



## A Bridge in Darkness

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Pureplay Press, Los Angeles, January 2005

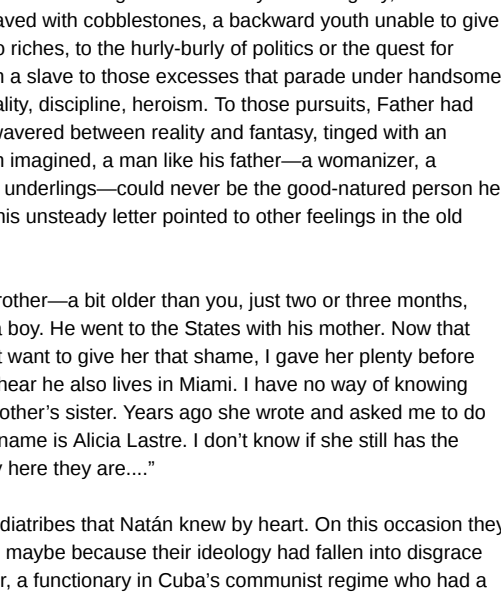
### Chapter One

At age thirty-nine, Natán Velázquez found out he had a half-brother.

"I have a brother," he told himself, purposely omitting the word "half," which he found a limitation. An only child, he had forever wanted to share the mystery, or at times the shame, of having parents.

Reuniting with his brother, he imagined, would be like facing a lost fragment of mirror: finding in another person the identical mole on the right hand, that same inflection in the voice, the same way of knitting one's eyebrow or glancing sideways. Even more, he could count on a companion for life's inexorable stretches; a confidant, a shoulder to lean on during a lonely turn. Natán was a man given to fantasy, a man who in another time—say, a century ago—might have written poetry.

Now he was just a dreamer with no family ties, no kids, no wife, no homeland—hiding from life in his daily routine at a Miami export company that sent tanker parts to Venezuela. His apartment had a balcony overlooking a lake that reflected, at nightfall, a forest of pines on the opposite shore and gave the fleeting impression that life repeats itself down to the last detail, an idea that made him secure and also disquieted him. At times a breeze rippling the water broke the stillness of the reflection, tossed a small boat near a ramshackle dock, stirred branches that raised themselves like arms to touch the edges of his quiet balcony, or frightened a bird of sinister plumage that flew off with a squawk into the grove of pines. The bird cast a shadow over the tiny waves before vanishing into the foliage; its lyrical moans echoed through the vegetation. Then the humid air made a mist on the glass of his sliding door and the landscape faded away, overcome by the invading dark. The living-room lamp shone on the glass where water drops had formed arabesques, indefinite figures. Natán felt unhappy with his present situation, while his past had grown distant from him.



Here, however, was his father's letter, dated with a trembling hand in the city of Camagüey, where Natán once had sauntered about on streets paved with cobblestones, a backward youth unable to give his all to the passions of life, whether to sex, to riches, to the hurly-burly of politics or the quest for power. His father, quite the opposite, had been a slave to those excesses that parade under handsome names: love, justice, the general welfare, equality, discipline, heroism. To those pursuits, Father had dedicated his energetic body and a soul that wavered between reality and fantasy, tinged with an endemic dose of cruelty; because, or so Natán imagined, a man like his father—a womanizer, a coveter, a doctrinaire socialist who abused his underlings—could never be the good-natured person he pretended or fancied himself to be. And now this unsteady letter pointed to other feelings in the old man: uncertainty and guilt.

"I never wanted to tell you, but you've got a brother—a bit older than you, just two or three months, maybe four. I haven't seen him since he was a boy. He went to the States with his mother. Now that your mother has died—I never told her, I didn't want to give her that shame, I gave her plenty before the divorce—I think you should look for him. I hear he also lives in Miami. I have no way of knowing where he is. You can try to find his aunt, his mother's sister. Years ago she wrote and asked me to do something for a cousin in jail here. The lady's name is Alicia Lastre. I don't know if she still has the same address and phone number, but anyway here they are..."

