

HAVANA

A CITY OF SEA AND LIGHT

A traveler arriving in the city of San Cristóbal de La Habana in the winter of 1789 would have easily found the city's cathedral. The huge building sat in one of Havana's main plazas—La Plaza de la Catedral—its surprisingly plain, asymmetrical towers and contrastingly ornate facade made in part of pale grey coral rock from the nearby sea. The sea could also be sensed in the undulating baroque curves of the cathedral's facade, reminiscent of breaking waves, interrupted by three great wooden doors. Along the cathedral square, the magnificent family palaces of the Pedroso, the Peñalver, and the Marqués de Aguas Claras stood with their arcades offering shady paths against the sun. The plaza was a central meeting point in Havana, and all day long the different people of the city would pass by—merchants, artisans, soldiers, slave traders, aristocrats and slaves—going about their daily business as the great bells of the cathedral marked the passing of the day. The cathedral's beauty and grace would have stood out even in the days of ornate buildings. A later Cuban writer would call it “music set in stone.”

On that winter day of February 16, 1789, the cathedral's thick walls obscured the light and sounds of the tropical street life while Havana's vicar general, Don Luis Peñalver y Cárdenas, solemnly baptized a ten-day-old infant girl, María de las Mercedes Josepha Teresa Bárbara Luisa de Jesús Santa Cruz y Montalvo. Mercedes took her place as the latest link in the chain of an intricately related creole aristocracy. The aristocracy was creole in the Spanish sense of the word, meaning born in the empire's colonies but tracing its lineage back to Spain. Blessed with young and wealthy parents, a beautiful mother, and powerful relatives, Mercedes seemingly had a sparkling, preordained destiny. The baby's maternal and paternal lines, both firmly entrenched in Cuba's economy and administration, would play a critical role in the transformation of the island from a lesser Spanish possession into the sugar powerhouse of the nineteenth century.

But Cuba in 1789 was not quite what most people would have imagined; even the cathedral had only replaced the decrepit old main parish church in 1779. Indeed, the building only received the rank of cathedral in 1788 when Havana was promoted to a diocese, rather late for a capital city founded in the early sixteenth century. Cuba had been one of Columbus's earliest discoveries, and he had praised it extravagantly as "of such marvelous beauty that it surpasses all others... as the day doth the night in lustre," having claimed it under the name Juana for Spain and *los Reyes Católicos*, Fernando and Isabel. But this beautiful island with its rich mahogany-filled forests, valleys covered in royal palms, and white beaches, had quickly been eclipsed by the later conquests of the Aztec and Inca empires. Cuba had only made its mark as a critical staging post for the most amazing and rich treasure fleets ever to sail the transatlantic routes. The gold and silver of Peru, Mexico, and Colombia all sailed to Spain on the fleets that stopped in Havana's deep-water port. To protect the port and the treasure route, the Spaniards built forts or *castillos* all around Havana, and it remained a walled city into the nineteenth century.

Havana is a city of sea and light. The city sits on the northern coast of the island of Cuba, the largest island of the Caribbean, which

spreads out like a lizard in the sun. Cuba's position in the Caribbean controls the entrance to the Antilles, and both the Spanish conquistadores and their colonial challengers quickly realized it was the key to controlling the new world: *la Llave del Nuevo Mundo*, as the royal decree of 1634 named it. The original old city, founded in 1519, faced the harbor, a protected bay with a pincerlike narrow outlet to the sea that facilitated military defense. Walled on its inland boundaries for protection, with two sea-facing fortresses at its entrance and three more along both sides of its bay, it was a fortress city. The oldest fortresses, La Punta, La Fuerza, and El Morro, were made of coral rock or limestone known locally as *pedras conchíferas*. Small bits of sea creatures can still be seen in their massive bases, and the stone cannot be cleanly carved or polished. The sea seems to exist in their very walls, which take on a luminescence in soft early morning and late evening light.

The need for these monumental city defenses had been quite real—pirates had burned the first settlements to the ground and killed many of the early inhabitants in 1538 and again in 1555. Within living memory, the British forces of Lord Albemarle had laid siege to it, captured it, and held it for a year in 1762. During that year, the great monastery church of San Francisco de Asís was used for Protestant worship, the bishop of Cuba was deported, and slaves and goods poured in in huge numbers as the British opened Cuba to free trade. Spanish trading restrictions resumed with Spanish rule in 1763, but Havana's yearlong British sojourn helped begin the transformation of Cuba from a small sugar producer, in the shade of the fabled Sugar Islands of Barbados, Jamaica, and St. Domingue, into the Queen of Sugar by the 1820s.

The families attending Mercedes' christening in the new cathedral represented some of the main landowners of Cuba who together owned most of the estimated five hundred sugar mills, including the nine mills on Mercedes' grandfather's huge estate. Their family names appear over and over in the list of civic officials and officers of the local militias: Beltrán de Santa Cruz, Cárdenas, Montalvo, O'Farrill, Herrera, Chacón, Calvo de la Puerta, Peñalver, Nuñez del Castillo,

and Castellón. They had married with the descendants of older settlers, including the original founders of Havana and first city officials: Sotolongo, Recio, Pérez Barroto, Guilizasti. The original conquistadores and settlers, arriving in Havana with the Governor Diego de Velázquez de Cuéllar, built their first homes in the humblest of materials, emulating the native Arawaks by using mud and the branches and bark of royal palms to make little thatched huts or *bohíos*.

In those early days, the sound of thousands of crabs coming up from the sea in search of food was a nightly occurrence, and the settlers' landholdings were dedicated to raising cattle and pigs for food and hides. The streets were not paved, and when night fell only moonlight broke the otherwise absolute darkness. The future Plaza de la Catedral was merely a swampy area regularly flooded by the bay. The many fruit trees planted by the early settlers led to infestations of mosquitoes, described by one visitor in 1598 as ferocious. The adult Mercedes immortalized these vicious insects after her celebrated 1840 visit, recalling how she bathed her arms in *aguardiente* distilled from sugarcane to repulse the insects. With her arms soaked in the cane spirits, she would sit writing her letters while being fanned by a young slave girl.

Despite these challenges, those early settlers seemed beguiled by the richness of the land. Havana's terrain was incredibly fertile, with much of the land covered in forests with huge ceiba trees spreading their enormous canopies, and rich cedars and mahogany along with *granadillos* and *jaguas*. Throughout the area, indeed throughout the whole island, the majestic royal palms rose straight and tall above all other trees. The Cuban forests would provide one of the first important exports for the newly arrived Spaniards. Cuban-sourced mahogany and other tropical hardwoods would initially be used to repair ships carrying gold and silver from Mexico and Peru, then as material for Philip II's Escorial palace and monastery back in Spain, and finally to build the great ships of the Spanish navy or armada in the eighteenth century.

The pirate raids of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century eventually led to the building of the city walls, although that project

took over one hundred years to complete. The original single-street settlement clinging to the water's edge had expanded considerably by 1789, and the buildings were no longer made from various bits of royal palms. From the late sixteenth through the early eighteenth century, handsome houses began to appear along with churches and plazas. However, many streets remained narrow and crowded, following the instructions laid down by the Laws of the Indies, which demanded narrow streets in the tropics to offer shelter from the relentless sun. The unappealing smell of *tasajo*—the dried meat supplied in huge quantities to visiting ships of the Flota de Indias—filled these claustrophobic streets. Even in 1800, the naturalist Alexander von Humboldt would describe walking through congested streets knee-deep in mud.

Busy streets were not surprising given Havana's role as the meeting point of Spanish fleets and home to a major shipyard. Mercedes' great-grandfather, Lorenzo Montalvo, had directed the building work for the royal shipyard, the Real Arsenal. The Real Arsenal was the largest shipyard in the world at the time, and produced great ships such as the towering 136-gun *Sanísima Trinidad* (1769). So important were the shipyards that in 1763, after the departure of the British, Carlos III of Spain created a naval office in Havana and named Lorenzo Montalvo as its *intendente general*. The Havana shipyards employed all sorts of craftsmen and laborers who resided year-round in the city. The sailing of the Spanish fleets, however, brought a major influx of visitors that swelled the local population. Spanish treasure ships would sail from the mainland ports of Veracruz (Mexico), Cartagena de Indias (Colombia), and Portobelo (Panama). Veracruz also received the cargo carried overland from Acapulco, the destination of the Pacific-based Manila galleons. The cargoes would include more than just gold and silver; they would also include spices, porcelain, and silk from the Philippines and China. Ships would meet in Havana to form great convoys to Sevilla and later to Cádiz, the main Spanish ports for the Indies. The Flota de Indias continued sailing until 1776, but even after its official end, ships continued to round El Morro and enter Havana's harbor in growing numbers.

As a port city, Havana had numerous taverns, boarding houses, gaming dens, and brothels. Most of its disreputable venues were concentrated in the poorer southern area of the city. The sailors who poured into Havana for weeks at a time made great use of its amenities—even in those early days, the city had a reputation for licentiousness that lives on through the present day. Havana also had a reputation for contraband. The Spanish crown had maintained a strict monopoly on all trading activity to its New World possessions through its port of Cádiz, but the aftermath of the British takeover saw the liberalization of trade with other Spanish ports in 1765. Both before and after 1762, the local need for slaves and their ready availability in nearby British Jamaica made the contraband trade an open secret, adding to Havana's dubious reputation.

Slavery, unfortunately, played an important role in the city's economic life. The first slaves had arrived in the New World in 1505, sent by Fernando of Aragón to the island of La Española (the Dominican Republic and Haiti). Slavery was quite common in Spain at the time, having also flourished under the Moors, so it was not strange for the Spanish crown to send slaves to its new possessions. As with commercial trade, Spain restricted the slave trade through the use of licenses, which awarded monopoly rights to specific companies. The British won the concession from 1713 to 1739 through the Treaty of Utrecht, which ended the War of the Spanish Succession. The license was granted to the London-based South Sea Company with Havana as the entry port for all Cuban slave traffic. After 1790, Cuba's first proper newspaper, *El Papel Periódico de la Havana*, carried advertisements for individual slaves. These ads lie scattered amid more mundane ones for used *volantes* (carriages), clavichords, and recently arrived European books: stark evidence of the eighteenth century's perspective of slaves as a mere commodity. This trade in humans initially brought Mercedes' great-great-grandfather, Richard O'Farrill y O'Daly, from the British island of Montserrat to Havana as the first representative of the South Sea Company. O'Farrill settled in Cuba, becoming a Spanish subject and marrying a well-connected widow, María

Josefa de Arriola. He remained active in the slave trade but also invested in sugar plantations after the concession changed hands.

As a fortress city, Havana also housed countless soldiers. Not only were there fixed regiments from the Spanish army stationed in Havana, there were also locally raised creole militias with regiments of whites and free blacks. Cuba after the British-controlled year of 1762 was a thoroughly militarized society. Even the most prominent citizens were fully integrated into military operations, with almost all the families having various members who were militia commanders or officers in the Spanish army. Many held membership in prestigious military orders such as those of Santiago, Calatrava, or Montesa. Whatever their landholding and commercial interests, the creole elite served the king's armies and his civil services because in the Spanish Empire, all authority and power centered on the king and royal court; all power and all decrees emerged from Madrid. The Spanish government co-opted the leading citizens through quasi-honorary appointments as senior militia officers.

Mercedes' family abounded in military connections, with relatives holding military appointments in the royal forces and militias. Her father, Joaquín de Santa Cruz y Cárdenas, a captain of the white militia of Havana at the time of her birth, would eventually rise to the rank of *mariscal de campo* (field marshal). Mercedes was also the granddaughter of the Count de Casa-Montalvo, Ignacio Montalvo y Ambulodi, a brigadier in the royal army and a colonel of a Cuban regiment of dragoons. Mercedes' female relatives often married military men, in some cases Spanish officers, such as her great-aunt María Manuela de Cárdenas, wife to the then general and later *mariscal de campo* Pedro de Mendinueta. At her baptism, Mercedes' extended family could count some nineteen officers of the royal army including twelve present or future generals and *mariscales de campo*.

