RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

The Spanish Bow

Andromeda Romano-Lax

Contents

About the Book

When Feliu Delargo is born, late-nineteenth-century Spain is a nation slipping from international power and struggling with its own fractured identity, caught between the chaos of post-empire and impending Civil War.

Feliu's troubled childhood and rise to fame lead him into a thorny partnership with an even more famous and eccentric figure, the piano prodigy Justo Al-Cerraz. The two musicians' divergent artistic goals and political inclinations threaten to divide them as Spain plunges into Civil War. But as Civil War turns to World War, shared love for their trio partner – an Italian violinist named Aviva – forces them into their final and most dangerous collaboration.

About the Author

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The Spanish Bow

Andromeda Romano-Lax

WINDMILL BOOKS

A Brian Lax y Elizabeth Sheinkman, con respeto y gratitud.

PART I

Campo Seco, Spain 1892

CHAPTER

~ 1 ~

I WAS ALMOST born Happy.

Literally, Feliz was the Spanish name my mother wanted for me. Not a family name, not a local name, just a hope, stated in the farthest-reaching language she knew—a language that once reached around the world, to the Netherlands, Africa, the Americas, the Philippines. Only music has reached farther and penetrated more deeply.

I say “almost born Feliz,” because the name that attached itself to me instead, thanks to a sloppy bureaucrat’s bias toward Catalan saints’ names, was Feliu. Just one letter changed on my death—yes, death—certificate.

My father was overseas that year, working as a customs officer in colonial Cuba. The afternoon my mother’s labor pains started, my father’s elder sister changed into a better dress, for church. Mamá bent over a chair near the kitchen doorway, legs splayed, ankles turned inward, as the weight of my dropping body pulled her pelvis to the floor. While she begged Tía not to go, Mamá’s knuckles whitened against the chair’s straw-plaited back.

“I will light candles for you,” Tía said.

“I don’t need prayers. I need—” My mother moaned, angling her hips from side to side, trying to find a position where the pain eased. Cool water? A chamber pot? “… help,” was all she could say.

“I’ll send Enrique to get the midwife.” Tía pushed the ebony combs into her thick masses of gray-streaked hair. “No, I’ll go myself, on the way. Where’s Percival?”

My oldest brother had slipped outside minutes earlier, bound for the bridge and the dry wash beneath it, along which the local shepherds drove their flocks. He and his friends hid there frequently, playing cards amid orange peels and broken barrel staves that reeked of vinegar.

Percival was old enough to remember the previous disasters in sharp detail, and he didn't want to witness another. Mamá's last baby had died within minutes of birth. The one before had survived only a few days, while my mother herself hovered near death, racked with infection-induced fever. In Campo Seco, she was not the only unlucky one.

My mother blamed the midwife who had moved to the village four years earlier, accompanied by her husband, a butcher.

"They don't wash their hands," Mamá panted. "Last time, I saw the forceps she used. Broken at the hinge. Flakes"—she squirmed and jammed the heel of her palm into her back—"flakes of rust."

"Ridiculous!" Tía drew the lace mantilla over her head. "You are worrying for nothing. You should pray, instead."

My two other siblings, Enrique and Luisa, remained stoic in the face of my mother's barnyard moans, the slick of straw-colored amniotic fluid on the floor, which five-year-old Luisa wiped away; the bloody smears on the wet towels, which seven-year-old Enrique wrung and dipped in a wide porcelain bowl. By the third dip, the blue flowers on the bowl's painted bottom disappeared, obscured beneath a smoky layer of pink water.

Thirty minutes after Tía departed, the midwife arrived. Mamá panted and strained from her marriage bed, pushing with all her strength while she struggled to keep her eyes open. She scrutinized the dirt crescents beneath the midwife's fingernails. She twisted her neck to follow every step the midwife took, to catch fleeting glimpses of the tools displayed on a square of calico covering the bedside

table, and the coil of gray cotton string that brought to mind the butcher's leaky, net-covered roasts. When the midwife's hands came near, Mamá tried to close her knees, to shield me from ill fortune. But the urge to push could not be stopped. I was coming.

