

The Name I Wanted:

Not Ricardo but Richard, because I felt like Richard Burton—a true Anglo-Saxon in tights reciting lines from *Othello*, because I wanted to be as handsome as Richard Gere in a white tuxedo, because I had a pinky ring just like Richard Dawson on *Family Feud*, because I knew I could be just as wholesome as Richie Cunningham, just as American as my father's favorite president, Nixon.

Richard—not Ricardo, not my nicknames: *El Negrito*—Little Black Boy—for my skin the color of dry tobacco when I was born, or *El Gallegito*—the Little Galician, because that's what Tía Noelia called anyone like me born in Spain, not a hundred percent Cuban. Not *Rico*, the name Lupe wrote on my desk branding me as Barry Manilow's Latin lover in ruffled sleeves dancing conga at the *Copa*, *Copa Cabana* all of eighth grade. And definitely not *Ricardito*—Little Ricky—worse than Dick.

Richard—descendant of British royals, not the shepherds of my mother's family, not the plantain farmers on my father's side.
Richard—name of German composers, not the swish of machetes, rapping of bongos.
Richard—more elegant than my grandfather in his polyester suit, Chiclets in his pocket,

more refined than my grandmother gnawing
mangos, passing gas at the kitchen sink.

Ricardo De Jesús Blanco, I dub thee myself
Sir Richard Jesus White
defender of my own country, protector
of my wishes, conqueror of mirrors, sovereign
of my imagination—a name for my name.

Betting on America

My grandmother was the bookie, set up at the kitchen table that night, her hair in curlers, pencil and pad jotting down two-dollar bets, paying five-to-one on which Miss would take the crown.

Abuelo put his money on Miss Wyoming—*She's got great teeth*, he pronounced as if complimenting a horse, not her smile filling the camera before she wisped away like a cloud in her creamy chiffon dress.

I dug up enough change from the sofa and car seats to bet on Miss Wisconsin, thinking I was as American as she because I was as blond as she was, and I knew that's where all the cheese came from.

That wasn't all: chocolate was from Miss Pennsylvania, the capital of Miss Montana was Helena, Mount Rushmore was in Miss South Dakota, and I knew how to say Miss *Con-nec-ti-cut*, unlike my Tía Gloria

who just pointed at the tv: *Esa—that one*, claiming she had her same figure before leaving Cuba. *It's true . . . I have pictures*, she declared before cramming another *bocadito* sandwich into her mouth.

Papá refused to bet on any of the Misses because *Americanas all have skinny butts*, he complained. *There's nothing like a big culo cubano*. Everyone agreed—*es verdad*—except for me and my little cousin Julito,

who apparently was a breast man at five, reaching for Miss Alabama's bosom on the screen, the leggy *mulata* sashaying in pumps, swimsuit, seducing Tío Pedro into picking her as the sure winner.

She's the one! She looks Cubana, he swore, and she did, but she cost him five bucks. *¡Cojones!* he exploded as confetti rained, Bert Parks leading Miss Ohio, the new Miss America, by the hand to the runway.

Gloves up to her elbows, velvet down to her feet, crying diamonds into her bouquet, the queen of *our* country, *our* land of the free, amid the purple mountains of her majesty floating across the stage, our living room,

though no one bet on her, and none of us—not even me—could answer Mamá when she asked: *¿Dónde está Ohio?*

Tía Margarita Johnson's House in Hollywood

Florida, the house we went to every Sunday, the house on a cul-de-sac of polite *americanos* just like her husband, the house where she was a *missus* instead of a *señora*, Johnson instead of Gómez, not my *tía* but my aunt in pink house slippers, an embroidered housecoat, reading *Good Housekeeping* with a gardenia tucked behind her ear, the house with a flower garden, not chickens like ours scratching through the backyard dirt, the house shaded by live oaks, not our sickly *mamey* trees half as big as the ones my father grew in Cuba, the house with a carport, her silver-dollar Buick, not our old Nova rusting in the rain, the house with two front doors, a castle, a magical doorbell that chimed “Jingle Bells” at Christmastime, *The Brady Bunch* house with an orange kitchen, an oven built into the wall, an upside-down fridge, bottom always filled with ice-cream sandwiches and Kool-Aid popsicles, the house of mac-n-cheese and blueberry pie, not *arroz-con-frijoles* and flan, the house of crayons and glitter she kept for me in a gold cigar box, the house where I saw myself in the polished coffee table with a crystal candy dish always filled with chocolate kisses, the house where we could sit in the living room, watch tv from her red-velvet sofa not covered in plastic like ours, the house of Sonny and Cher and Lawrence Welk on Sunday nights, not my mother's *telenovelas* or my grandfather's Westerns dubbed-over in Spanish, the house that spoke English, the house where I wasn't Cuban anymore, the house without a *revolución*, the house in one country, not two, the house that disappeared when she moved to Jersey, the house we never went to again, the house I never left.

Cousin Consuelo, On Piano

Por favor Consuelo, play something—for la familia, her mother begged until she stomped to the bench, bored us with some waltz. I asked for *Crocodile Rock*, but she didn't know it (or so she said), hammered out a mambo instead, her waist-long hair swaying like a metronome keeping tempo and everyone two-three-fouring around the coffee table. I asked for *Muskrat Love*, but she kept the frenzy going with a *paso doble* setting off a chorus of ¡Olé! ¡Olé! ¡Olé! ringside at a bullfight tossing out roses. *Margaritaville*, I pleaded, but she followed with the sweet and slow honey of a bolero. *Okay, one more—that's it!* she warned. I yelled for *American Pie*, but the crowd demanded *!Guantanamera!* that damn song about Cuba they all knew by heart. *!Guantanamera!* My mother slapped my fingers out of my ears, made me sit on my hands. I had to listen to my grandmother caterwaul, dabbing the corners of her eyes, her voice cracking over a country I didn't know yet had to love like Tía Miri did, singing about *el campo* I never saw yet had to feel in Brenda's notes rising into mountains, resting in valleys, the click of her nail-tips on the keys like rain falling in the room, on my father. I had to watch him sink into the sofa, clutch his whiskey, follow her fingers rippling left, right. I had to sing with him like a *real* Cuban, had to feel displaced, broken, beautiful—and clap for more, had to make Consuelo play *Guantanamera* twice, three times, until she stuffed the sheet music back into the bench, marched to her room, leaving us and the piano a dumb black box without her.

Taking My Cousin's Photo at the Statue of Liberty
for Roxana

May she never miss the sun or the rain in the valley trickling from Royal palms, or the plush red earth, or the flutter of sugarcane fields and poincianas, or the endless hem of turquoise sea around the island, may she never remember the sea or her life again in Cuba selling glossy postcards of the revolution and *El Che* to sweaty Germans, may she never forget the broken toilet and peeling stucco of her room in a government-partitioned mansion dissolving like a sand castle back into the Bay of Cienfuegos, may she never have to count the dollars we'd send for her wedding dress, or save egg rations for a cake, may she be as American as I wanted to be once, in love with its rosy-cheeked men in breeches and white wigs, with the calligraphy of our *Liberty and Justice for All*, our *We The People*, may she memorize all fifty states, our rivers and mountains, sing "God Bless America" like she means it, like she's never lived anywhere else but here, may she admire our wars and our men on the moon, may she believe our infomercials, buy designer perfumes and underwear, drink Starbucks, drive a Humvee, and have a dream, may she never doubt America, may this be her country more than it is mine when she lifts her Diet Coke like a torch into the June sky and clutches her faux Chanel purse to her chest, may she look into New York Harbor for the rest of her life and hold still when I say, *Smile*.