The men in Mercedes' family circle also held many of Havana's civic offices. Some of these positions were officially hereditary while others passed along informally within a particular family. In many cases, the Spanish crown sold offices outright. With their dominance in commerce, military, and civic posts, the various families attending

the baptism in the Havana cathedral formed a creole oligarchy well placed to lobby for Cuban interests and to benefit from the tremendous economic growth about to transform Cuba. From 1762 to 1792, sugar cultivation grew by 1,500 percent and exports increased tremendously. Spain faced growing pressure to open more ports to Caribbean products and to eliminate the slave trade monopoly. Cuba's population also increased by approximately one hundred thousand from 1774 to 1792, although it was still a relatively racially balanced society compared to the neighboring British and French islands. Sixty-nine percent of Cuba's population in 1792 was free, including a large black and mixed-race component.

While Havana's seamier side might be notorious, the elegant plazas and palaces housing its wealthier citizens appeared a world away. Moving away from the humble *bohíos* of early days, the Habaneros (Havana residents) built masonry homes based on Moorish-influenced Spanish style. The new homes were designed with greater permanence in mind but also sought to protect their occupants from the intense Cuban sun—the sun that influenced so much of daily life. The chronicler from 1598 recalled “the burning rays of an oven-hot sun,” and Mercedes later claimed that “throughout the day, one languishes under the heavy weight of the sun.” Early creole homes were constructed around a square or rectangular central patio. All rooms would open onto this patio in a manner designed to catch every possible breeze and ensure optimal ventilation. The Cuban desire to benefit from the island breezes became a national characteristic; even now a soft breeze is something to treasure and enjoy. Mercedes captured this longing, recalling the feeling of “voluptuous delicacy” that accompanied the arrival of longed-for breezes.

The homes also employed the typically Spanish details of reddish tiled roofs, intricately pieced wooden ceilings, and wooden doors wide enough for a carriage to pass. The patios would often contain a fountain or central well, and the roofs would carefully funnel rainwater down to hidden cisterns for later use. While the first more permanent structures were only one story, with more wealth came larger homes with a second floor, interior galleries, and out-

ward-facing balconies—all with intricately turned wood window grilles—never any glass. As the seventeenth century gave way to the eighteenth, Habaneros added more elaborate sculptured door ornaments and graceful frescos on the interior walls. Leading citizens requested permission for porticoes and arcades, and entire plazas offered covered walkways. Still, the facades along the side streets were generally simple—the plain wall hiding the lavish interiors favored by wealthy Habaneros.

Impressive houses, some actual palaces, belonging to the aristocratic creole families were concentrated in the area north of the Plaza Vieja. Despite the introduction of a system of house numbering in 1763, Habaneros still referred to most homes by their owners' names and made note of the cross streets. The practice was especially true of the palaces but also would occur with more average residents, as a 1795 advertisement in the *Papel Periódico de la Havana* indicated, directing interested buyers to the “casa de Don Vicente Ponce, Calle de Cuba.” A short carriage ride in a typical Cuban *volante*, avoiding the mud and dust, would take the visitor south from the Plaza de la Catedral to the Plaza Vieja along Calle de San Ignacio; if it returned north along Calle de Mercaderes it would pass one of the most beautiful homes in Havana, the Casa de la Obra Pia, with its innumerable arches hidden behind a quiet facade. The graceful home belonged to the family of Mercedes' paternal Cárdenas grandmother. Mercaderes also conveniently housed the particularly high-end shops where Habaneros could purchase luxurious linens, silks, and wools along with fabrics shot with gold and silver. Luxuries were always in demand; Havana's first historian wrote in 1761 that Cuban fashion placed no limit on the delicacy and splendor of clothing.

The immense Plaza Vieja, dating from the sixteenth century, contained no public buildings; only residences, although it featured a lively market in its center. In Havana even the residential homes often had shops in the lower floors, and the bustle was constant. Along one side of the plaza, an altar to Our Lady of the Rosary inspired the name Rosario given to the porticoes of the home of Mercedes' cousin, the Marquesa de Casa-Calvo. Evening rosary

processions would make their way from various churches to the Rosario arcade to sing and pray to the Virgin. The plaza also contained the palatial family home of the Counts de San Juan de Jaruco. Imposing arcades with arches and columns marched along the Plaza Vieja, a testament to the importance of the Santa Cruz family. Mercedes' great-great-grandfather Gabriel de Santa Cruz petitioned the Spanish king for a license to build the arcade; the petition records his claim to be one of the leading citizens of Havana and reminds His Majesty of his family's loyal service. In old Havana, arcades equated to privilege and power. Although the house on the Plaza Vieja was the most prominent of the Santa Cruz houses, like many affluent families, the Santa Cruz family had several homes scattered throughout the various streets of Havana. Mercedes' godmother, the actual Countess de Jaruco, owned a spectacular house by the Plaza de Armas, and she too received permission to add *portales* in 1784. Traveling farther east from the Plaza Vieja led to the Plaza de San Francisco, dominated by the church and convent of the same name. That plaza opened up to the harbor and was a bustling hive of activity. Mercedes' maternal great-grandfather, Lorenzo Montalvo, was buried, dressed in the robes of a Franciscan friar, in a chapel adjoining the convent, near the Montalvo family home on Calle de Oficios.

The insularity of Havana's elite became obvious in the tangled web of familial ties that united the city's prominent inhabitants. A quick review of old Cuban parish records and genealogies makes it abundantly clear that the term *intermarriage* is an understatement. Not only did second and third cousins marry with great frequency, but first-cousin unions were remarkably common. What really makes the creole elites stand out, however, is the number of marriages between uncles and nieces—sometimes followed up with a first-cousin marriage in the next generation. The families united at the cathedral had numerous examples in their midst. Mercedes' aunt María Luisa Montalvo y O'Farrill married her own uncle Juan Manuel O'Farrill y Herrera, while another O'Farrill y Herrera sibling, Rafael, married his niece María Luisa O'Farrill y Arredondo. The intricate relationships that resulted from these close intermar-

riages make these family trees resemble the thick canopies of the majestic native ceiba trees that rise from a single, tall trunk. Frequent early deaths also resulted in remarriages and extended families living together in their palaces, often uniting younger children of a second marriage with grandchildren from the first. Multiple generational living perhaps encouraged more interfamily unions.

Frequent intermarriages reflected the fairly universal desire to retain estates and fortunes within the family or to ensure the future of a younger son or daughter. Creole families often set up entailed estates tied to their titles, and keeping more in the family was an attractive prospect. There was another reason for preferring marriages within a small circle, which was very specific to Spain and its colonies: *limpieza de sangre*. *Limpieza de sangre* translates as "purity of blood," and was prerequisite for certain honors or legal entitlements. As a legal matter, an individual would have to prove a "clean" bloodline free from Jewish, Moorish, or newly converted ancestors for several generations. Strange as it sounds today, it was a concept born from the turmoil of Spain's reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula from the Moors and its later expulsion of Jews and its remaining Moorish subjects. Likewise, some honors required proof of noble lineage. For an eighteenth-century family concerned with maintaining its status and obtaining more honors, marrying a stranger was riskier than marrying a close relative.

While most Cuban aristocratic families shared similar customs, Mercedes' maternal and paternal families seemed strikingly different in their outlook on life. Mercedes' paternal side, the Santa Cruz and Cárdenas families, had arrived in an earlier wave of settlers, particularly the Cárdenas, whose founder arrived in the late sixteenth century. They quickly married into the founding families of Havana, and through their relations inherited the beautiful old home of the Obra Pía charity and its patronage that annually dowered five orphaned girls. The king granted Mercedes' great-grandfather the title of Marqués de Cárdenas de Monte-Hermoso, ostensibly in appreciation for services given in the British invasion. While the Cárdenas served in various civic positions, they don't seem to have

been very active in the military. The Beltrán de Santa Cruz family arrived in 1628 when Don Pedro Beltrán de Santa Cruz y Beitía was sent to establish the Real Tribunal de Cuentas (Royal Court of Accounts) in Havana. The Santa Cruz men had previously been conquistadores in the Canary Islands and in Colombia. Like the Cárdenas family, the Santa Cruz family also married into the older families and favored mainly civic service. Both families established "feudal" towns tied to their titles of Cárdenas de Monte-Hermoso and San Juan de Jaruco. These families abounded with religious figures, including the legendary Cárdenas sisters, known for decades as the Beatas (the blessed) Cárdenas because of their piety. In both cases, the overall impression is of a conservative, settled family, and Mercedes' closed-minded grandmother, María Josefa Cárdenas y Santa Cruz (with a Cárdenas father and Santa Cruz mother) personified many of the family's traits.

In contrast to the Santa Cruz-Cárdenas side, Mercedes' maternal line, the Montalvo and O'Farrill families, were relative newcomers, having arrived within twenty years of each other in the first decades of the eighteenth century. The Montalvo and O'Farrill families were closely linked through Richard O'Farrill's wife, the widowed María Josefa de Arriola, mother of Lorenzo Montalvo's second wife, Teresa Ambulodi y Arriola. Hence the O'Farrill children were Teresa Ambulodi's half brother and half sister. Both families shared a strong business sense, and within a generation their respective heirs held extensive landholdings with established entailed estates. Compared to many of their contemporaries, these early generations of O'Farrills and Montalvos seemed more forward thinking and open to new ideas and technologies. Mercedes' grandfather, Ignacio Montalvo, Count de Casa-Montalvo, had sent his two sons to study in Madrid's prestigious Colegio de Nobles and would later place them as cadets in the Spanish Guards. Montalvo himself traveled in 1794 with Francisco Arango, the representative of the Havana council, on an eleven-month fact-finding mission to learn about advancements in efficient sugar production and technologies beyond the Spanish colonies. The enterprising duo visited Cádiz, Portugal,

Britain, Barbados, and Jamaica before dramatically concluding their journey with a shipwreck on the southern coast of Cuba. Ignacio Montalvo, along with his O'Farrill brother-in-law (and son-in-law!), Juan Manuel O'Farrill, was a founding member of the Real Sociedad Económica Amigos del País, which tried to establish a more enlightened society in Cuba by opening schools and the first public library. Arango, Montalvo, and various relatives also helped create the Real Consulado de Agricultura y Comercio that lobbied for a more liberalized economy and commissioned their investigative journey.

The O'Farrills had looked outside of Cuba for opportunities in an even earlier generation. Mercedes' great-grandparents, Juan José O'Farrill y Arriola and Luisa Herrera y Chacón, sent their ten-year-old son Gonzalo for military training in France, starting a career that would culminate in his position as minister of war to Joseph Bonaparte in Spain. The O'Farrills were always ready to help well-connected foreigners, as when Gonzalo O'Farrill, then Spanish minister in Berlin, aided the naturalist Alexander von Humboldt in his scientific journey through the Americas. O'Farrill offered to swap his Cuban income for von Humboldt's Prussian rents, providing the explorer access to local currency while on the island. They were an outward-looking clan, and in her future life Mercedes seemed to take after this maternal line. At the end of her life, Mercedes would be buried next to her great-uncle Gonzalo O'Farrill—two Habaneros lying in the Parisian Père Lachaise cemetery.

A clear visualization of this outward-looking perspective still hangs in Havana's city museum, located in the old Palace of the Captains General. The portrait commemorates the successful journey of the intrepid Ignacio Montalvo. Montalvo, bewigged and dressed in a military uniform, proudly indicates with an elegantly out-held hand the evidence of his grand achievements: a diagram of a steam engine for a sugar mill. It calls to mind another portrait depicting another grand achievement affecting Cuba: Sir Joshua Reynolds's portrait of General William Keppel at the fall of Havana in 1762. Shown in his scarlet British army coat, Keppel looks into the distance and indicates with his hand the far-off Morro fort and a long, snakelike

line of redcoats. Keppel's achievement is military, and his painting is by a Royal Academician, while Montalvo's portrait celebrates the acquisition of technology, executed by a provincial painter. Still, side by side, the similarity is startling. Did Montalvo consciously emulate the European style of Keppel's portrait? In his choice one can see how Montalvo viewed his accomplishments, aspirations, and Cuba's position in the world.