And then—just as suddenly—I stopped coming. What had once moved too quickly stopped moving at all. Mamá's belly rippled and bulged a final time, then hardened into one long, unceasing contraction. Her jaw went slack. A blue vein bulged at her temple. Enrique, lingering in the open doorway, tried not to look between her legs, where the combination of taut, pearly flesh and wet hair made him think of washed-up jellyfish, collapsed against the weedy shore. The midwife caught him looking and snapped the sheet back into place, over Mamá's legs and high, round abdomen. That gesture hid one disturbing view, but it only drew more attention to what remained visible: my mother's red face, beaded with sweat and contorted with pain.

"Here," Mamá would say later, in recounting the story of my birth, "is where you decided to rebel. Whenever someone pushes you too hard, you do the opposite."

Actually, I was stuck: feet twisted up toward my neck, rear facing the only exit. A living *churro* tied into a bow.

The midwife grunted as her hands pushed, prodded, and massaged beneath the loosely tented sheet, a question darkening her face. Forgetting Enrique, she tore away the sheet and whimpered at the sight of a small purple scrotum appearing at the spot where a crowning head should have been. She watched that spot for ten minutes, twisting the cloth of her apron with red fingers. Then she panicked. Ignoring Enrique's incredulous, upturned face and Luisa's round eyes, she pushed past them both and down the stairs, missing the bottom step entirely.

The midwife had left to fetch her husband, who was two blocks away, wiping his own stained hands. She could have sent my brother or called from the balcony to one of our

neighbor's fleet-footed children. But she wasn't a bright woman. And she knew that a third infant death in one family would invite costly gossip. Already, she could envision the sea of dark shawls that would greet her from this day forward—the back of every neighbor woman's averted head and rounded shoulders, snubbing her if I died, and my mother with me.

Left unassisted, my mother summoned her resolve and tried to breathe more deeply. She felt safer with the midwife gone, ready to accept whatever happened. She asked Luisa to retrieve a bottle from the cellar and to hold it to her lips, though nausea allowed her to drink only a little. She called Enrique to come and take the forceps, to dip and scrub them in a bowl of the hottest water, to be ready.

"They don't open very well," he said, struggling with the oval-shaped handles. They were fashioned from twisted iron and padded with small pieces of stitched dark leather that reminded Enrique of a sweat-stained horse saddle. "Are the pieces supposed to come apart?"

"Forget it. Put them down. Use your hands."

He blanched.

Mamá heard Luisa start to cry, and ordered her to sing—anything, a folk song, or "*Vamos a la Mar*," a happy round they'd all chanted on picnic trips to the Mediterranean coast.

"…to eat fish in a wooden dish…" Luisa sang, again and again, and then: "I see something! It's a foot!"

Another push. A narrow back. With Enrique's help, a shoulder. My mother lost consciousness. I've been told I hung there for a while, the picture of blind indecision, with my head refusing to follow my pasty body. Until Enrique, decisive enough for us both, stepped forward and pushed a small hand into the dark, hooking a finger around my chin.

Following my final, slippery emergence, he laid me on my mother's belly, still attached by the cord to the

afterbirth inside her. There was no spank; no bawling cries. Mamá briefly surfaced into consciousness once again with instructions for Enrique on how to tie the cord with the gray string in two places, and how to cut the flattened purple cable in between.

He moved me onto my mother's chest, but I didn't root. One of my legs hung more limply than the other, the hip joint disturbingly flaccid. No one cleared the white residue plugging my tiny nostrils. Mamá's arms lay at her sides, too tired to embrace me. There was little point. My eyelids did not twitch. My rib cage did not swell.

"It's cold," Luisa said. "We should wrap it."

"*He's* cold," Enrique corrected.

"A boy." My mother sounded both pleased and resigned, her cheeks wet as she relived what had happened before and would happen again: the increasing pain as her adrenaline ebbed, the incapacitating fever, the deep plunge into confused sleep from which she might not return. "Tell the midwife it was not her fault. The notary will come to the door. There is a blank card with an envelope in the drawer, with the money. Write the name down for him, so there is no mistake: *Feliz Aníbal Delargo Domenech*."

She gritted her teeth, waited for a spasm to subside. "Is it cold in here, Luisa?"

