

EAST OF

HAITI

THREE NOVELLAS



CÉSAR
SÁNCHEZ
BERAS

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CÉSAR SÁNCHEZ BERAS

English translations by
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To Rhina P. Espaillat with deep gratitude

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HE MUST NOT KNOW IT

English translation by
Rhina P. Espaillat

Chapter 1

MADAME DEGÁ

“There is a kind of escape that looks like seeking.”

Victor Hugo, 1802-1885

Alberto Durosier, now known as Zero-One, arrived in the neighborhood during the final weeks of winter 1970. The family had been looking around from city to city, across the whole south of the country, as if running from something malignant and unknown. They settled on Seventh Street, in the neighborhood of Villa Consuelo in Santo Domingo, after eluding, thanks to some good luck, a certain stroke of bad luck—a major mishap in their original home, Barahona.

The truck used to transport the few possessions that comprised their improvised move was not adequate for that type of service. It was a massive mastodon that looked like a big, rambling metal house with tires worn smooth by overuse; no rear lights to indicate stops, and no rear mirrors, so the driver had to work magic to know who was coming up close behind the truck.

The old motor of what was once a 1959 Leyland Hippo would snore, threatening to stop in the middle of Sanchez highway during the weekly trip it normally made from the interior of the country. Whoever saw it far away did not confer on it the nobility of its origin. When it crossed in front of the stands built

roadside it caused shock because of its rickety appearance and total lack of paint, its bed surrounded by a railing of tubes and a canvas for covering the merchandise it originally transported.

The truck's owner was a middle-aged man, paunchy, with narrowed, unusually lively eyes. A farmer toughened by daily work, without the mettle necessary for that kind of labor, especially for a man preceded by a well-earned reputation for being quick with a knife. He knew the country's every corner, no matter the spot or site pointed out to him, but he was born and raised in Moca, in a settlement called Estancia Nueva. His transport was, as they say, the soul of his business, since he was a seller of chickens on a grand scale, and he delivered them all over the capital during the first hours of the morning. The owner of the truck had an order of some few hundred pounds to deliver to the marketplace at Villa Consuelo, and he did the new arrivals a favor by bringing their possessions, which he dumped in front of Number 49 without even making sure that was the address to be occupied by those he had just transported.

La Turca, the name by which the woman was known who owned the little house in the back, looked with some mistrust at the woman who was to be her tenant before a breath of uncommon goodness pierced her maternal heart. She too had roamed around from place to place, without a husband to support her and her hungry children. On seeing herself in the image of another misfit she couldn't help taking pity on that very skinny woman, who had a mad look, and was carrying a child of about two astride her narrow waist.

After a long time, the neighborhood realized that Cuza, as the mother of Albertico was called, was a native of Haiti. Her birthplace was the community of Pétion-Ville, and she had found work not long before in the home of a landowner in the sugar business. In her latest job, she had been impregnated by a moneyed man who frequently visited the home where she had

worked since she was a little girl until almost thirteen, when her grace—that of a black woman—initiated the *via crucis* caused by her misfortune.

Cuza's mother was Degá Durosier, a woman of medium height with round, expressive eyes. She seemed never to be tired, could do hundreds of things during the day, many at once without breathing a word of complaint. She had come into the world in a very poor village a few kilometers from the ancient city she loved with all her soul. Her desire to progress took them and her husband to Pétion-Ville in search of food for the growing family, and to build a better future. At that time the new place that took them in was a birthplace of merchants and artisans. Painters who offered works of great artistic value, but were urged by poverty to sell them for a tenth of their worth. Woodworkers who carved into cedar and mahogany indigenous landscapes that no longer existed. Nevertheless, they had no opportunity to raise a family in peace, nor to become really acquainted with their own country. Fierce pursuit by the Haitian government called for the unexpected absence of the husband. Finding herself alone and pursued, she had no option but to flee without looking back. To leave Pétion-Ville at once and cross the border to this part of the island, ending up in the settlement of the sugar works known as Batey Central de Barahona, in worse conditions than those they had left behind, and a child still breast-feeding.

She found work as a cleaning woman, but in a short time other duties were added: she served as an errand-girl who shopped twice a week for the family's food; nursemaid to the children of the lady of the house until they went to bed; hairdresser to the same lady, braiding her straight hair to embellish it; and every other night, provided sexual release to the master, who from the first day did not hide the libidinous looks he gave the hips of the worker he had hired.

Degá was the firstborn of the fourth-grade elementary school teacher, Alexandrine Chevalier, and Webert Durosier. Madame Chevalier was a natural teacher of reading and writing in creole, or, as she used to say, the language of the people, and worked tirelessly at the President Toussaint school. Monsieur Durosier was a musician and self-taught intellectual who became aware very early of the political problems of his country. Her father gave no ground when he knew he was right about some issue. His ideas, set to popular musical scores and sung, attracted the attention of the henchmen of the Duvalier tyranny, and he had to run for his life. First to France for a short stay, during which he improved his French, then to New York, to perfect his knowledge of the English language and try to earn a living performing with the Caribbean afro-jazz musicians in Harlem and, finally to Boston, where he met his death when a taxi-driver ignored a red light and drove into a tall, slender black man who was walking from his apartment to the Methodist Church to give music lessons on a volunteer basis.