Perhaps it would seem surprising that Joaquín de Santa Cruz and Teresa Montalvo, children of very different families, should marry. However, Havana's relatively small society offered limited choices, and the two shared mutual Calvo de la Puerta cousins. Joaquín might also have been attracted to the dynamic Montalvo-O'Farrill clan, since he demonstrated early on his own forward thinking in his business dealings. Passion might even have played a role. Mercedes suggested this last reason, claiming that her father fell in love with her mother, whom she extravagantly described as beautiful as the day and "uniting all the natural charms which heaven in its generosity can bestow upon a mere mortal." Mercedes would always praise her mother to the skies in all her reminiscences, and generally adopted a romantic perspective.

Mercedes' father and mother married young in June 1786, when they were just sixteen and fourteen, respectively. Both shared the early loss of a parent. Teresa's mother, María Josefa O'Farrill y Herrera, had died two years before, while Joaquín had lost his father as a baby. Although young, Joaquín commanded a fortune inherited through his paternal grandparents. Joaquín and Teresa's first-born son, Manuel María, arrived within two years of their marriage, and Mercedes was born a year later. After Mercedes' birth in 1789, Joaquín would use the Jaruco title in official correspondence with his great-aunt's blessing, though his widowed great-aunt still possessed his great-uncle's title and estates. This third Count de San Juan de Jaruco has been described as an intelligent and restless man, a person looking for more than what was then the status quo of Cuba. His ambition showed in his many business ventures and dealings with the royal court in Madrid. But in 1789, he and his young and bewitch-

ing wife seemed merely eager to travel and see the great cities of Europe. Yet another family portrait reveals a clue to these European aspirations and to the family's wealth and position. Painted before Mercedes' birth, this curious painting depicts Teresa, Joaquín, their son and heir Manuel, and Manuel's slave nurse, Agueda. They sit in a European interior, Joaquín every inch the eighteenth-century nobleman: curled and powdered wig, elegant coat, waistcoat, and breeches, holding a tricorne hat in one hand with a gentleman's dress sword at his side. Teresa appears stylishly in a frothy white dress with its bouffant kerchief, fitted bodice, and frilled short sleeves, her hair fashionably teased, and her son Manuel in a lacy dress. Agueda, slightly in the shadows and dressed in a dark version of her mistress's gown, wears a *mantilla* (lace veil) and *peineta* (comb) in her hair, and provides the most exotic element of the portrait. Otherwise, the family could be in Madrid, Paris, or even colonial America—nothing else readily identifies them as a creole family. Other than the slave Agueda, the only clue to the provincial location is the relatively untrained and primitive skill of the anonymous painter. The sitters' proportions are somewhat odd; Teresa's right arm seems enormous, and Joaquín's stockinged legs are fat. Few formally trained painters existed in late-eighteenth-century Havana. Not until the early part of the nineteenth century would the French painter Jean-Baptiste Vermy, a follower of David, take the city by storm, producing more artistically advanced portraits of the ranking families.

The chance to travel to Europe presented itself in the form of a prospective inheritance from one of Joaquín's uncles, an exiled Jesuit priest living in Italy. Since the planned journey was arduous, and the young couple would probably visit various countries, they decided to leave the children behind. The children would be safer with their extended families, and Joaquín and Teresa could wander easily with no responsibilities. The arrangements for their care were somewhat surprising: the children were separated from each other and placed with different family members. Perhaps the strong-willed María Josefa de Cárdenas insisted on caring for the next heir, or other family rivalries existed. Regardless of the reasons, Joaquín and Teresa

entrusted the young Manuel to his paternal grandmother, the stern and devout Countess de Casa-Barreto, while baby Mercedes went with her great-grandmother, Luisa Herrera y Chacón, her mother's own grandmother.

At the end of the baptismal rite, the priest, Don Luis, would have urged the infant to keep true to her baptism throughout a blameless life, ready for the coming of the Lord and life everlasting. Don Luis would have concluded with the words: *Vade in pace, et Dominus sit tecum*, Amen. Go in peace, and may the Lord be with you, Amen. With this blessing, the newly christened Mercedes emerged to start her life's journey. But already, her particular path deviated from the standard for most Cuban children. At less than one year old, Mercedes saw her parents sail for Europe on their own journey—one which most thought would end in a year or two. Mercedes later wrote in her memoirs that the separation was predicted to last six months; wishful thinking given the distances involved and the long, dangerous sea crossing. Few would have guessed that she would not see her father until she was almost nine years old, and that it would be a new century before she saw her mother again, and then only in far-off Madrid.

MERCEDES AND MAMITA

So Joaquín and Teresa sailed away to commence their European adventures, leaving behind one-year-old Manuel and the infant Mercedes to the tender mercies of their extended family. For Mercedes, the saving grace of a difficult situation lay in her parents' decision to place her with her maternal Montalvo/O'Farrill relatives, specifically with the O'Farrill family matriarch, her great-grandmother Luisa Herrera y Chacón. This forward-looking family's attitudes would steep her earliest childhood days in openness, affection, and freedom that laid the foundations for her attitudes and beliefs. Mercedes felt at home in the sparkling O'Farrill world, but the permissiveness and freedom that she experienced would later conflict with the sterner Santa Cruz/Cárdenas side.

The O'Farrills were more than a mere Havana family. They were known as a "clan" because of their notable intermarriages and links with key families as well as their strong sense of mutual assistance. The strength of the O'Farrill concept of clan was unique among Cuban families, and has come down through the ages in histories and tales of old Havana. Perhaps the key to this strong bond lies in their

Celtic roots, since the O'Farrills traced their line to County Longford in Ireland. The first Habanero O'Farrill was Richard O'Farrill y O'Daly. No matter how later generations tried to ennoble him by claiming royal Irish descent, he had been the son of an Irish soldier on the tiny English-owned island of Montserrat—an island that would almost be destroyed by a violent volcanic eruption over two centuries later. There his parents had settled, but the O'Farrills always sought more—more than just life on a speck in the British Empire.

The chance to come to Cuba as the agent for the South Sea Company was a coup in all respects. The position meant trading in human beings, not shocking in the early eighteenth century, unlike today or even the nineteenth century when the abolitionist movement strengthened. At the time, the company merely viewed it as another commercial opportunity in line with a tradition of transatlantic slave trade that had flourished since the beginning of the sixteenth century. Most of the major European nations had participated—indeed even fought for the privilege. But let's be clear, despite his important commercial position as the company's agent, Richard (or "Ricardo") O'Farrill would have been closely involved in the trade and more than a witness to the horrors that accompanied the profits. Whether he ever traveled on a slave ship is unknown, but he certainly would have been present at the arrival of the wretched vessels and their unfortunate cargo. The Spaniards euphemistically called the Africans shipped across as *piezas de India* (pieces of India)—exotic pieces of cargo.

The South Sea Company's license did not last long, but Ricardo had realized that there were many opportunities to be had in Cuba—perhaps in slaves but especially in sugar. Sugar and land seeped into the O'Farrill blood. Before long, Ricardo had married the widowed daughter of the royal treasurer, petitioning the Spanish king for citizenship and permission to bring his property from Jamaica—including 236 slaves. He also bought land and began to cultivate sugar. The O'Farrills were wealthy landowners and members of the Havana elite by the time that Luisa Herrera, daughter of a marqués and bred from a long line of Spanish nobility, married old Ricardo's son, Juan José.

Luisa adored children and was used to managing an enormous household. She came from a family of twelve children, gave birth to twelve of her own, and raised the eleven that survived. She had a talent for creating a nurturing home life. Her son Gonzalo fondly recollected how "one tender look from my mother filled my father's face with joy and serenity." Luisa had worked hard at establishing these eleven children in society and ensuring their fortunes. Most of her children had married or established their own homes by the time Mercedes was born, although in typical Cuban fashion her two youngest daughters still lived with her, and others came and went.

Luisa Herrera was probably in her early sixties by the time Mercedes entered her great-grandmother's home, and her own eldest daughter, Mercedes' grandmother María Josefa, had been dead for five years. Luisa herself had been widowed for almost ten. So perhaps Mercedes offered a final chance for Luisa to cherish a new baby. All the family could see that Mercedes became her special delight. For Mercedes, Luisa Herrera became more than just her great-grandmother; she became her own Mamita.

There is no known surviving portrait of Luisa Herrera, either in youth or in old age. Her great-granddaughter, however, left a vivid sketch in her account of that early Cuban childhood. Luisa, Mercedes wrote, had been a rare and delicate beauty who even in her old age preserved traces of loveliness in her finely drawn features. Almost forty years later, Mercedes could still recall "her snow-white hair gracefully rolled up and pinned up in braids exposing a perfectly formed brow and angelically sweet blue eyes. Her fine and delicate features revealed her entire soul by an ineffable expression of calm and habitual benevolence, just as the barely tinted whiteness of her skin, like a transparent veil, barely covered her small blue veins, and conveyed an almost youthful charm despite her age." Above all, Mercedes remembered a serene character that was both indulgent and cheerful, the very idea of the loving grandmother.

Mamita's serenity extended to every fiber of her being, including her physical aspect and her exemplary toilette. The day's end would find her dressed in her habitual white, as fresh and fragrant

as she had started, with every hair in place and her gown still carefully pleated. After reading Mercedes' tender description it is easy to envision a loving spirit gliding through the lives of her extended family, leaving a trail of calmness and goodwill in her wake. This benevolent matriarch was surrounded by the love and respect of all those near to her and even the wider Havana society. Luisa was so highly regarded that at her death in 1806, the bishop of Havana, Don Luis Espada, chose her to be one of the first persons buried in the new city cemetery and officiated at the burial himself, hoping that his personal involvement and her prominence would together inspire other eminent Habaneros to emulate and begin burying their dead there rather than in the city's churches and monasteries.

Cuban grandmothers are legendary for spoiling their grandchildren, feeding them favorite foods, letting them have their way, and drowning them in affection. From what Mercedes herself wrote decades later, the late eighteenth century was no different. Mamita's own children chided her for excessive tenderness toward the motherless girl, but Mamita responded sweetly to the criticism: "What do you want? She embodies the last piece of my soul—let me enjoy her!" Mercedes more than reciprocated the affection, and Mamita's love filled the void left by Mercedes' parents in these early, formative years. Mercedes thrived in the tropical heat of Cuba under the dotting eye of Mamita. Mercedes' deep sentiments for Mamita would become the seed for her own emotional growth, encouraging feelings of tenderness and love. She remembered her affection for Mamita as an "awakening to the world." The absence of the child's parents also drew attention from other members of her extended family, and she later wrote that "all... had the right to spoil me and no one had the right to chastise me." Mercedes could only recall being surrounded by love and the tenderest of care. Sitting at the end of a long line of ninety-five relatives at one of Mamita's family celebrations, Mercedes could not help but feel like the "last link in a chain," firmly part of a thriving world.

Mercedes' attachment to the matriarch of the O'Farrill clan would later spur close ties to Mamita's son Gonzalo O'Farrill, the only one

of the eleven children who would spend his adult life in Spain and France with Mercedes. The family had sent Gonzalo away to be educated in France at a young age, and he later entered the Spanish army as a career officer, rarely returning to his homeland. He served the king wherever he was needed, from battlefields in North Africa to more glamorous postings in European capitals. But his mother never stopped missing her "little boy" and always longed to see him. So often did Luisa recount his one and only visit to Havana that Mercedes became convinced, in her young mind, that she had been witness to the great event. Years later, meeting the famed great-uncle in Madrid, she was able to tell him with unerring accuracy details of his long-ago Havana sojourn. Gonzalo O'Farrill laughed and laughed when he heard the teenage Mercedes spin her tale, but such had been Luisa's longing for her flesh and blood that she had bequeathed this memory to Mercedes.