"It's hot, Mamá."

"The notary will inform the priest"—she sucked in a mouthful of air, then bit down on her lower lip—"and the engraver."

"The engraver?" Luisa asked, but Mamá did not explain.

"Enrique—you know how to spell Aníbal, like your great-uncle."

Enrique shook his head.

"Like the conqueror from Carthage, the man with the elephants."

"I *don't* know how," my brother protested, more alarmed by the request to write my name than he'd been by the

drama of pulling a reluctant baby from the womb.

But the long list and the imagined tasks ahead—a letter to Papá, a visitation, a burial—had exhausted the last of Mamá's stamina. She closed her eyes and swung her head from side to side, trying to catch an elusive breeze. She began, "A-N-I-B…" and then lost consciousness again.

Luisa and Enrique did not understand that Mamá considered me already dead. They wrapped me and took me down to the cool, earthen-floored cellar—a cellar that Papá excavated and enlarged on every visit home. He'd always dreamed of starting a fine liqueur-making and exporting business in the cavernous room beneath our three-level stone house. Other local families had succeeded at the same dream. At one time, fourteen different sweet liqueurs—colored grassy-green to honey-yellow, with aromas of herb and hazelnut—were made and shipped from Campo Seco and a cluster of neighboring villages. We had the grapes, we had the train, and we had the confidence: Catalans, like Basques and other ancient seafarers, had traded and prospered long before there was a unified nation called Spain.

In the meanwhile, the cellar was simply an empty space, save for one rustic bench and one rough-hewn table, joined without screws or nails, suitably pitted and gouged, so that it looked like a place where Don Quixote might have dined three centuries earlier. On this table Luisa had placed a pot of cooling water dipped from the larger pot the midwife had prepared, and a hot chocolate serving set with delicate tulip-shaped cups, which she arranged while jostling me importantly over the shoulder. She'd already pushed one of her doll's bonnets over my sticky head. Now she worked a cocoa-soaked finger between my pale lips.

Enrique had changed out of his stained shirt and slipped into the too-small military uniform he wore for costumed play, a gift from my father which gave him comfort. He

picked up his homemade flute. Because the rustic instrument always set Mamá's teeth on edge, Enrique had grown used to playing here, below street level and away from open windows. Between the warm shaking, the bitter taste of Luisa's fingers and the shrill ancient music, I opened my ears, eyes and mouth for the first time. I prepared myself to live.

Upstairs, the midwife had returned at last. Finding the baby gone and Mamá barely conscious, she sent her husband to notify the priest and began to massage my mother's distended belly, trying to stimulate contractions that would expel the afterbirth and stem the flow of blood. In the midwife's refocused mind, there was no time for gratitude—not to my siblings, for having removed the stark evidence of the day's tragedy, nor to God, for having spared one life when He easily could have taken two.

From the cellar, Enrique heard Mamá scream with renewed vigor, and at the same time, a knock on the door. He climbed the ladder to the foyer and pulled the heavy front door open to find the notary waiting there, just as our mother had predicted.

"The midwife, please," he said, just as Mamá howled again.

"She's occupied. Wait, please."

"The baby is with them?"

"No. We already brought it to the cellar."

The notary winced. "It can't stay there, you know. It will…" he paused.

"Smell?" Enrique guessed.

"Well, yes. But not for a little while."

"No—it already does!"

The notary shook his head.

"A fait accompli," he said. "So, there is no blame."

"Not the midwife's fault. That's what Mamá said. Wait—the envelope!"

“And your Tía?” he inquired as my brother hurried away, to retrieve the money.

“She’s at the church,” Enrique called over his shoulder. “Lighting candles.”

“I see.”

As the notary waited, he hunched his shoulders, looked back at the street, and then took a few steps forward, into the protection of the foyer. The men of the town paid him little mind, but the women had poured buckets of water on him from their balconies, to protest the food taxes levied on any item unloaded by train. At least it wasn’t boiling water they poured or—God help him—oil. One particularly feisty grandmother had been fined for scalding his predecessor. It was a difficult freelance existence, checking stamps here, imposing duties there, notarizing official papers on the side, writing important letters for the more than half of the village population that was illiterate. And notice how they sought him out during land deals, or when someone needed to protest a notice of military conscription. No buckets of water then!