The rest of the letter was drenched in political diatribes that Natán knew by heart. On this occasion they sounded more like a defense than a reproach, maybe because their ideology had fallen into disgrace all over the world, or maybe because the writer, a functionary in Cuba's communist regime who had a son—or two—in exile, now found himself at death's door; for in his last letter a few months earlier, the old man had said the doctor gave him little time to live. Though he hadn't mentioned an actual illness, it seemed his heart or liver or some other vital organ had fatally weakened; and seventy years of passionate intensity were now pointing to their pitiless conclusion.

Sitting on his darkened balcony, Natán looked out at the faraway lights of downtown Miami and thought about his father, who would soon die; about his mother, whom he had buried in Florida, an old emigrant lady interred in a country she had never managed to understand; and the lake's inky-black waters, headlights on the highway, songs of nighttime birds, planes taking off at the airport nearby, shadows of pine trees on a deserted shore led him to reflect on death, solitude, exile, and the unaccountable truth of being alive.

Neither the lively images from his television set, where all manner of melodrama or foolish comedy unfolded, nor the occasional visits of his two lovers—Sandra the divorcee or Teresa his neighbor, a married woman with two daughters—could stir in him even the tiniest excitement that people need for any pleasure in life.

Every day, Monday to Saturday, he plunged into the dreary world of commerce, where prices, motor serial numbers, and piece counts went back and forth over the phone. Faceless voices in different accents and languages pronounced the same vacant courtesies. With a businessman's cool dexterity, Natán worked the invisible net that connected Miami to San Francisco, New York, Chicago, Houston, Caracas and Maracaibo. The boss had been happy enough with him to give him a brand new car. And with his commission from a recent sale, he had made the down payment on his apartment by the lake. He alone knew that his businessman's identity was a sham. Inside himself he felt unworthy, unsure, unhappy; and he was pushing forty.

"So it seems I have a brother," he mused aloud on reading his father's letter. That night he clumsily delivered the news to Sandra, who burst out laughing.

"Don't expect too much! I've got five," she said.

They had sex on the carpet, Natán leading her to different positions in order to fend off the boredom he had started to feel with her anxious, overripe body—a body that pursued him at every instant. Sandra had wanted to do it with the lights on, maybe so she could read her lover's face during the act. Natán wanted to unload the woman and didn't know how. He only understood the moment had come for the two of them to set up house together or break it off. Sandra was tired of living alone. Her son had left with his father, and she didn't want to go through life as someone's sweetheart. She was also possessive, and she suspected Natán was seeing someone else.

"I need more time," he said. "We should know each other better."

"More time? Ten months isn't enough? I'm thirty-five, you're almost forty. We're not kids anymore."

"That's just it, Sandra. What's ten months? Nothing."

When they were done on the floor, Natán, irascible and panting for air, opened the balcony door. The apartment became small when Sandra went walking around barefoot from room to room, fixing her hair, drying off drops that slithered on her flesh after a shower, criticizing his mess of clothes or books and, worst of all, trying to pick up the scent of his other visitor. Her own perfume stuck to the towels and furniture with a dogged insistence. She already behaved like mistress of the house. She wanted to bear Natán's child.

"It's time for you to think about being a father," Sandra told him that night.

"I'm not cut out for having children," he answered. "I'll never be a good father."

My father wasn't. These things are hereditary. And if I think about what's happened to my brother, even I can't complain."

"Your half-brother," Sandra corrected him.

"Yes, half—you're right—my half-brother. My father says his name is José."

A man called José Velázquez. A disembodied being, Mustachioed or clean-shaven. A full head of hair or a bowling ball. A smiling expression or a sneering one. An ordinary guy or an illustrious professor. A dedicated worker or a goof-off. A family man or a stubborn old bachelor like himself. A model of balance or a nut case. A fugitive from the law or a judge. An atheist or a pastor. Quick to anger or easygoing, friendly or vindictive, serious or a clown, honorable or a liar, clumsy or deft, with a sunny disposition or a remorseless one. José Velázquez. Yes, Natán reflected, names are empty of meaning; and his half-brother's name was no exception.