Mamita's Havana home was busy, and like most Havana homes—including grand *casas*—it had offices or businesses located on the lower floor. The comings and goings of business associates would only have added to the general household bustle, including those enormous family gatherings. The centrality of the extended family is not just a modern Latin phenomenon, but rather one rooted in a time when family ties were often the most reliable ones, and where family protection was crucial for advancement and security. Blood kin could be trusted, or so was the general belief. For a little girl, far away from her own nuclear family, belonging to this rich tapestry of life would have had a fundamental impact—creating a foundation for which she would always search or wish throughout her life.

Luisa maintained not only a Havana home but also held extensive *fincas* (country estates or farms) and visited them regularly, as was the custom of wealthy Havana families. In Havana, feminine life was rather constrained, centered on the home with excursions limited to visits to other family homes, regular attendance to church, or an evening outing in a *volante*, the Cuban carriage with two enormous wheels that navigated the narrow streets. The city was full of noise as the famous Cuban street vendors offered their bread, fruits, and

milk. Market traders always called out their wares, and there was also the constant sound of the bells from the churches, convents, and monasteries. Mamita, like most wealthy Havana matrons, had her own household chapel or oratory and regularly received her confessor. The Roman Catholic religion was not just part of everyday life in Cuba; it helped shape the flow of the days and months. Feast days were celebrated, processions marked special events, and the family chaplain played an integral part in aristocratic households. For women in particular, including Mamita, attending mass constituted a regular feature of daily life.

City life could seem a bit formal and constrained for a child, perhaps. But the graceful walled houses offered their own sort of entertainment for a little girl. Their shady garden patios, full of flowers, held secret places. The huge interconnecting rooms offered endless space for racing and running, while the marble staircases could be used as slides—sometimes with tearful consequences. The rooms surrounding the enormous gateway—wide enough for a carriage to roll through—held intriguing barrels and containers full of plantation products for storage and sale, and provided entertainment from the daily parade of traders. Mercedes' memoirs suggest she was playful and maybe a bit naughty. Running around the house, up and down the marble stairs, slipping and falling as all children do, and being picked up and taken care of by her mother's old nanny, Agueda, Mercedes must have been somewhat of a devil. She had no thought for studies, preferring games and mischief. She sent her writing master's bonnet flying in the air as he tried in vain to make her learn her lessons. Mercedes' tricks spared no one, and no one really tried to stop her in these first nine years. She always "played by right the central role... no one had the will to use their authority to make me see reason." Only persuasion was ever employed, never punishments. The result, as Mercedes admitted, was the development of a precocious sensibility and an exalted spirit that remained with her all her life. Freedom and indulgence meant a world ruled by her caprices.

Fincas provided even more opportunities to indulge her flights of fancy. The countryside contained a wealth of freedom for an adven-

turous child. There in the open spaces, Mercedes could explore the unspoiled terrain, rich in flowers, plants, birds, lizards, frogs, and other wildlife. Royal palms stretched across the fields, often lining the paths, and wild, rare orchids grew throughout the island. The royal palms in particular often captured the imagination of foreign visitors, such as the future wife of the writer Nathaniel Hawthorne, who eagerly wrote to her family of her enchantment with these "splendid" trees that were "columns of white marble with a Corinthian capital of green." She also recalled the great ceiba trees, in particular one which "exceeded anything I have ever conceived of in the way of a production of the earth." The great swathes of Cuban forests with their cedar, mahogany, and ebony were full of graceful intertwining vines which for Sophie Peabody had a "melancholy beauty."

The plantation lands contained sugarcane and tobacco fields and coffee and citrus groves, along with beehives producing rich honey and wax. There were also vast pastures for the herds of horses and cattle. The cane fields were full of Cuban crickets and snakes. Colorful birds roamed the skies, including the *zunzun*, the tiniest hummingbird. Later in the day, as the sun set, the *cucullos* (Cuban fireflies) would come out, which children captured and used as lanterns to light the evening shadows.

Mercedes loved the open air and recalled "running in the countryside like a greyhound," where she "knocked the fruits from the trees that were within my reach, or searched to catch the bird's nests which, held by creepers, dangled over my head. Other times, running far away, I tried to ride the young foals grazing in the savannah." She would only head home when the sun was setting, as the herds of horses "still overwhelmed by the heat of the day, their manes ruffled by the evening breeze" drank by the river. Then she would arrive "cheeks rosy, my heart leaping and joyous... my dress hiked up and almost tearing under the weight of the flowers and fruits which I had collected along my way."

Accompanying Mercedes in almost all aspects of her early life were the slaves charged with her care. Like all upper-class Cuban babies, Mercedes had a wet nurse who was also her nanny. Mercedes

recalled "Mama Dolores" with great affection, and the feeling was reciprocated. The reward for nursing an infant was freedom, but according to Mercedes, Mama Dolores refused to be parted and stayed on, still a slave, as her nanny. While it could seem farfetched to believe in such a sacrifice, the most intimate household slaves could, in some cases, form a very important part of the Habanero household. In grand Havana palaces, the owners lived and slept on the top floor, with the large, airy interconnected rooms offering some coolness and shelter from the heat. The slaves and the servants lived just below, and the whole household shared relatively close quarters. Aristocratic households abounded with individuals for every domestic task: laundresses, cooks, coachmen, seamstresses, and even, occasionally, someone specialized in curling feathers. The close proximity could create close bonds, and there were very mundane cases where the owners freed a slave in his will, as the first Count de Jaruco did in 1772 when he ordered that "a young black boy called Felipe of the *Arará* nation, who their lordships had reared, should serve the Countess during her life and by her death be freed... and be given the equivalent in money of his value today."

Along with Mama Dolores, Mercedes also had a personal slave, a young girl named Catalina. Many Cuban children had a particular slave child to play with or care for them. Catalina would often soothe Mercedes to sleep, caressing Mercedes while singing her songs or retelling the sad story of Catalina's passage into slavery and the final separation from her brother. Mercedes later recalled that the story, recounted hundreds of times, would always end with both Catalina and Mercedes in tears.

These childhood experiences and ties perhaps colored Mercedes' later seemingly contradictory feeling toward slavery. In many cases, household slaves had a very different life and experience than those who suffered the brutality of the sugar plantation. There could be, in the best of cases, a paternalistic relationship with these servants, something that was more difficult to replicate in the tobacco and coffee plantation and all but impossible in the sugar mills. The detailed inventory of one of Mercedes' father's sugar mills, San Ignacio de

Río Blanco, shows that 24 out of 178 slaves were considered runaways, having attempted escape at some point in their lives. Mercedes saw some, but not all, the signs of misery. Describing a slave family's burial ground, Mercedes recalled noticing as a child that the slaves rarely grew flowers on their small plots of land, and that there were none on the grave sites. "All that is a pleasure for life is far out of reach and even far from their possible desires." Even with these experiences, however, Mercedes was describing the old-fashioned, still small-scale slavery of the eighteenth century, already in the process of changing. She missed the subsequent explosive growth of slavery in the many years she was away from her homeland.

Mercedes primarily recalled her Cuban days as blissful, a world that revolved around her. But in reality, other aspects were less pleasant to remember. As in all enchanted tales, Mercedes' idyllic childhood contained an evil fairy. In Mercedes' case, it was her paternal grandmother, the virtuous and devout María Josefa de Cárdenas y Santa Cruz. In Mercedes' tales, María Josefa never smiled, never showed affection, and was always consumed with a need to control all around her. The contrast with Luisa Herrera could not have been more striking, but in fairness María Josefa had experienced more than her share of tragedy. Barely seventeen when she married Mercedes' grandfather, she saw her firstborn son and her husband die in the span of two years. Widowed at twenty-two with another baby son, she remarried a man almost thirty years her senior whose evil reputation still resounds in the tourist plaques of *la Vieja Habana*. María Josefa became the wife of Jacinto Barreto y Pedroso, later Count de Casa-Barreto, and had four more children, but her new husband was known as one of the cruelest of Havana slave owners. Part of the Barreto fortune was based on the license granted for the brutal but lucrative occupation of capturing and reselling the runaways who hid in the hills and caves. One story tells of the count inviting a group of beggars to receive alms but then setting loose his slave-hunting dogs on the defenseless gathering. The pandemonium that ensued left many men wounded, and only then did Barreto distribute his alms—in proportion to the wounds received. The count

died in 1791 in the middle of a terrible storm and the final part of the black legend claims that his body was swept away by the storm waters: the devil had claimed his own.

Whatever the facts within these legends, there does seem to have been something dark about the Barreto men, documented in multiple occasions of reneging on legacies or trying to disinherit legitimate heirs.

Mercedes' encounters with her grandmother were not enjoyable. One particular episode left a haunting impression on Mercedes, as she alluded to it twice in her writings. While she changed the location, the key moment remained the same. She credited the moment as the awakening of her moral life, which spurred a lifelong repugnance for the use of brute force.

According to the more detailed description, the incident occurred on a visit to her grandmother's finca, probably when Mercedes was around eight years old. The visit began on an ominous note upon Mercedes' arrival at the plantation, when she was greeted by the severe María Josefa flanked by her household chaplain and her confessor. According to Mercedes, her grandmother could not spend more than forty-eight hours without these two Capuchin priests, since she required daily confessions. María Josefa dominated her household with iron-clad rules under which "every hour had a purpose, and all occurred with strict regularity—the day before the same as the next one. Her daughters, like her slaves, were broken under her authority... and under the force of obedience seemed to have lost the power of free will." Intimidated at first, Mercedes quickly decided to take no notice of these rules, and immediately resumed her "vagabond ways."

As Mercedes recounts it, the first day she was left alone, the second she was reprimanded, and on the third day she encountered her grandmother: "her brows creased, her look severe." Mercedes was told off, and the confessor mumbled threats of locking her away. Rising to the challenge, Mercedes continued her countryside adventures. The punishment came one hot, sunny day. Mercedes found herself locked up in a ground-floor room, with bits of light seeping between

the wooden bars of the solitary window. It was the siesta hour and the air, "inflamed by the heat and the light," was oppressive. "All was calm and quiet, and if not for the buzzing of the insects... one could have believed that a magician's wand had lulled Nature." In her account Mercedes completes the scene by noting that, in the overwhelming heat, a serpent outside was spread out voluptuously on the giant banana leaves, and a thieving monkey eyed an ear of corn that it intended to steal at nightfall.*

Accompanying Mercedes in her imprisonment was Conchita, one of her young aunts. The room also contained a large aviary full of colorful and chattering birds. The timid and delicate Conchita, who would one day contemplate entering a convent, was probably the favorite sister of Mercedes' father—the only one he named in his will. A stronger foil for the mischievous Mercedes would have been hard to find. After shedding frustrated and fruitless tears at her imprisonment, Mercedes leaned sadly against the wooden bars of the window and quickly discovered that the wood was worm eaten. Quick as a flash, Mercedes persuaded her young aunt to help pull apart the bars to create an escape route. From that moment, Mercedes was carried away by her passions—as she would often be in the years to come. She seized the moment, oblivious to consequences, and as an extra flourish flung open the bird cage. The tropical birds flew out the window and Mercedes and her aunt followed. In Mercedes' words, they found themselves "in the midst of the fields surrounded by a cloud of beautiful, colorful birds that flew back and forth over our head... as though thanking us for their liberty."

The exhilaration did not last long, however, as they heard the alarm raised in the house and saw the approach of a search party of slaves led by the two family priests. Mercedes immediately realized that her young aunt was terrified. She knew her mother better than Mercedes, and Mercedes recalled how Conchita's "lips trembled"

* Mercedes wrote this piece around 1838 with a view to the dramatic narrative—monkeys are not native to Cuba! She often distilled real events into a more romanticized version.

and she could barely breathe. Trapped by the search party, the two escapees were led back "fearful and humiliated."

When they arrived at the door, one of the priests told Conchita that her mother awaited, and Conchita "cast one lost glance around her, almost looking for an escape, but at one glance from the father-confessor, one of the slave women who had accompanied us seized her and disappeared with her." Feeling guilty for causing the predicament of her delicate and graceful aunt, Mercedes tried to follow but was blocked by the slaves and the priests. Mercedes soon heard Conchita's cries in another room, ran in, and was shocked by the spectacle of Conchita "sustained in the air by her feet and shoulders by two slave women." Under the unmoving eye of her mother, Conchita was beaten repeatedly until Mercedes jumped on the back of one of the slave women, sank her nails into her, and caused her to release Conchita.