Anyway, here came the boy—my brother, Enrique, out of breath from climbing and descending the two flights of wooden stairs to my mother’s bedroom.

Together they filled out the papers, stumbling over the questions my mother hadn’t anticipated and my brother wasn’t sure how to answer: maternal grandmother’s last name? Paternal grandmother’s? Parents’ birthplaces? All the while Enrique worried distractedly about the four names he had managed to write in a shaky, left-leaning scrawl: my first name, quickly, my second name—the one that troubled him—less so.

“A-n-í-b-a-l—can you read it?” he fretted.

“Yes, that’s fine.”

But neither noticed how the notary had botched my first name, misreading the *z* at the end as a long-tailed, sloppy *u*.

“The money.” Enrique presented his clenched fist.

The notary tugged open my brother’s fingers and counted the treasure inside. “It’s not enough. I’ll be writing two certificates.”

At that moment, my Tía rounded the doorway, her black skirt flapping at her ankles, stirring dust motes into the bright shaft of light penetrating the foyer.

“What’s this?” she said, pushing past the notary, who touched his hat in greeting. She moved Enrique aside and peered at the certificates in the notary’s ink-stained hand. Reading the words, she crossed herself.

“The boy paid me for the first one, but I need money also for the second.”

“Why two, if the infant was born dead?”

“You can’t have a death certificate without a birth certificate.”

“But why can’t you put ‘born dead’ on the birth certificate, and leave it at that?”

Out of habit, the notary retracted his head into his stiff, high collar.

Tía barked, “Shame on you, arriving even before the priest.”

“I do a service, Señora. I am a—”

“Vulture.”

“—a legitimate representative,” he continued, “of the provincial authority.”

“I doubt you collected two certificates when Señor Petrillo’s infant died. You know a shoemaker has little money, but you think we have more than our share. Bureaucracy—”

The notary interrupted, gesturing toward the stairs. “Once these have been stamped, the service is fulfilled. Payment must be made.”

“—before spirituality, I was saying. That’s where this country is going.”

“The boy’s mother understands. Without these certificates, funerary benefits can’t be paid to the father. The shoemaker does not work for the colonial government administration. He has no right to such benefits.”

As they argued, no one noticed Enrique hopping side to side, trying to interrupt. Tía stirred her fingers around the bottom of her leather pouch, still mumbling about the decline of piety and the problems of empire, while the notary wagged his head. Finally, after more coins and handwritten copies of both certificates had changed hands, Tía turned to my brother.

“Out back,” she ordered, irritated by his hopping. “Before you have an accident.”

“I don’t have to go.”

“Well, what then?”

“Feliz isn’t dead.”

“Who?”

“The baby, Feliz.”

“The boy is confused,” the notary said. “The baby’s name was Fel*iu*,” he said, stabbing a finger at the certificates in Tía’s hands.

She squinted as she read. “I’d be very upset to find out you copied the name wrong.”

“Like the saint. It means ‘prosperous,’ I believe.”

Tía muttered, “Not very prosperous to be born dead.”

Enrique tried again. “But the baby—he’s in the cellar. You can see.”

“It’s the midwife I need. Here and here—she will need to put her mark,” the notary said, accenting the last word acidly just as the woman’s heavy descent sounded on the staircase.

The midwife acknowledged the adults with a weary nod, made an X just above the notary’s ink-stained fingertip, then turned to Tía. “She seems comfortable now. Make sure she doesn’t use the stairs for a week. Even then, if the bleeding increases…” She paused, hoping the notary would

excuse himself so she could deliver more intimate instructions. When he made no effort to leave, she changed the subject. “I can speak to the carpenter for you, about a coffin. But he’ll want measurements, so as not to waste wood. If you’ll bring me the body, I have a piece of string left, to measure it.”

Tía stood erect with indignation. “You mean to say you didn’t get a good enough look when it came out?”

“I ran to get help. I didn’t see it at all. It isn’t in the bedroom.”

“It’s in the cellar,” Enrique said, and then louder, fists curled with frustration, “Feliz is in the cellar!”