When Degá saw herself in the whirlpool of widowhood, with a small child and no husband to protect her, she didn't hesitate before crossing the border to the village of Jimaní. Like hundreds of others of her countrymen, she saw a brief oasis on the eastern part of her island and put space in between, to distance herself from the tragedy of her own surroundings.

But her chain of penury was just beginning to take shape. Degá's unspeakable calvary took her to survive in a hell disguised as a country estate. The huge house of the owners, that house of the rich, that place where peons and servants die, where she sighted land, was the closest thing to slavery that she could remember. The night that they found her hallucinating that she was returning to her country she had a fever of over thirty-nine degrees Celsius. The wife of Señor Mendoza, for the

first time in their married life, opposed her husband's decision and quickly sent a servant to fetch Dr. Abad.

The doctor was Dominican of Lebanese descent, and served as a veterinarian at the sugar mill. They called him for an emergency and he came under the impression that he would earn a healthy sum for taking a look at one or another of the animals on the land of the engineer Mendoza, but when he reached the house they led him through to the barracks in the dark where Degá was dying. She had contracted tetanus walking barefoot over rusty barbed wire on her way to market.

The once cheerful face that used to shine like a mirror had become almost grotesque, deformed by the grimaces provoked by increasing pain. Her muscles, as they contracted, added a load of years that she had not lived, and spasms overran her body from her feet to her tangled hair. From afar she seemed to be laughing inside her sadness, but seen more closely it was evident that it was her suffering that produced that twisted smile with what remained of her full lips. Her pharynx had begun to narrow, introducing a desperate asphyxiation. She had not eaten for several days, and only moistened her lips slightly in her struggle against the fever. The tension of her fists and arms had shrunk her to a stain on the white sheet that covered the bed. It was the closest thing to death that the estate had witnessed. They wanted to avoid exposing Degá's daughter to that Dantesque scene by removing her from her mother, in a kind of quarantine imposed more out of pity than sanitary purposes.

Degá, their loyal black worker, died half an hour later, despite what the doctor, something of a good soul, attempted to do: administer intravenously a load of penicillin used for sick horses. Before closing those intensely black eyes forever on the world that had wounded her in so many ways, she regarded them all for a few seconds and fastened her eyes on the mistress

to beg a favor: “Look after my daughter, madame! *Bondye ap pey ou!*”

That was all she said with the few words she could articulate from the flames of fever. An overwhelming torment consumed her wholly, not so much the fear of death as leaving her defenselessness little girl an orphan.

The Mendoza home continued undisturbed, despite the absence of that woman who, for such a long time, watched over everything in the mansion to assure that all would be in order. The little girl had taken up the reins of the house before the departure of her mother, and turned out to be equally hard-working, although she had much to learn about preparing meals for her employers.

After a few years the belly of the child, who had already entered adolescence, began to expand in a way that suggested something was taking place in her body; a burden of shame and impotence kept her away from everyone and she hardly ever went out even to the patio, hiding herself in chores and duties, attending to the kitchen and the house. They forced her to say what they all suspected in some way, but no one in the family wanted to admit. Corralled among them all, she identified by both first name and last the man responsible for the violation and the resulting pregnancy that she would now endure.

They asked themselves how they would tell the society that observed them that Alberto Mendoza, the engineer, the bachelor most sought by young ladies of marriageable age, the rich man about town—he who played tennis and spent the Christmas holidays in the United States, the best partner for any matrimony, heir to a growing fortune since age thirty-five—had begotten a child with a girl, a little black girl who ran errands at the market, the daughter of a Haitian servant.

The employers wanted to blame her for a non-existent seduction and a lascivious offer that had never happened, but she

had only enough strength to cry inconsolably. She cried broken buckets worth of tears. All of this in the crowded gathering in the living room seemed to be the climax of a pre-ordained curse, hearing the name of the younger brother of the engineer Mendoza, and yet no one ventured to suggest a just solution to that unspeakable assault.

They commiserated momentarily with the victim's helplessness. They tried to console her with the crumbs of a pity that lasted only a few hours. By the end of the day, they had given her some money for the impending departure, raw food in a knapsack and some used clothing for herself and for the creature not yet born. What seemed like generosity from the family was in no sense a gift inspired by goodness. The package of gifts was given to her on an unshakeable condition to "Go, and don't come back!"

With that laconic command they asked her not only to leave the town, but also to disappear from the life of the lady's brother-in-law. While she gathered the items and prepared to leave, they gave her the last instruction: "The child can't be born, and you know it very well. You are not to give birth to it. This problem should be resolved right away, today, by any means. This money is to resolve the matter. And for your own good, don't say a single word about what has happened."

They sent her with one of the peons to a doctor friend who was an expert in such matters. She traveled seated on some sacks of agave on the floor of a van of the kind used for taking the harvest from the farm to the market. For a moment she thought her employers were right, and she repeated to herself what they had said: "The child can't be born, and you know it very well." But when she placed her hand on her belly and felt a gentle movement that pushed on her ribs, a windstorm of tenderness gave her back the strength they had taken from her with their threats. At that moment, she decided to give the creature waiting to be born what they wanted to deny it, the right to live.