Mercedes felt an overwhelming sense of indignation at the mistreatment and humiliation of a weaker being. Passionate and protective responses would recur over the course of her life, as would the image of a strong, independent spirit cultivated by the wild nature of her island paradise. The sun, the light, the perfumed air, and the all-encompassing heat were forever seared into her earliest memories. But another aspect of Cuba contrasted with this natural, romantic freedom that Mercedes cherished. The rigidity of a colonial society balanced its tropical, sensual nature.

In Mercedes' case, a rebellion and clash with her grandmother—the ultimate representative of close-mindedness and order—eventually convinced María Josefa of the need to rein Mercedes in and of the danger in Mamita's softness and permissiveness. Mercedes commented that her escape that day cost both her and Conchita tears, but she could not have realized then what price she would ultimately pay for her brief triumph.

JOAQUÍN

On the third of February, 1797, the royal mail ship *El Rey* arrived on the eastern tip of the island in the port of Santiago de Cuba, Cuba's second largest city and its former capital. The ship had sailed out of the port of La Coruña in northern Spain three months earlier and had been forced to shelter from heavy weather in the Canary Islands, finally reaching its destination after eluding a division of British warships near Cuban coastal waters. In addition to the mail, *El Rey* also carried the newly minted sub-inspector general of the Royal Armies, who enjoyed the second-highest military rank on the island. The sub-inspector, carrying the rank of brigadier general, was also entrusted by King Carlos IV with a special commission to map the almost uncharted expanse of Guantánamo Bay, to explore the possibilities for settlements, to develop new roads, and to plan a canal in the expanding sugar lands near Havana. The sub-inspector brought engineers, botanists, naturalists, and other staff for what became known as the Royal Guantánamo Commission.

The royal commission enjoyed the personal support of the most powerful man in Spain, the Prince de la Paz—Manuel Godoy, favorite courtier of the king and queen. The Cuban colonial hierarchy took note, and messages began to fly back and forth confirming that

the governor of Santiago, the captain-general of Cuba, and the *intendente* of the navy would all do their utmost to support the mission. In Havana one person in particular eagerly anticipated the arrival of the sub-inspector—little Mercedes, just eight years old. Obviously, no eight-year-old child would know or particularly care about royal commissions, new settlements, or roads. Her intrigue lay in the arrival of her father, Joaquín, the new sub-inspector general, Brigadier Count de Santa Cruz de Mopox.

Her father had returned home.

Joaquín had left Cuba in the spring of 1789 as a mere captain in the Havana infantry militia, not even a count, just the legal heir to the title and estates of the Count de San Juan de Jaruco. His great-aunt allowed him to use the title of count while in Spain to bolster his prestige and to help promote the family interests, but it was still a steep climb from those beginnings to his current military position and the newly created title of Count de Santa Cruz de Mopox. In February of 1797 Joaquín was still only twenty-seven years old, but in keeping with his restless and driving nature, he had spent eight years in a relentless push to secure ever-growing honors and privileges. While his daughter Mercedes ran freely in her own version of a tropical Eden, basking in the love and protection of her Mamita, Joaquín and his wife, Teresa Montalvo, played the grand game of royal courtiers. Mercedes' parents had planned their European adventure almost from the time of their 1786 marriage. In both 1787 and 1788, the couple applied for a royal license to travel to "the realms of Castilla," describing themselves as young and rich, explaining that they had business to oversee personally and relatives to visit in "those lands." They sent the first petition directly to Madrid, only to have it returned with terse instructions for its submission through the appropriate channels in Havana. With all the delays, the final approval did not arrive until the fall of 1788—while Teresa was pregnant with Mercedes. Since the royal license required Joaquín and Teresa to travel together—there seemed to have been some fear of scandal if this rich young couple separated so early in

their married life—the couple had no choice but to wait until after the birth of their second child.

Joaquín always tried to circumvent normal procedure—he seemed to live in a constant race against time, something that Mercedes noted when she described him many years later: "he said that our time here was too short to lose any of it with sleep." Hence, she added, he lived perpetually on coffee—a pot of strong Cuban coffee always at his side—and he sought other distractions to keep him awake. Even before he had left Havana or had even received royal permission to do so, Joaquín had submitted through his Madrid agent the first of countless petitions pleading for promotion to colonel—at a price—in any of the various Havana militias. This, despite having only joined the infantry militia in 1785 as sub-lieutenant and only obtaining his captaincy in 1788. At one point, shortly after arriving in Madrid, he had two simultaneous requests outstanding—including one where he offered to underwrite a regiment of mounted dragoons in the Matanzas region in return for the command of the Jaruco squadron. The minister of Indies, Antonio Valdés, gave his opinion to the first minister: "[Jaruco] is wet behind the ears, without any experience whatsoever, and lacking the military character necessary to entrust him with the command of a regiment, which being newly formed would require particularly vigorous discipline. Nor has he offered enough money for the post considering the salary that he would subsequently receive, without even considering what he would gain in honor and the advancement of his career."

Nothing deterred Joaquín, however. Calling himself the Count de Jaruco, he received, again at a price, the honorary appointment of gentleman of the bedchamber to the king in late 1789. He asked the king for permission to travel to Italy to see more of Europe and to "illuminate the spirit and acquire knowledge useful for the service of Your Majesty," yet within days of receiving permission he sent off a new letter, asking for one thing more—to be inducted into one of the prestigious orders of chivalry—even though he did not yet meet the qualifications. His reasoning, as he stated unashamedly, was that he

knew how "decorous such distinctions" were abroad, and he wanted to bask in that glory during his trip. His petition failed.

Even when Joaquín achieved his coveted appointment as sub-inspector general in May 1795, he spent five months quibbling over his exact rank, salary, and expenses. He penned lengthy letters exhaustively citing precedent, articles, and regulations, squeezing every bit of advantage possible—sometimes creatively using information. Frustrated civil servants retaliated with sarcastic comments, noting for example that traveling to Guanabacoa for troop reviews would be a mere stroll rather than a tedious journey.

Joaquín's letters show a man who was always thinking and planning—gossiping for information and maintaining extensive correspondence regarding his Cuban properties as well as his activities in Spain. Particularly enlightening are his surviving letters from 1794 to 1795 to his cousin and adviser Francisco Arango, who at the time was embarked on an eighteenth-century version of industrial espionage with Joaquín's father-in-law, the Count de Casa-Montalvo. Joaquín's letters reflect a constantly changing stream of ideas, plans, and goals. Diplomatic postings, ministerial positions, military rank, and plans for expanding his Cuban holdings—all came rolling from his pen—along with court gossip, reports on efforts to promote mutual friends, and many assurances of friendship and devotion from Joaquín and his wife, Teresa. He followed the court on its annual progressions through royal palaces: December and January in Madrid; spring in the lush gardens of Aranjuez; high summer in the Guadarrama Mountains at La Granja de San Ildefonso, where fountains copied from the Palace of Versailles splashed clear, ice-cold mountain waters; and autumn hunting in El Pardo outside Madrid and in San Lorenzo de El Escorial, the austere royal monastery/palace with its huge Cuban mahogany doors and furniture. While following the king and queen in these endlessly circular court movements, Joaquín longed for more foreign sites and also for a release from his dependence on slaves, bad sugar harvests, and volatile commodity prices.

Such was the tight and insular court life that the slightest gesture was analyzed. In a letter to Arango dated May 2, 1794, from Aran-

juez, Joaquín confided that the king had recently taken him and the Duke of Alcedia (as Godoy was then titled) by the arm and walked out of luncheon saying, in full view of others:

This poor boy cannot continue in the Corps [of Guards] . . . three days ago I went to his house and was sorry to find him beat up and covered in blood from the results of riding that day; I know he wants to stay in the Corps, but I entreat you," he said to the Duke, "because he is dear to me, give him something else, as he is more than fit for whatever you may want to grant him. . . ." to which the Duke answered: "Fine, let him ask for whatever he wishes.

Joaquín reported that after that small but public exchange, he was nearly overwhelmed by countless fellow courtiers congratulating him on all sorts of wild titles and imaginary honors—none of them real but within the scope of imagination. So he asked for a diplomatic post, and said that the duke received the petition with great pleasure, while Joaquín subsequently joked to Arango, "but I don't know what he has done with [the request] . . . maybe he had a maid wipe his a . . . with it." Joaquín clearly knew what was needed to move ahead in the world, but he also expressed frustration with the stagnant and monotonous life of a courtier.

The breakthrough finally began in 1794 when Joaquín was named, in quick succession, the commanding colonel of a battalion of Royal Guards and then Count de Santa Cruz de Mopox in his own right. He also obtained valuable trading licenses and monopolies, all capped off with his nomination as sub-inspector general of Cuba and the rank of brigadier. How had this happened so suddenly?

Shortly after arriving in the Spanish capital, Joaquín and Teresa embarked upon a luxurious lifestyle. Renting various houses in the heart of what is today's Old Madrid, they eventually settled on a home on the Calle de la Luna and offered regular dances and a *tertulia*, a Spanish version of a salon. Their lavish entertainment attracted notice and comments for many decades. They had style and taste, and their musical soirees included the best instrumental and singing

artists of the time. Mercedes herself would later say that her father did everything on a magnificent scale. For her part, Teresa became an effective networker and flourished as a popular hostess. Indeed, when Joaquín left for Cuba in late 1796, friends and relatives reported back to Havana that Teresa had become adept at managing business deals. In a letter dated February 1797 to Arango, their mutual cousin and friend José de Jesús Arostegui y Herrera admiringly recounts that “our Teresa is gorgeous and active in supporting Joaquín’s interests. It may seem hard to imagine, but she handles his business dealings with the dexterity of a man who is already well-versed in their management, and she has a way of cutting to the chase that allows for her to resolve things in a matter of hours.”

Joaquín and Teresa carefully cultivated the friendship of Manuel Godoy, which in turn helped secure the affection of the king himself. Their charm and lavish entertainment were supplemented by a judicious use of monetary contributions to the military costs of the ongoing war with the French Republic, and by well-placed and expensive personal gifts to Godoy. Joaquín’s letters reveal him to be fervently patriotic and concerned with the welfare of his country, but he was also aware that aiding the national defense would promote his own cause.

Maintaining the Santa Cruz influence was probably one of the reasons that Teresa stayed behind in Madrid—even though she had not seen either of her Havana-born children, Manuel and Mercedes, since 1789. There were other considerations, too. The Santa Cruz marriage had produced three more children, all born in Spain, but Teresa had already experienced the loss of one daughter, María. In 1795, Teresa suffered through a difficult childbirth in her final pregnancy. Joaquín’s letters indicate that its aftermath caused her some lingering medical problems. Although she had recovered sufficiently to accompany Joaquín to Paris and London in late 1795, she may not have been robust enough for a long and demanding sea journey.

Joaquín, irrepresible as ever, began working almost from the moment *El Rey* entered Santiago’s harbor. He initially focused on organizing his royal commission to explore Guantánamo, and in his

first month he wrote no less than ten letters or reports to Spain—outlining his appointments, his plans, and forwarding additional information and ideas for development. The sheer number of letters is overwhelming, reflecting Joaquín’s seemingly boundless capacity for weaving dreams and plans. Not only was he looking at the Guantánamo Bay area, he also suggested developing the Bay of Nipe on the northeastern coast—yet another building project. Joaquín soon expanded his Guantánamo venture from a scientific expedition into a review of strategic military and economic development for the island.

These multiple plans and tasks kept Joaquín in the Santiago and Guantánamo area for several months. Since the king had ordered him to commence his military role almost immediately, Joaquín also began the process of reviewing the troops, analyzing their state of readiness, and determining how to incorporate the newly arrived militias from Santo Domingo (today’s Dominican Republic), which had been ceded to France. Slowly making his way north and west toward Havana, Joaquín inspected troops in Bayamo and Puerto Príncipe (today’s Camagüey) among other cities, finally arriving in Havana sometime toward June or July 1797—almost five months after his arrival on the island.