“Stop this nonsense!” Tía scowled. “Felix, maybe, or Feliciano, or Feliu—but what is this Feliz?

“I imagine,” she continued, facing the midwife, “that you expect full payment, even though you managed to miss the birth.”

No one noticed my mother descending the stairs, one painful step at a time, pale hand gripping the banister. She sat down on the bottom step. Her nightdress billowed around her bare feet. Her damp, dark hair flowed over her pale shoulders.

“I just wanted my baby to be happy,” she said. And then louder, so that the notary, the midwife, Tía and Enrique all turned, “Not prosperous, not successful. Just happy.”

“See?” Enrique said.

The midwife opened her mouth to reprimand my mother for getting out of bed, the notary pursed his lips in preparation for defending the spelling on his certificates, and Tía ground her jaw, gathering the residue of her complaints. But before any of them could speak again, a piercing squall came from the cellar’s open trapdoor, in the far corner of the foyer. Luisa’s head followed it, then her shoulders, over which I was still crudely positioned.

“Happy?” Luisa called out, over the sound of my furious mewling. “He can’t be, with this black, tarry stuff coming

out. He started crying when I tried to wipe it, and now he's turning purple."

The adults gasped as they saw her head and shoulders sway unsteadily, one hand over my furiously shuddering body, the other gripping the ladder rungs. Tía, the midwife, and the notary remained frozen. My mother lifted her arms, but she was too dizzy to rise. Only Enrique bolted into action, pulling me away from my sister's unsteady shoulder so that she could haul herself the rest of the way out of the cellar. In the ensuing confusion, no one mentioned the certificates again.

My mother laughed through her exhausted tears as Enrique brought me to her: "Call him anything, I don't care." And from that moment, she didn't. She had traded her initial, plain hope for an even more basic one: that I would simply survive.

Tía and the midwife broke free from their paralysis and gathered around my mother. They grasped her elbows in order to coax her back up the stairs, and reached forward to take me out of her arms, muttering cooing sounds to stop my crying.

"Leave us be, and let him cry," Mamá said, refusing to let go as she unbuttoned the top of her nightdress, preparing to nurse me on the stairs. "*Es la música más linda del mundo*."

It's the most beautiful music in the world.

Now, all of this story I'm telling you so far, I wrote down quickly, one night in October 1940. I began it at another man's request, but did not deliver it to him.

You're not asking me why. I'd like to attribute your reticence to shyness. But your trade requires the opposite; requires, perhaps, the impatience I see when I look in your eyes, where I'd like to find—what? Forgiveness?

Perhaps simply: Understanding.

Writing these memories pained me. Less so the earliest childhood parts, which is why I started with them; certainly the later parts, as I was forced to review the course of my life, the development of my ideas and stances, which were to prove inadequate to the complexity of those times. But the discomfort of recollection was only a shadow of what was to come, when I would lose nearly all that was dear to me.

For the last year, the curators of the new museum of music in Spain have been hounding me with letters and telegrams, asking for my bow. The museum people have no idea that I wrote my memoirs thirty-odd years ago, and that I have them in my possession still. I bring you here not to discuss the bow—which I shall donate as promised—or to thrust into your more capable hands all my papers, which I can share only in my own way, in my own time. To understand and appreciate what they contain, you must go slowly with me; you must indulge my interpretation. You must be a better man than I was—more sympathetic, at the very least.

I realize the later parts of my story are the ones you most want to hear. You would have me begin with Aviva, all the better to have a living picture of her in your mind. Or at least with Al-Cerraz. You have asked already about the final 1940 concert, and I throw up my hands—I can no more start with that than I can play the Bach suites backward, from the last note to the first. I have never been that sort of a trick-performing prodigy. I have always been methodical, essentially conservative, by which—I see your smile—I don’t mean politics. You will forgive me for being a classicist always, insistent on symmetry and proportion. You will allow me, at my advanced age, this last kindness—truly an indulgence, considering my lack of cooperation with your past journalistic efforts. In return, I will be honest.

Wilhelm, I have done a terrible thing.

Yes, please—a glass of water.

But I have left you with the impression of a baby, barely alive and mistakenly named. Please, if you will let me introduce you to the boy, just beginning to understand the beauty and difficulty of life in that time, in that place.

