Carmen Bernal

by Jean Hedgecock

*AT RISE: CARMEN is organizing gift bags and tissue paper. She does so carefully and deliberately. There are four gifts to be wrapped in total, and SHE does this throughout the monologue. These gifts are special, and CARMEN puts quite a bit of time and effort into preparing each one. Perhaps she curls ribbon or crafts bows. As she smooths white tissue paper between HER fingers:*

I remember the packing. I remember the feel of my white linen blouses between my fingertips. I could not part with those blouses. I knew once I left, it wouldn’t matter about uniforms, but when you wear a thing every day, it becomes a part of you. I wondered if my friends had packed theirs. I try to think back to the last time I saw my friends in their crisp, white blouses. That last day. The nuns were given seventy-two hours to leave the country and everyone was scrambling about gathering their things and saying goodbye. One of my teachers called me back and gave me a Madonna. To keep me safe.

I was not supposed to pack the Madonna. Only necessities. But I wrapped her in white tissue paper and hid her at the very bottom of my big, black duffle bag. Because of its shape, that bag was called el gusano, and so the children who left with those bags came to be called gusanos….worms.

In my memory of it, everything seems normal. My parents said it would be a few short months until we would be together. A man named George would meet me at the airport and look after me. They said it all so matter-of-factly and most of my friends had gone by then. It seemed like a normal thing to do. I was not afraid, not at all. I remember thinking of it as a kind of adventure.

My mother took me to the seamstress and we had two camiseros made for my departure. One was brown and yellow, a fall dress that looked like October. The other was solid navy and very elegant. I loved those dresses. My mother also took me to buy my first pair of high heels to wear to the airport. They were black and the heels were very pointy. I wonder now if my mother was trying to make me look older than I actually was. Maybe it worked because at the airport, many children were made to wear name tags, but not me. I remember feeling very grown up in my new dress, my heels clicking across the floor. We were placed inside of a large glass room, pecera, in English, the fish bowl.

*BEAT.*

A worm inside a fishbowl. I think I was maybe five hours inside, waiting while the officials searched all the children and their belongings. I watched them confiscate all the things they deemed non-essential. Who gets to choose whether a thing is essential or not?

I was very worried about the Madonna at the bottom of my bag and the gold Lady of Mount Carmel scapular my mother had placed around my neck for protection. Would the officials take them from me? The scapular was tucked inside my dress and not visible and they didn’t find the Madonna, which was a sort of miracle. I remember feeling very relieved that they didn’t take those things and glad that I hadn’t tried to pack my beloved dolls. The smaller children, the ones with the nametags, were crying. It was hard to tell if it was because they had been separated from their parents or because their possessions were being taken from them. I think it was all of it. We could see our parents through the glass. All the other parents seemed very distraught—their hands and faces glued to the glass, trying to gather in the last moments with their children. I remember the glass distorted and deformed their faces, but I couldn’t help looking at them. By contrast, my parents seemed very calm and peaceful. They were smiling even. I smiled too. I believe it was the most difficult thing my parents ever had to do.

We had to climb up a long stair case to board the plane. At the top of the stairs, I turned and waved one last time, hoping my parents would see me. I couldn’t see them, but I thought they must be watching. It was the first time I had ever been on a plane. I remember the palm trees--smaller and smaller until they were tiny specks, and then we burst through the white clouds and a luminous blue sky welcomed us. I remember thinking my parents had delivered me to heaven. By the time I arrived in Miami, an hour later, I had grown up. I had no choice.

Like my parents promised, George was there to meet me when we landed. For some reason, I had assumed he would be American. I hadn’t asked my parents any questions, so I was surprised to find that he was Cuban. Jorge. Jorge Guarch.

*At this point, two of the gift bags are ready. She picks one up and places it to the side:*

1961.

*She places the second one beside the first:*

1962.

SHE admires the packaging of the two gifts for a moment before moving on to prepare present #3.

Jorge Guarch drove me in his station wagon to the girls’ camp called Kendal. The camp was very crowded. I remember opening a cot every night and crying myself to sleep, because I missed my parents so much. I also missed the things of my childhood--my beloved dolls, playing Yaquis on the porch, my red and black bicycle, my skates, and the almond tree that my mother had planted and named Carmencita, after me. I also missed the foamy and transparent sea and the rugged black coral reef, the place my mother and I would go to watch the sun set. In the beginning of summer, I would clean this section of beach of sea urchins so I could swim and walk on the reef without shoes. My parents always watched me from the shore. I would sink into the water and lose track of time. I remember that feeling of timelessness and feeling alone in the immense sea. The feeling was bigger even than the ocean. I have tried to find that feeling at other beaches, but I could never find it again. I remember the rhythm of my neighbor’s drums blending with the sound of the breaking waves and sitting on the porch at night to watch the Cuban moon. Sometimes, when I wasn’t expecting it, I’d be captured by the image of my father driving me to school in his Renault, or rubbing the windshield on a rainy morning with a cigar in his hand. Once, when I was little, my father took me to see a splendid building, La Beneficencia. It had beautiful iron bars and I felt very drawn to them. My father let me go very close to the building. There were children behind the bars, all dressed in identical uniforms. My father said they were orphans and they all had the same last name. Valdes. Bishop Fray Geronimo Valdes donated all of his property, wealth, and even his name to the children of the institution. I can remember feeling very sorry for the children who had to grow up without parents. No matter how hard I tried, I could not imagine a world in which I didn’t live with my parents….

*BEAT.*

Later, I came to find out that this Casa de Beneficencia had become a social example. These children’s education was directed towards all aspects of art and culture in a very loving atmosphere by the sisters of charity of St. Vincent de Paul. These children grew up to be distinguished professionals in many fields. Actually, the institution provided these children a chance, it gave them real opportunity.

*SHE places the third bag next to the previous two.*

1963.

*SHE begins on the fourth bag.*

At Camp Kendal, girls were leaving every day. They were being sent to foster homes and schools and orphanages all over the country. The nuns wanted me to go to Montana. When I finally found Montana on the giant map, I was absolutely terrified. I knew if I left, I would never see my parents again. I didn’t understand that I didn’t have a choice, so the nuns had no idea what to do when I told them no…. So, I stayed, and eventually I was able to move in with my Aunt and Uncle.

What if I’ve forgotten her face? What if I’m not able to recognize her in the airport? My father’s not coming. Not yet. He has to stay behind and settle things with the house….

*Beat. SHE fills the bag with tissue paper.*

What if she doesn’t recognize me? I am no longer the child that I was. Will she see that the United States has been very kind and generous? A few short months they had said. They didn’t know. How could they know it would be this long?

*SHE sets the fourth present beside the others.*

1964.

*SHE considers all the gifts together.*

There are no gifts I could give my mother that would ever equal the gift she gave me. She gave me a chance, she gave me real opportunity. It was the ultimate act of love and courage. I know this. I will always know this.

*SHE hangs a little “Happy Mother’s Day” sign above the four presents. She reaches for the Lady of Mount Carmel scapular that has been hiding under her clothing and places it on the outside for all the world to see. SHE looks at the presents one last time, takes a deep breath, and exits.*