The telephone, a device that at times determines the course of things, a minor deity in the service of Fate—a tamed and "technified" Hermes, Natán mused in recalling his high-school study of Greek—now put him in contact with the lady his father had mentioned.

"Alicia Lastre?" Natán asked in a nervous voice. "Are you the aunt of José Velázquez?"

Yes, she was. She spoke in the deliberate, dispassionate tone of someone for whom life holds no further surprises. Months had passed since she had heard anything of her nephew, who came and went without notice—a wanderer who showed up on the spur of the moment and departed just as unexpectedly, with an abrupt and puzzling farewell, never spelling out his plans, not wanting to give others a way of finding him.

He could be anywhere, Alicia said. One time he had sent her a postcard with a date-stamp from Argentina. His trade was unknown, maybe because he had none. Alicia had gotten to meet several of his lovers who had called her, politely inquired about her health or welfare, and after some minutes of mindless chatter, with poorly feigned disinterest, asked after José. He also had a few friends who apparently held him in high esteem but always wound up bemoaning his shiftiness, his unsteady, evasive nature.

Natán decided to pay Alicia a visit. The elderly lady lived in a tumbledown building in the poorest part of Little Havana. The trees, in accord with the houses, were depressed and rickety structures, at times concealing, with their threadbare foliage, the progressive erosion of walls and roofs. Natán entered the former hotel, now a lodging for pensioners, with the embarrassment of an inopportune visitor. The stairway stank of cats' urine. The carpet had all but disappeared under layers of filth; but Alicia's apartment, overstuffed with furniture and knickknacks, was apparently immune from dust and gave off a seasoned elegance. The octogenarian with a worshipper's gaze wore a spotless white dress, and her hands had a youthful sheen. Her gestures were informal, without ever missing their measure of courtesy. However, the light suffusing the room disturbed him. It seemed to come from several windows, raising slivers of color through the jam-packed dwelling; but the windows were actually shuttered, and the center of the room was lit with a single white lamp that overpowered the faint glow of candles on an altar fixed to the wall.

After a bit of small talk about ailments that older people use to chat up a stranger, the lady said quite unexpectedly, "José often spoke about you."  
"About me?" Natán asked in astonishment. "He knew who I was?"  
"Of course. He saw you several times in Cuba and then here, when you came—ten years ago, isn't it? I remember him telling me: My brother has arrived. I even asked him to bring you around, but he never answered me. That was just like him. And I didn't press him. It was at the time his mother died—may she rest in peace. Thanks to her, I got out of the hell that Cuba has become."

"No! Not possible. He must have been talking about another brother."  
"Another brother? No, he's an only child on his mother's side, as you are. As far as I understand, your father had no other children—or none that anybody knew. José's mother never married after her fiasco with your father. When he met her she was a virgin, and he was the only man of her life. It seems your father had this mysterious power with women. He left his mark on them. I pray to God that He forgive your father the harm he has done. He's not bad in his heart; he did me a great favor some years ago. He interceded for a cousin of mine who was a prisoner in Cuba."

"Why did José never approach me? Why didn't he tell me who he was? Did he say he had spoken with me?"  
"Not really. A number of times he came and told me: Today I saw my brother. And then he started in about something else. I don't ask him questions because José has always been a bit odd, reserved about his own affairs, too reserved, just like his mother, may she rest in peace. He got this trait from her. It's how he is. No one knows what he thinks. He tells you what he wants to tell you, and not another word."

"Do you have a photo of him?"

"I don't think so. He didn't like being photographed, any more than his mother did. From boyhood he had a phobia about that. I, on the other hand, being quite photogenic and also vain—why deny it—I've got a tremendous photo collection, hundreds of photos. Too bad, many of them are back in Cuba. Photos are good for showing other people how you used to be; because, my son, you change, you change until you become unrecognizable, and people don't want to think you were any other way. Even José has changed so much, he was such a handsome fellow, in a way he still is, but if you saw him now—he's gone white-haired, not a dark strand on his head. José has suffered greatly."