CHAPTER

~ 2 ~

"I'M GOING TO the train station," my mother announced on a cold morning, nearly six years after my birth. "Your father has arrived."

I'd had a nightmare and woken from it breathing hard, just as the women in the house were stirring and whispering. Now, as I struggled to lace my boots, Tía mumbled over my shoulder, "Go back to bed with your brothers and sister. You'll only delay your mother."

Ignoring my aunt's reproachful expression, I stepped out into the dark street with Mamá.

"Your nightmare wasn't about a box, was it?" she asked as we hurried along.

No, I told her. It was about a wintry, unfamiliar beach of cold, dark, wet sand, and what lived in the holes.

"Good. Never mind."

We continued in silence, holding hands; past connected, multistory stone houses like ours, and shuttered stores. As we zigzagged down the oddly angled streets I struggled to keep up, a jerking tail behind Mamá's purposeful kite. The sidewalk was barely wide enough for one person, made of a smooth and slippery stone so burnished by decades of passing feet that it glinted silver. I skidded along its surface while my mother stumbled over the cobblestone road, yanking me each time her ankle turned, both of us struggling downhill toward the station in the dark. When I slipped and fell, skinning one knee, Mamá said nothing, only pulled me up by one arm and kept going.

A barnlike oak door creaked open, and a woman's craggy face emerged, illuminated by a candle lantern.

"*Buenos días, Doña*. Meeting the train?"

"Meeting my husband," Mamá answered.

"*Madre de Dios*," the crone grunted, crossing herself before she withdrew into the shadows. The door's ring-shaped knocker clapped hard as the door slammed shut.

Black sky lightened to deep navy as we cut across the town plaza. At the church, I ran one hand along the old building's pockmarked walls, remembering my brother Enrique's words (*Yes, they're bullet holes; even the priest says so. He has a jar full of the slugs…*) until my mother glanced over her shoulder and jerked me out of my reverie.

"Filth!" she yelled. "Look at your hand!"

"What? I can't see it."

"I don't have time for this, Feliu!"

We veered into the alley behind the fish market, hopping the channel of wastewater spilling from the market's open back door. In the golden, lamplit interior, I could see men heaving crates and shoveling chipped ice. Fish scales sparkled between the alley's wet cobblestones like trapped stars.

Deep navy yielded to peach-tinged blue by the time we reached the station, where the train waited, warm and rumbling, still dribbling steam. Mamá freed herself from my sweating hand and marched onto the platform, where several men gathered around her. Within moments she was seated at a bench against the station wall, pulling coarse twine from the lid of a large box the men had placed at her feet. It was about as wide as my mother's outstretched arms, made of an unfamiliar reddish-brown wood. There was a single small clasp on the fitted lid. Instead of a lock, there was only a twist of heavy wire attached to a yellow card bearing official-looking stamps and our address.

"Perhaps you should wait," the stationmaster was saying. "Who knows what's in it? Take it to the church. I'll

have a wagon brought around for you."

But my mother blotted her face dry. "I've waited months," she said, and glared until the stationmaster patted his vest pocket and strode away.

As Mamá untwisted the wire, she whispered, "You've seen bones, haven't you, Feliu? It is probably mostly ashes, but there may be bones." She worked her fingertips under the lid. "Don't be afraid."

I held my breath and stared. But when my mother pried the lid free with a dull pop, *she* was the one who gasped. Inside, there were no bodily remains.

"Presents!" I cried out. "From Papá!"

Mamá studied the straw-padded contents, fingering each object in turn: a compass, a blue bottle, a glossy brown stick, a jungle cat carved from dark wood, a cigar box with a small blank diary inside. At the bottom of the box lay an old suit jacket, neatly folded, which she took out and held to her face, inhaling. Reluctantly, she lifted out two notes—one printed on a card, a few sentences surrounded by blank space; the other larger and rough-edged and handwritten. She read the first quickly and let it drop onto the sticky station floor, shaking her head when I leaned over to retrieve it. A breeze flipped the card over twice, then sent it toward the tracks. The second note she read slowly, silently, smoothing it against her lap. When she finished, she folded it carefully, tucked it away in a pocket, and sighed.

