intentional deception. All the cottages were dark but for one where a woman, opening the screen door, said, “I was hoping you’d stop by.”

. . .

**SHE HAD YET** to request or offer an exchange of last names, or personal histories, which created a vacuum of protocol that, to Ford, felt like freedom.

He asked, “Need any help?” No lights on, the woman was in the bathroom, searching for something—a towel, it turned out.

“Not with you around. Wasn’t it obvious? That was a new one for me.”

“It seemed natural, just sort of happened.”

The woman, voice husky, said, “I wouldn’t mind if it happened again,” and came back into bed.

Maggie, that was her first name. Whether it was her real name or short for “Margret” or “Marjorie,” he hadn’t risked inquiring. Intimacy with a stranger was a cozy tunnel untethered to the past, open at both ends. Secrets, if shared, would necessarily vanish at first light.

Seldom had Ford felt so relaxed.

Later, they talked some more. Him saying, “I know the Cuba idea sounds far-fetched, but it’s an actual business proposition. Usually, I’d put it down on paper, a list of pros and cons, instead of bouncing it off you. You mind?”

Without using names, he had condensed Rivera’s unusual cover story.

Maggie started to ask “What kind of business are you . . .” but caught herself and opted for a safer option. “Machine guns and motorcycles, huh? I guess we’re all Huck Finn at heart. I’ve always wanted to go to Cuba—not that I’m fishing for an invite. I’ve got this place booked through Sunday.” She tested the silence for awkwardness, then added, “Havana is beautiful, from the pictures. Have you been?”

He dodged that. “There are direct flights from Tampa now. That would make it easier.”

“But is it legal? And, once you get there, is it safe? I read an article about an antiques dealer—he’s from Miami, I think—that he’s in jail, accused of stealing documents from the Castro estate. Paintings and stuff, too. And this other man who tried to smuggle in electronic equipment. Almost four years he’s been in prison.”

Ford’s attention vectored. “Which Castro?”

“Well . . . I’m not sure, but they’ve both been sentenced to death by firing squad. Not the Castros, the men I’m telling you about. Or sentenced to life. Some terrible punishment. I’d have to find the article.”

Ford settled back. “It wouldn’t have made the news if it was true.”

“You mean it *would* have made the news.”

Too late to correct his slip. “Could be. You hear all kinds of rumors about that place.”

“What I’m saying is, you need to confirm with your friend that what you’re doing is legal. If he is a friend . . . or *she* is a friend. Either way.” Her hand found Ford’s thigh. “Sorry, none of my business. Tell me the rest.”

He did, paraphrased a summary he’d written on a legal pad earlier in the lab:

On December 31, 1958, three American pitchers playing for the Havana Sugar Kings were delayed by extra innings and accidentally trapped when Castro’s army came to power. The players—two from the Midwest, one from the Bronx—weren’t politically savvy but knew it was dangerous to return to Havana until things cooled down.

They were cautious for good reason: Cuba’s recent dictator, flaunting Caribbean League rules, had personally signed their contracts after bribing them with cash and presents. Bribes included new Harley-Davidson motorcycles and three gold-plated Thompson submachine guns, each personalized and engraved LOYAL BEYOND DEATH—FULGENCIO BATISTA.

At the end of seventeen innings, when news about the coup circulated into their dugout, that inscription took on a darker meaning. Fulgencio Batista was the recently deposed dictator.

Everyone in Havana had seen their hot rod Harleys and gaudy rifle scabbards. No denying that. So the three Americans waved good-bye to the team bus, mounted their bikes, and lay low in western Cuba for a week. Ultimately, they swore a blood oath and either hid or buried their valuables before returning to the United States. Because of the embargo, they never went back.

Ford ended the story, adding, “My friend has a contact who claims to know where the stuff is. It would be fun, I think. Not for the money—if we recover anything, it should go to the players’ families. That part we haven’t discussed. Problem is, my friend might have invented the whole business just to lure me down there so I can help with something else.”

Maggie, rather than ask the obvious, decided to have fun with it. “They buried their motorcycles . . . my god. That sounds unlikely. Probably hid them, don’t you think? Even if they didn’t, you should go on Adventure for its own sake. We get trapped in ruts, doing what’s expected instead of what we really want.” She squeezed his hand. “I don’t mean to sound maudlin, but I’ve wasted too many years afraid

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