There in Havana Mercedes and her brother Manuel awaited their first glimpse of their legendary father. Mercedes did not record this first encounter, but one can imagine it was in Mamita’s home, or perhaps both children were together with Joaquín’s mother, the widowed Countess de Casa-Barreto. Mercedes did describe her mixed emotions upon his arrival: “The delight I felt in meeting my father was muted by the sorrow of leaving Mamita, and I could not be parted from her side without everyone promising that I could see her every day.” Barely eight and a half years old, she saw the familiar and loving comfort of Mamita’s presence replaced by an unknown albeit dashing father. Nothing is known about nine-and-a-half-year-old Manuel’s thoughts, but he was probably intrigued by the charming and affectionate stranger. Manuel might have been ill at this time, as he passed away within a few short months, in December

1797, in the hauntingly beautiful Casa de la Obra Pía, then home to the Cárdenas family. In 1960, renovations of this Old Havana palacio uncovered an inscription in a room in the upper stories, which read: *Murió, Manuel Conde de Jaruco 1797* (Manuel, Count of Jaruco, died 1797). Through some accident, the inscription vanished almost immediately after its discovery. Its strange appearance and disappearance added one more layer of legend to the Obra Pía, a house that has so captured the imagination that even the revolutionary government produced a period miniseries based loosely on its past—*The Orphans of the Obra Pía*. Even more oddly, Mercedes' lengthy memoirs never mentioned this Cuban-born brother even though he was her closest living relative in Havana until her father's return. Besides the church records in the Havana cathedral, there are only a few references to him scattered among the reams and reams of Spanish and Cuban archival records. Poignantly, the last record is a letter from Joaquín, dated December 11, 1797, formally advising Godoy of Manuel's death, since the little boy had been an honorary cadet in the American Company of the Corps of Royal Guards—his father's old regiment.

In addition to the duties of his military position and royal commission, Joaquín also had to oversee his extensive business affairs. When he returned to Cuba, Joaquín had agricultural interests in sugar and coffee, and was beginning to invest in tobacco. He also held various potentially lucrative trading privileges that allowed him to ship cane brandy and molasses/sugar to the United States in return for shipments of flour, which he could then sell in Havana for bread supplies. Royal decrees still controlled the entry of all goods from other countries; therefore, Joaquín and his partners enjoyed near monopolies. All of these business interests kept Joaquín more than occupied, and it may be surprising to learn that Mercedes went to live with him. But Joaquín was always an affectionate man, and as Mercedes explained, "My father loved me with a tenderness bordering on the extreme, and it seemed as though he wanted to compensate for his past neglect by showering me with all the pleasures permitted of someone my age."

Mercedes began her reign as the little queen of Joaquín's new household. She had a carriage at her disposal and could come and go as she pleased with just her personal slave in attendance. The inappropriateness of this conduct could not have been lost on the family, but Joaquín was "young, lively, and cheerful to a fault, and he understood nothing about the upbringing of a young girl." Joaquín's household was in effect a bachelor's house as opposed to Mamita's home for an extended family. Despite Joaquín's wealth and social standing, in 1797 he actually did not own a suitable home in Havana. Many assume that he lived in the *palacio* of the Counts de Jaruco, the stately, columned stone house that takes up almost half of one side of the Plaza Vieja. It has a deep and shady stone portico, a massive wooden door with an intricate Indian-head keyhole, and decorative wall frescos that today help attract tourists to the numerous art exhibitions and other cultural events held in its central patio. Outside the main door there is a large plaque declaring that the building was the family home of the Condesa de Merlin and her father. In reality Joaquín probably never lived there, as it still belonged to his great-aunt. Instead, he most likely rented a house, either one located on San Ignacio and Chacón, in the northern end of the city steps away from the water, or the palace of the Marqués of San Felipe and Santiago on the enormous Plaza de San Francisco, near the Franciscan basilica facing the main arrival point for ships and cargo.

Regardless of the exact location, Joaquín set up his usual sumptuous lifestyle. He had over twenty slaves working as domestics in his household, including several coachmen—called *caleseros* in Cuba. He owned numerous carriages, ranging from grand painted carriages with four crystal carriage lamps to illuminate the dark Havana streets, to the very Cuban *volantes*, perched up high on their two wheels. There were enough carriages and *volantes* for Mercedes to easily have her own particular one. Joaquín's home was his office to a great extent, and he entertained lavishly—friends, family, and colleagues—as Havana was a small social world and Joaquín was now placed close to its epicenter. Joaquín's house was full of carved and inlaid mahogany furniture, including numerous desks and tables in

all shapes and sizes, many of them cleverly made to extend as needed and others topped with marble. More than anything, Joaquín had *taburetes*—a sort of rustic chair with leather seat and back popular at this time, which could be easily moved and stowed as guests came and went. He owned over one hundred *taburetes*. Joaquín also had a vast assortment of fine and daily-use china and crystal, totaling over thirteen hundred individual pieces, some of them hand-painted and rimmed in gold, others with his family crest etched on the wine glasses. Juan de Dios ran the kitchen with a younger helper, Antonio, but all sweets and pastries were elaborated by Dorotea, trained as a *dulcera* (sweet maker) and married to another of the domestic slaves, José Dolores. This was a house ready to entertain on a grand scale, with its crystal chandeliers and formal painting of mythical scenes and portraits of famous friends, royalty, and celebrated men of the era. Portraits included Godoy, the Spanish ministers Aranda and Mazarredo, the Austrian emperor Joseph II, and the unfortunate French king, Louis XVI—even, surprisingly, George Washington and Benjamin Franklin.

Mercedes witnessed the dances and other diversions that her father's house regularly hosted. Although she was very young, she already understood the passion that all Habaneros had for dancing—something repeatedly described in other contemporary accounts. The ardor for dancing was particularly notable, Mercedes thought, because the climate, with its oven-hot sun, created a state of "voluptuous apathy" in the general population—the contrast between this state and the energetic feasts and dancing in the evenings was all the more striking. To Mercedes, this constant dichotomy helped render Cuban women irresistibly enchanting; a mix of vivaciousness and languidness. She would deploy these very characteristics herself to charm the Spanish court and the Parisian salons in later years. But Mercedes was still very young, and even if her father thought dances and parties were appropriate for a nine- or ten-year-old girl, Mercedes herself preferred spending more time with Mamita. "Seated at her feet, perched on her knees, I listened with vivid interest to tales from the Old Testament or Roman

history and I experienced some unknown sense of conviction that in preferring Mamita's company to a ball, I did well by God. Looking at her, I believed that the happiness that she felt in seeing me was also mine."

As she had with Mamita, Mercedes accompanied her father to his country properties—generally, the Havana landowners went out to their properties on a regular basis but rarely lived on them. Even so, some of the properties boasted impressive houses. Joaquín's Río Blanco estate was especially admired for its luxuries. Given Joaquín's nature, he was likely to make quick trips as he constantly expanded or repositioned his property portfolio. He sought to shift his investments toward tobacco and constantly sought new lands for sugar production. Sugarcane uses the soil intensively, and therefore flourishes best on virgin lands. Also, in the late eighteenth century, wood was the primary fuel for the boiling cauldrons. Every successful sugar plantation needed a nearby woods or forest—something that Cuba had in abundance but which the sugar plantations were stripping rapaciously. Cuba's intricate web of forests containing mahogany, ebony, cedar, and other precious hardwoods, its pride for the first three hundred years of its history as a colony, began to disappear in the Havana area.

In the late 1790s, Joaquín owned two working sugar mills: Santa María de Loreto, alias Seybabo, and San Ignacio de Río Blanco. Río Blanco was a relatively recent acquisition through Teresa's inheritance from her father, but Joaquín had owned Seybabo for some years. Since his time in Spain, Joaquín had been trying to improve its production through the purchase of additional slaves and through more creative efforts like commissioning the first steam engine for a Cuban sugar mill. The Spanish engineer who designed the engine, Agustín de Betancourt, was a colleague of the great Swiss French clock maker Breguet. Betancourt had the engine manufactured in England, the world leader in this new technology. The first experiment with the new machine occurred in January 1797. The steam engine worked successfully for a few weeks but ultimately failed. Still, other planters soon followed suit, finally finding permanent

success twenty years later. Joaquín, ever enamored of all that was new, was certainly a pioneer.

Familiar with her father's different rural properties, such as coffee farms and sugar estates, and with the slaves that made up their workforces, Mercedes obtained a precocious appreciation of the complexity of a slave society. Visiting her father's sugar estates, with their more labor-intensive processes, she saw a much harsher regime than in Havana homes or even on the coffee farms. Indeed, the naturalist Alexander Humboldt, Joaquín's guest on several occasions, noted that Cuban slave owners would scare domestic servants by threatening a transfer to a coffee farm, and would threaten the coffee worker with a transfer to a sugar mill. A world of difference separated a sugar worker from the urban servant of an aristocrat.

Mercedes wrote that she "remember[ed] slavery with horror, and that perhaps surprisingly for a young girl she "felt that the immense distance between the master and the slave was not natural, that there was too much of the violent, forced and monstrous in this domination." Her country visits would have been hateful, she wrote years later, except that her father's dotting affection allowed her occasionally to alleviate some of the slaves' suffering. To a certain extent, Mercedes would always associate her father's love with her early attempts at benevolence, and she always considered him the most generous and charitable of persons.

On one of her stays at a sugar plantation, Mercedes was awakened at dawn by screams. Running to her father's room, she went to him in tears, afraid and upset by the sounds that she realized were from a slave being punished. Her father, alarmed, took her in his arms and carried her out to where the punishment was being meted. The screaming had stopped when they arrived, and the man was waiting for the final blow:

My face full of terror and my still tearful eyes contrasted with his air of indifference, almost desensitized. We learned that he had run away for the fifth time. Nevertheless, my father ordered him let go immediately. So it was that my childhood disposition inclined me to

exercise charity like a sweet habit. Alleviating the misery of those that surrounded me, I felt a growing need to do good.

Mercedes' benevolent efforts led to another encounter, one that on first reading seems too dramatic to be true, but that finds documentary support. Until the end of the eighteenth century, sugar plantations stopped work once a week to celebrate mass. After all, one of the often-cited justifications for slavery was the conversion of the pagan Africans to Christianity. After the service, if the owners were there, the slaves would be allowed to greet their master. Mercedes recalled that this was the time for petitions and for pardons. One Sunday, Mercedes saw an attractive woman carrying her child rushing up to her father. The other slaves seemed to part respectfully for her, and she had a certain air of majesty and authority. The woman prostrated herself at Joaquín's feet and begged him to change her assigned work from the sugar mill to the relatively easier work overseeing the drying process, to facilitate caring for her young child. However, the rules of a sugar estate were implacable: the most arduous tasks went to the young and strong, while only the weak and frail held the lighter ones. Joaquín denied her plea. At this stage, Mercedes recalls:

This negress stood up, embraced her son and dissolved in tears crying these words: "my beauty and my youth once were my fortune, why do they now cause my misfortune?" ... Her tears moved me. Clinging to my father's neck I insisted that he agree to her request; his good heart did the rest. The joy of the negress was as vivid as had been her pain...her tears continued to fall as she gestured in joy.

The whole episode and the rather majestic and mysterious air of this woman caused such a commotion that Joaquín decided to enquire into her history. Mercedes recounted that she was called Cangis and came from the Congo, as was typical of many Cuban slaves. Her beauty had prompted her village to elect Cangis queen, and she in turn chose her own king. Hence she cried that beauty had

once been her luck. However, her king soon died fighting a neighboring tribe, and Cangis, already pregnant, fell prisoner and was sold to the captain of a slave ship. Farfetched the story may seem, possibly even romanticized, but the people sold into transatlantic slavery hailed from all classes. There are at least two other known stories of enslaved royalty: one in Río de Janeiro, where "Teresa the Queen" had indeed been a queen in Cabinda until caught in adultery, while the mother of King Gozo of Dahomey was sold into slavery by her stepson. When her son succeeded his half-brother, he searched in Brazil for her in vain.