"They've broken their promise. Whatever remains they retrieved after the rebellion were buried in Cuba. The American victory changed their priorities. Now they're too busy getting out the living to worry about the dead."

The details meant little to me. Two months earlier, my mother had perched my siblings and me in a row of five dining-room chairs—even Carlito, who kept squirming off his seat—to tell us what had happened. Rebels fighting for independence from Spain had triggered an explosion in the

harbor. The building where my father worked had caught fire, killing Papá and nine other men. Now America—a place that meant nothing to me, beyond the fact that Spanish ships had discovered it—appeared ready to enter the fray.

Mamá cupped my chin in her hand. “Your Papá should have lived three centuries ago, when the world was getting bigger. Now it’s getting only smaller and more loud.”

As if to prove her point, the train departed at that moment, wheezing and clanging, south toward Tarragona.

When it was out of view, she said, “Papá meant to deliver these gifts with his own hands. They’re from his travels. He had his own intentions, but I’ll leave the choice to you.”

I picked up the compass first, watching the little copper-colored needle spin and bounce. Then the blue bottle. Then the jungle cat. They were enticing, but I did not choose them. Maybe I felt contrary on this rare morning alone with Mamá, away from the superior airs of my elder siblings; maybe I felt the need to reject the gifts that had the most clearly childish appeal. I picked up the one object that made no immediate sense: the glossy brown stick. At one end it had a rectangular black handle dotted with one small circle of mother-of-pearl. At the other end it had a fancy little curve, like the upswept prow of an ancient ship.

I lifted it out of the box. It was longer than my arm, a bit thicker than my finger, and polished smooth. I held it out in front me, like a sword. Then upright, like a baton.

“It’s pernambuco—a very good South American wood,” Mamá said, her eyebrows raised.

The anticipation on her face made my throat tighten. I returned the stick hastily to the box.

“Tell me,” I said. “I don’t want to choose wrong.”

I expected her to reassure me. Instead she said, “You *will* be wrong sometimes, Feliu.”

Her lecturing tone reminded me of the times she had helped tie my shoes, tugging the laces hard enough to upset my balance. I couldn't know that those days of playful rough-handling were numbered, to be replaced by a grief-filled overprotectiveness.

When I still hadn't chosen, Mamá asked, "Do you remember your Papá?"

"Yes," I answered automatically.

"You can still see him in your mind? As clearly as you can see me?"

This time, when I didn't answer, she said, "Always tell me the truth. Maybe other people need to invent drama. Not us. Not here."

I'd heard her say this earlier that year, as the survivors of the *Desastre* of '98 had straggled into town, living ghosts from failed faraway colonial battles. The Americans had invaded Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines, Spanish colonies already struggling for independence. The last vestiges of the Spanish Empire were collapsing around us while another empire rose to take its place. Now the soldiers and bureaucrats and merchants were returning—limbs missing, heads and torsos wrapped in stained bandages. Many who passed through Campo Seco seemed lost—they weren't our missing men, we had nothing for them, so why had they stepped off the train here? We rented our cellar to one of them, moving all the casks and wax-sealed bottles aside, furnishing the dark, cool room with a cot, one chair, and an old cracked mirror. The man paid in advance for a week's stay but left after three days, without explanation, prompting Tía to castigate Mamá, "I told you not to put the mirror down there. A man like that doesn't want to see his face."

I closed my own eyes and tried to see Papá. He was a blur, except for his dark mustache, thick under his nose, curled and twisted at the tips; and the wide bottom cuff of his pin-striped suit pants. I had clung to those pants while

he directed the secular village choir. And I had perched high on his shoulders, smelling his hair tonic while we watched local processions. Papá had little interest in the Catholic festivals that clogged our village streets. But he had loved when the traveling musicians came, with their gourds and broomsticks strung as homemade mandolins, guitars, and violins. I'd begged my father to buy me instruments like those. That had been close to two years ago, when Papá had last visited home.

"The stick!" I called out suddenly. "Is that what he wanted for me to have?"

"*Bow*, Feliu. It's an unfinished bow, without the hair."

"I knew it!" I retrieved the stick from the box and began to saw at an imaginary instrument across my chest.