"We've all suffered," Natán said in a cutting tone, and he was taken aback by his own aggressiveness.

"That's true," the old lady hurried to agree. "All of us do that, all of us—from rich to poor, young to old—just José suffers more because he holds his suffering inside. He talks about this or that, but not about his own problems. I've never heard him complain. José is a saint, do you see? Some women have told me horror stories about him, but I know it's out of spite."

They remarked a frenzied scratching of the claws at the window. Across the lady's face, lit up by a gentle beam of the remarkable light shining in the room—which Natán supposed the mad's coming from a skylight, though he didn't look up for fear of being unseemly—there passed a slight shadow of irritation.

"It's the cat on the balcony," she said, "but we won't let him come in. He's behaved very badly, very badly. We're punishing him. What was I saying? Oh yes, those women in love with my nephew José."

"If you could give me a phone number, maybe through one of those ladies... Please understand, I want to know him. After all, he's my only brother—but how bizarre it is that he has never contacted me, even knowing who I am! He probably hates me."

Alicia Lastre bared her gums.

"José, hate? It's obvious you don't know him. José is love itself, love through and through. But he's always wanted to be free. Even from his mother, whom he adored. So I think you'd only lose time talking to those women—but maybe I have some numbers—yes, even if I haven't spoken with any of them for some time now—a certain Gladys, who used to ring me up quite a lot, and another called La China—also a friend, Gabriel Perdomo, who passed by here a couple of times—so many names, my son, so many people! I've known so many people, in Cuba and over here. It's like a dream, or maybe a nightmare. Time passes, we people come and go, a lot of them die. Can I make you some coffee?"  
Natán left the building at dusk. For a moment he hesitated, uncertain; he couldn't remember where he'd left the car. He was afraid someone might have stolen it, since the area gave off a sinister feeling in the half-light of day's end. In a doorway, a trio of ragged men drinking beer, their mouths attached to the flimsy metal cans, went silent as he passed. At the corner, young guys with marked Hispanic profiles were whispering under a street lamp. Their surly faces promised violence and their bodies gave off an acrid odor so strong as to be unnatural. Then he saw his car sitting defenseless at the opposite curb, near a cafeteria that exuded the stench of rotten lard. In another doorway a gaggle of Cubans—no mistaking their abrupt manner of speech—were making an uproar about the double-dealing of international politics, their voices eclipsing another, also distinctly Cuban, that jabbered from the radio.

A transplanted people, Natán thought as he languidly opened his car door—a graft that doesn't take. He and his brother had become denizens of that artificial world of a people who didn't fit in their own country or in any other.

As he started the engine, a car behind him peeled out with a big noise. Natán wanted the other car to pass him, but the other, its windows darkened, gave him the right of way. Natán turned at the corner, then at the next and the one after that. In the unrevealing semidarkness, the streets looked the same. On the rundown sidewalks, he found transients whose miserable appearance discouraged him from asking for the directions he needed. He was about to turn into a blind alley when he saw in the river the shadow of an enormous ship hulking in the water gave him pause. He was lost. He saw in the rearview mirror that the same car was following him closely, with its lights turned off. The car's windows, almost completely black, gave no view of the driver. It must be a coincidence, he told himself; but after driving several blocks with no particular aim, and realizing the darkened car hadn't stopped following him, he halted and got out. Moving away from his door with a slighted grimace, he went toward the other car, which had also stopped in the middle of the empty street.

Night had closed in. He contrived to walk with the brazen and energetic step he'd seen in B-films and TV dramas, groping blatantly in his pocket to pretend he was carrying a pistol. As Natán approached, the car pulled back slowly, spun around and quickly made off, throwing up a toxic cloud that dissolved in the dark and sickly trees. In the car's rapid retreat, Natán had barely made out the driver's profile through the half-open front window.

Amid the shadows, all he had seen clearly was a man with white hair.