Exposure to the brutality of slavery may have stirred Mercedes at a tender age, but in the end she was still a very young girl, just ten years old. The countryside could still be her secret Eden, and she was still a mischievous child. Fun could be had and trouble could be found. Her father's military position meant that, even in the countryside, he always needed to remain in communication with Havana. Messengers were always on hand, ready to ride their mounts as soon as needed. Mercedes, never having learned to ride, eyed these horses with longing. Never one to pause for a moment if she wanted something, Mercedes devised a plan. After studying two messengers, she approached the older one, Silva. Mercedes asked to ride his horse, but Silva hesitated, explaining that the horse was too lively and she wouldn't be able to hold on, and then what would the Señor Conde say? Mercedes, knowing that her father always gave in to her, dismissed his worries. Silva still argued; he had children, he could lose his post.... Mercedes gave him no time to argue, jumped up on the horse, and flew off at a gallop. Disaster soon followed the first moments of pure pleasure. Mercedes began to tire and suddenly lost consciousness. When next she opened her eyes, she lay on the grass by a stream, shoeless, with her riderless horse bathing in the water. Silva knelt beside her crying and wringing his hands. Mercedes' first words were "Papá won't know anything," after which Mama Dolores ran out to her and carried her on her shoulders back to the house. Luckily, her father was away for the day and all was well.

After five days, however, Mercedes experienced fever and headaches and they called for a Havana doctor. Mamita also came from the city, and all were alarmed at the seemingly inexplicable illness. Finally, Silva could contain the secret no more and confessed all to her father. Mercedes was bled and quickly recovered from the ordeal. Silva was forgiven; after all, even good-natured Joaquín was probably now well aware of his daughter's strength of will and stubbornness.

BEHIND THE CONVENT WALLS

*M*ercedes' relationship with her extravagant and doting father proved sadly to be short-lived. Political factors stepped in to force everyone's hand, as they would throughout much of Mercedes' life.

Joaquín had arrived in Cuba with valuable licenses to trade rum and sugar products for flour, which he would import into Havana on neutral (mainly American) ships. This business was considered incredibly valuable as it infringed on the monopoly then held by merchants from the Spanish port of Cádiz and the Mexican port of Vera Cruz. Joaquín partnered with various influential figures, including his cousin Francisco Arango and the military *intendente* Pablo Valiente. The lucrative deal allowed for the shipment of a certain number of barrels over a period of time, but by late 1797 European politics had shifted, transforming Britain from friend into foe. Fear of a British blockade of Havana drove the decision to import the bulk of the concession as quickly as possible. Valiente, using his control of the Havana fortresses, transformed them into ad hoc warehouses for the flour. Since the Havana market could not absorb the entire stock

immediately, most of the flour sat in the improvised warehouses. Slowly, in the Cuban heat and humidity, the flour started to rot. Almost four thousand barrels were eventually dumped into the sea, causing a huge outcry and scandal, aggravated by those citizens who resented the privileged trading and the higher bread prices caused by the restricted supplies.

As though this debacle was not enough, Joaquín saw the value of his special privileges reduced as the threat of war opened the Havana port to all neutral ships. Protesting to the king, Joaquín dramatically also asked for permission to remain in Cuba in order to sell all of his lands, as prelude to a permanent move to Spain. He also sought a waiver of the royal transaction tax. Joaquín had been spending lavishly, as usual, and he had also expended considerable sums of his own capital on the Guantánamo projects, particularly in trying to attract inhabitants to new settlements. He had frequently clashed with local officials. He needed new sources of funds and new privileges from the court. Teresa had already requested various extensions on his privileges in December 1796 and again in December 1797. She had also been obliged to fight off the seizure of the Mopox sugar exports in Cádiz to pay off Joaquín's financial backer, the Marqués de Casa-Enrile. Hence it would have been logical for Joaquín to contemplate a personal plea to Godoy and the king. He requested permission to sail back to Spain in 1799 along with several of his officials, with the official intent of reporting on the progress of the royal commission. An unofficial goal was to address his complex web of dealings.

Joaquín's plans to leave Cuba raised an important family issue: what to do with Mercedes.

For some time, the family's general plan was to marry her off in Cuba, in the type of interrelated marriage that would further bolster the Santa Cruz-Montalvo influence within Havana society. Joaquín and Teresa had another daughter in Spain who could secure their position within the peninsular aristocracy. However, there was no immediate pressing need for Mercedes' marriage; indeed, Joaquín had summarily dismissed Francisco Arango's inquiries in May 1794.

Mercedes secretly hoped that her father's notable fondness for her might translate into a reunion with her distant and idealized mother in Spain. Mercedes imagined that her mother's loving guidance would round out her sketchy education. Europe would provide new thoughts and ideas—something that Mercedes felt ready to absorb. She wrote about this period of her life in her memoirs, stating that “my passionate and precocious imagination strove impetuously to conquer the unknown, and I felt tormented by the desire to learn.”

Modern European ideas were all well and good, but were not deemed appropriate for a Cuban lady destined to marry in the colonies. Nor was a passionate imagination combined with a willful nature a sought-after commodity in the marriage market. According to Mercedes, Cuban relatives thought that “the most prudent path therefore was to dampen this tendency [and] leave me in ignorance of as much as possible.” One relative in particular looked on in mounting alarm at Mercedes' haphazard education—her grandmother, the Countess de Casa-Barreto. María Josefa de Cárdenas believed that Mamita's extreme tenderness for Mercedes had led to excessive freedom, lack of discipline, and impetuosity, which now posed a danger to all the family plans. Seeking to remove Mercedes from pernicious freedom, María Josefa in her pious mind thought that a convent would be the perfect place to shelter the child in her father's absence and to nourish her soul appropriately. In eighteenth-century Havana there was only one acceptable place for a daughter of the nobility: the Convent of Santa Clara de Asís. Two of María Josefa's own cousins, Joaquín's Santa Cruz aunts, were well established there, and Mercedes could be their protégée, educated under their care and guidance. The Countess de Casa-Barreto wasted no time in convincing her son. Good-natured Joaquín, torn between filial duty and his great affection for his daughter, made the fateful decision.

Along the Calle de Cuba between Sol and Luz, a long, blank-faced, two-story wall dominates one side of the street, with a tall bell tower rising in one corner. The only breaks in the fortresslike façade are three great wooden doors and several windows covered

in wooden grilles; the larger ones are placed high on the walls, and the lower ones are paltry given the sheer scale of the structure. The high walls are painted in a pastel shade, like most Havana houses, in part to ward off the reflective glare of the sun. The overall sense is impregnable.

But this is no fortress, although the walls did serve a defensive purpose at one time. This is the Convent of Santa Clara, and its walls formed an enclosure meant to cut off its inhabitants, the holy sisters of the Franciscan order, daughters of the Havana aristocracy. The convent had been founded in 1644 at the request of the leading citizens who needed a place for their daughters who could not marry due to a lack of suitable dowry or suitor. For almost three centuries, until 1922, the convent was sealed off to the average Habanero and was the object of stories and legends. When the sisters sold it to move away from the overcrowded city center, the government opened its doors for a few weeks. The public flocked and was amazed to see the seventeenth-century cloisters and buildings, imagining the life of the early citizens and creating legends about hauntings, cries in the night, and buried bodies—stories that the present-day custodians are still happy to tell tourists.

Santa Clara, as the Countess de Casa-Barreto knew, was no ordinary Havana convent. It would only take novices who could prove their bloodline and who could provide a two- to three-thousand-peso dowry, less than a grand marital dowry, but still expensive relative to the other Havana convents.

The convent took novices preparing to profess and become “sisters of the black veil” as well as *seglares*, usually widows or older spinsters who wished to retire from public life. It also took a select number of young girls to be educated and prepared for their later life, generally ones with family ties. So it was that sometime around 1799, Mercedes prepared to join their number. No more running wild in her beloved Cuban countryside, watching the dancers in her father’s house, or sitting at Mamita’s knee. Mercedes would be educated and molded into a lady. Mercedes was less than happy—she was appalled.

Joaquín conditioned his agreement on Mercedes herself having no strong aversion to entering the convent. Therefore, María Josefa brought all her powers of persuasion to bear on Mercedes, finally triumphing in the matter. Mercedes, still ambivalent, however, insisted on her father not leaving for Spain until after her entry into the convent. She clearly wanted a way out. Her grandmother tried to pave the way for a happy entry by taking Mercedes to visit her father’s aunts and other nuns in the days before her entry. As Mercedes recalled:

They availed themselves of the most delicate attentions and even to a type of coquetry to seduce me: caresses, flattery, sweet-smelling sachets, pretty scapulars, good quality sweets, they omitted nothing; but all of these measures would be frustrated on the last day upon seeing the fateful grilles, and upon hearing the discordant sound of the locks. It was too late; I had promised it; with an oppressive heart and teary eyes, I embraced Mamita, and for the first time felt the blow of disgrace and the yoke of necessity.

Mercedes, under the tutelage of her great-aunt, Sor María de los Dolores de Santa Teresa,* found herself in a new world. The convent comprised three interconnecting cloisters and an orchard, all surrounded by the high walls. The main cloister was enormous, with a central lush garden surrounded by deep, first-floor arched colonnades, its thick columns supporting the second, more airy galleries. The nuns’ cells and the larger common rooms were spread throughout the various cloisters. The second cloister contained a miniature town with little houses and two cobblestoned streets in the middle. Throughout the centuries, wealthy Havana families had endowed particular cells to house their daughters and later relatives, building additional rooms as the convent grew.

Theoretically, the Santa Clara nuns took vows setting them apart from the world as well as vows of poverty and they relinquished their

* The nuns added a saint’s name to their own and were typically termed Sor or Madre.

inheritance rights, but they lived very different lives to those of other Havana nuns. The sisters of Santa Clara had personal servants—in Cuba this meant slaves of course—to tend to their needs. Many, if not all, had private incomes that they used to provide for particular needs or wants. Joaquín himself in 1796 had used his property at Seybabo to guarantee a mortgage that raised fifty-five hundred pesos in capital for the personal requirements of his aunts. The nuns often ate or socialized in their cells, and their personal slaves could come and go from the convent, providing a link to the outside world. In short, the sisters had never accepted the communal life often associated with convents—the common life. Rather, as in many of the great Latin American convents in Mexico and Peru, they followed what was known as private life—*vida particular*.

This way of life was under intense pressure, however, throughout the Spanish colonies. From the mid-eighteenth century, the Bourbon reformists had been trying to instill greater discipline and a return to the common life in all convents. Not only did this mean the elimination of personal incomes and servants, it also called for a more cloistered existence, a return to the silent discipline that had existed at their foundation centuries before. In Santa Clara, these enclosure measures included installing iron grilles with prongs in the *locutorios* (rooms for meeting visitors), additional wooden grilles in the eight outward-facing windows, and dense latticework over the grilles in the choir area where the nuns gathered to hear mass and other services. The choir was particularly important because the nuns were not permitted to enter the church attached to the convent, which ran along one side of the main cloister. The choir and the *locutorios* were their two vital links to the outside world. Little wonder that Mercedes found the grilles and locks daunting.

The Clarisas fought back with fruitless legal appeals to Madrid, and by 1783 the existing nuns were asked to choose between their *vida particular* or accept the common life. Only nineteen out of ninety professed nuns accepted the new ways. New nuns were given no choice in the matter. By 1795, matters were even more complicated, as twenty-five nuns from the nearby Spanish colony of Santo

Domingo sought refuge with their Cuban sisters after Spain ceded Santo Domingo to the French. Overcrowding was an issue, and the religious authorities imposed an embargo on all new novices in 1797. It is a testament to Mercedes' family's influence and prestige that she was even allowed to enter as a protégée.