After a moment I stopped to ask, "What kind of bow?"

The question gave her pause. "It doesn't matter," she said, and part of me knew that she wasn't telling the truth. "One bow is the same as any other."

I danced in circles as my mother spoke with the wagoner and watched his assistant load the box onto the wagon bed. Then I remembered my unanswered question: "Is that what Papá wanted me to have?"

The wagon jerked forward, steered by an impatient driver and eager horses.

"Up, Feliu," she gestured, her arms beckoning me toward the seat. "Your brothers and sister are waiting for us. Father Basilio is expecting a coffin. You made your choice. Now come."

Back home, Enrique stole glances at my strange wooden stick, which made me hold it closer, working it under one armpit and finally down into one leg of my pants. But any incipient jealousy was dampened when he realized it was a musical object. "A bow?" he snorted, slapping my back. "I thought it was a musket plunger."

Enrique, age thirteen, was our little soldier; he claimed the compass, a handy instrument for making sorties beyond the olive- and grapevine-covered hills. Percival—at sixteen, an adult in our eyes—stayed above the fray, accepting the blank diary. In the years to come, he'd never write a word in it, only numbers: gambling odds, winnings, and debts. Luisa, age eleven, wrapped her chubby fingers around the jungle cat, refusing to let go until Mamá offered to fill the blue glass bottle with perfume, if Luisa would give the cat to two-year-old Carlito. When the divisions were made and all brows smoothed, Mamá exhaled deeply, saying nothing more about my father's undisclosed intentions.

Many years later, it would become an insomniac's preoccupation for me: What if Enrique had taken the bow? He'd been in Papá's choir, and had demonstrated greater musical aptitude than any of us, even if guns amused him more. If he'd walked with Mamá to the train and back, with more time to consider, would he still be alive? Would the compass have helped Percival or Luisa to better find their ways? And Carlito: Well, there was no saving him. He would die of diphtheria seven years later, to be buried alongside our two siblings who had perished as infants. At the funeral, Percival would lean into me, whispering, "We beat the odds—that's all it is."

There's a saying in our corner of northeastern Spain: "Pinch a Spaniard—if he sings out, he's a Catalan." We considered ourselves a musical region, and yet even here, among troubadours, my father had stood out. In his spare time, he had been the director for our local men's choir, a group that took its cue from the workingmen's choirs of Barcelona—proud men, singing our native regional language at a time when Catalan poetry and song were briefly blossoming.

In 1898, the year my father and several other prominent local men died abroad, the group disbanded, replaced by a

choir led by Father Basilio, who had come to us from Rome. This later choir was never as popular. Following the priest's lead, it sang in Italian—a disappointment to nearly everyone, even my Cuban-raised mother, who had never felt entirely comfortable with the Catalan language. The secular Italian choir folded a few years later, leaving only a few hard-core devotees, the poorest singers of the lot, to sing in Latin during Masses. Our town, once a multilingual bastion of song, had grown unexpectedly silent and dour.

My mother had met my father at an arts festival in Barcelona, where they discovered that they shared similar backgrounds, as well as a love of music. Both of them had been born in Spain and had spent their childhoods in colonial Cuba, returning with their optimistic parents to Spain in time for the short-lived First Republic, in 1873. My mother had been renowned for her voice, though she claimed later she'd never had any professional ambitions. By 1898, she didn't sing at all—not even the simple rounds and folk songs she had once sung for her children.

Lying together in the bed we shared, Enrique would sometimes sing to me a remembered line or two, very quietly in the dark, as if it were a secret no one should hear. When I asked him to sing more, he would tease me: "You know that song. Come on…." I had a good memory for most things, so the complete unfamiliarity of what he sang drove me to distraction. I'd beg him again, and he'd tease me more, until I felt panicky. Only when I was on the verge of tears would Enrique relent and finish the song, sedating me with belated satisfaction. It occurs to me now that Enrique was old enough to be embarrassed by those lullabies, but he didn't want to forget them, either. He wasn't trying to torture me so much as give himself permission to remember.

In the years before he accepted his post overseas, Papá had been our town's music teacher, keeping a piano for that purpose in a room between the church and the school.