The crowded conditions within Santa Clara, the dissent and controversy, and the heightened sense of enclosure must have created a claustrophobic atmosphere. For a perceptive and free-spirited child such as Mercedes, it must have been insufferable. The sisters tried their best on the first day. Mercedes noted an almost a festival-like mood pervading the cloisters. Her arrival was an event for all, a break from the unvarying order of their lives. The sisters tried to incorporate Mercedes into their activities—music being one of them. She was invited to join other girls in a choir, rehearsing songs to celebrate their upcoming patron's day on August 11. The nuns were delighted to find that young Mercedes had a lovely voice. But amidst the effusive praise, Mercedes was on her guard. She sensed an underlying motive in their compliments, which seemed to focus on how that angelic voice could best be used to praise the Lord on a more permanent basis. One nun added, "Is it not so, my child, that you would stay with us?"

Mercedes was not to be persuaded. Following her great-aunt's slave, Domingo, through the convent's darkened and hushed corridors, she vowed to leave Santa Clara. Desperately unhappy, she determined to plead her case to her father and ask for a return to Mamita's home. Confident in her powers of persuasion over her indulgent father, Mercedes wrote to him. She was shocked, however, to receive his reply via her grandmother. Joaquín begged her to be calm and patient and reassured her of his affection, but he held firm to his resolution: Mercedes must stay in the convent. Mercedes responded by begging her father to come and see her, hoping that he could never refuse a face-to-face plea. For once, easygoing Joaquín did not waver. Mercedes began to think of other means of regaining her freedom.

Convinced that her grandmother lay behind her father's decision, Mercedes tried a different tack. She discovered that one of

the two priests assigned as confessors for Santa Clara was also her grandmother's personal confessor. Declaring that she needed to confess, Mercedes sought out the priest. Her strategy was calculated to alarm the unsuspecting confessor and encourage him to influence her grandmother. In the confessional she cried, "I do not have the courage to stay here any longer; I am desperate.... If I commit a grave sin it will hang on your conscience.... do not abandon me!" The surprised priest agreed to help.

Nothing more was heard from the father confessor, and Mercedes continued to fear eventual pressure to take religious vows. She lost her appetite and couldn't sleep. Underlying all was an overwhelming feeling of injustice. For a strong-willed and previously indulged child, the loss of liberty and the forced separation from Mamita and her father contributed to a sense of betrayal. Perhaps it seems exaggerated for a ten-year-old girl to suspect that the nuns and her grandmother were conspiring to seal her within the convent walls rather than merely to educate her. After all, the same reforms that had prodded the nuns to a more austere communal life had also forced a temporary block on new novices, and the only hope for a new recruit lay in petitioning the king. However, if ever a family had the necessary influence, it was Mercedes'. In 1806 Joaquín successfully requested a dispensation to allow his younger half-sister, Conchita, to enter Santa Clara.

The fear of being coerced united with the sense of injustice and abandonment led Mercedes to a new resolution: if no one would help her, then she would have to rely on herself. She felt a sense of empowerment, the freedom to make her own decisions, since all had failed her. Rather unusual for a preadolescent girl, it was absolutely revolutionary for the time and place, when young girls did not make their own decisions. But Mercedes was determined. She thought ceaselessly of how to escape from Santa Clara: "a thousand extravagant projects presented themselves to my imagination." One can only imagine what some may have been.

In the end, help came from a surprising source. While Mercedes generally viewed the sisters with suspicion, there was one young

nun that she befriended. According to Mercedes, Sor Santa Inés was twenty years old, a lonely and melancholy nun who had herself been coerced into the convent by her father. In Sor Santa Inés, Mercedes found a sympathetic listener. Her great-aunt did not approve of the friendship; Sor Santa Teresa thought the younger nun was a negative influence on Mercedes. She forbade Mercedes to visit Sor Santa Inés in her cell or spend time with her alone. Mercedes found ways to see her secretly. So taken was Mercedes with Sor Santa Inés that she told her story—probably somewhat tragically romanticized—in a novella attached to the first part of her memoirs. The extent of truth versus fiction is unclear, but Mercedes did receive help and advice from some source.

The convent was undergoing some building work, and the main doors, normally tightly sealed most of the day, were opened regularly to let workers flow in and out. Mercedes' fertile mind thought to use the increased access to escape. She discussed her scheme with Sor Santa Inés, who convinced her of its impracticality but gave her an alternative escape route. There was a small opening in the lower choir, below the upper choir where the nuns gathered to hear mass. The three-foot hatch had two doors, one on the convent side and one on the church side, and was used for communion. Neither door was ever locked. Mercedes only needed to choose the moment.

The morning of her planned escape, Mercedes waited for her great-aunt and Domingo to leave for services in the upper gallery choir with the other nuns. Mercedes entered the lower one, where several servants were praying, and waited for them to leave and for the sacristan to open the great church doors to the public. Knowing that communion was held at 9:00 AM, she could only wait impatiently as the room emptied. Finally, only one old woman, half asleep, remained. Mercedes approached her but unwittingly woke her up. The woman announced that she planned to remain until nine, and Mercedes decided to wait no longer. She felt, she wrote, pulled by a superior force, and almost without thinking she approached the grille next to the doorway. She opened first one door and then the second. "Then... with a movement quicker than a thought I crossed

the space and found myself on the church side. . . . I fixed my dress as best I could and calmly crossed the church in front of the choir and the sisters."

Reaching the street, Mercedes was overcome by fear. Wearing her white uniform with a thin muslin veil, she knew that she stood out from other Habaneras. Havana women invariably wore black dresses on the street, and curled and teased their hair. Terrified of being discovered and returned, she quickly dashed through the empty streets to Mamita's house.

Her arrival created uproar, the shock of her escape eliciting both delight and consternation. Salvador, Mamita's old servant, could not contain his stunned happiness and smiled broadly. Mamita, emerging from her devotions in her oratory, could not bring herself to castigate Mercedes, and instead covered her in caresses. Mercedes herself, ecstatic and slightly dazed from her success, cried and laughed simultaneously. But all this joy proved short-lived as Mamita insisted on notifying the convent and her father. Responses came swiftly: Joaquín was on his way, and the abbess and Mercedes' great-aunts replied curtly that the fault lay in her inadequate education. They blamed the person responsible for her upbringing. Mercedes began to see the result of her willful escape in the pain that the critical response brought to her beloved great-grandmother's face.

The scandal that her escape created cannot be overstated. At the dawn of the nineteenth century, Havana was essentially a deeply conservative place. Young girls did not run away from convents, did not race unattended through the city's streets, and did not disobey their fathers. Years later, the story of Mercedes' escapade from Santa Clara would be repeated frequently, and an early biographer called her action "manly."

Joaquín arrived, and told them that his first idea was to return her to Santa Clara. However, the sisters refused to have her, so he decided to punish her intransigence and disobedience in a different manner. He forbade Mercedes from seeing Mamita, and took her to stay indefinitely with a relative, Aunt Paquita. Although saddened, Mercedes decided not to fight this new exile, as she wished

through her obedient conduct to minimize criticism of Mamita. Mercedes found her relative to be devout but more indulgent than her grandmother. She had several daughters, and Mercedes soon became friends with these cousins, including the eldest, somewhat older than Mercedes and obsessed with many admirers. Mercedes also found herself living with at least one of the legendary Beatas Cárdenas, her grandmother's spinster sisters. Religion was their passion, yet they dedicated themselves to charitable work instead of taking religious vows. One of these sisters, shocked and appalled by Mercedes' recent actions, devoted her time to augmenting Mercedes' spiritual education.

Still, life was not unpleasant with Aunt Paquita. They soon decamped to San Antonio de los Baños, a town south of Havana founded by the Cárdenas family where various family members had properties, including Joaquín's coffee estate Las Delicias. The surrounding Alquízar region, famed for its dense tropical forests and rich floral plants, was later described by a noted Cuban novelist as brimming with sweet-scented blooms. Mercedes and her cousins frequently swam in the river and stayed in the cool waters until sunset, watching with delight as the fireflies began to emerge. Once again, Mercedes climbed trees in search of fruits, in this case velvety-fleshed *caimitos*. During one such climb, she surprised a snake, fell, and was rescued by the vigilant Mama Dolores.

Later in the year, the family went again to the countryside, offering Mercedes the chance for another illicit escapade. Paquita's property was close to Mamita's and abutted one of Joaquín's sugar mills. Knowing Mercedes' independent character and fearing she would create another scandal, Aunt Paquita only permitted outings under the care of her chaplain, Fray Mateo. Of course, one overweight and lethargic friar could not impede Mercedes from crossing a stream one day, knocking away the wooden plank bridging the water and leaving poor Fray Mateo behind, clutching his breviary and yelling. Reaching her father's cane fields, she came across clusters of *bohíos*, housing some of the slaves. There she found Cangis, the same African woman who had pleaded with her father, now grieving over her

son's grave. As Mercedes recalled years later, witnessing the woman's despair made her own escapade seem foolish.

By the time Mercedes returned to Paquita's house, in the carriage that had been searching for her, she regretted creating so much commotion and consternation. She avoided the gathered family in the main entrance and hid in her bed until she heard Dolores cry "*Jesús María! What has happened to her?*" The next day, Mercedes promised not to run away again.

During the stay with Aunt Paquita, the transatlantic mail brought a long-awaited letter. Teresa Montalvo, still in Spain with her other children, sent Mercedes a miniature painting of herself as well as a message that begged Joaquín to bring Mercedes. Mercedes was overjoyed—her longed-for desire seemed now a possibility. She would cherish that miniature portrait until her death.

After the family's return to Havana, Mercedes' father visited more frequently. She sensed that, although unhappy with her conduct, he regretted the whole Santa Clara episode and its aftermath. María Josefa had died March 12, 1800, and with her disappeared the driving force for sending the child to the convent. Perhaps his mother's death had greatly affected him—Joaquín was strongly attached to his family, having lost his father in infancy. The same love of family now brought him closer to Mercedes and led him to finally agree to take Mercedes to her mother in Spain. Mercedes was about to enter a new phase of her life.

ADIOS, CUBA

Mercedes returned to her father's home as the reigning queen, more secure than ever in his affection. She visited dear Mamita at will, and life resumed as she had known and loved it. Writing years later in her memoirs, she recalled her days passing sweetly in complete idleness. Everyone seemed to have given up imposing any sort of rule or discipline. She "learned nothing and barely knew how to write." While there was little in the way of an academic regime, Mercedes was a curious creature who loved to observe everything and everyone around her.

She spent more time with her father, sitting with him in his study in front of his massive mahogany desk with its silver fittings. He shared with her the enormous genealogy charts he had commissioned to prove his noble descent and his *limpieza de sangre*, which meant his clean lineage. "Clean" at the time referred to the lack of any mixture with the "wrong" families, religions, or races. Joaquín had used this proof of pedigree to support his entry into the chivalric order of Calatrava, for his title of Count de Santa Cruz de Mopox, and he would wield it once more to fulfill his aspiration for a peerage, to be called a *grande* of Spain. While recounting to Mercedes the family legends and explaining her place within its entangled

branches, Joaquín would have a large coffeepot at hand, masses of papers scattered about, and small piles of coins ready to hand out as alms to the needy.

Joaquín demonstrated the immense importance that he placed on his family's social position by lingering over his elaborate family tree and ensuring that young Mercedes understood her own position within the closed world of the Cuban oligarchy and the wider Spanish nobility. Social pride was so fundamental to their world that it would influence many critical decisions in their lives. Mercedes herself would carry this lesson into her future life, where it would reappear even as subtly as in her inclusion of the words *née Jaruco* on her visiting cards in Paris. The neat picture she drew of her father in her memoirs seems to mirror all that is known about Joaquín from other sources: his family pride and ambition, his complex and almost messy business dealings, his seemingly endless need to live life at a relentless pace. All were captured in his daughter's memories of family trees, untidy desks, and countless cups of coffee.

Joaquín entertained as usual, and Mercedes recalled the alcohol-fueled toasts, exuberant praises, and flattery of the participants. Beyond seeing the splendor of the feasts and dances, however, she also noted that the next day many of these same so-called friends would be less than flattering about Joaquín. She saw many of these guests as an entourage attracted to the appearance of success. Mercedes sensed the insincerity surrounding her father and had begun to grasp the way business and patronage operated in late-eighteenth-century Havana. If her memoirs impure to her young self a more world-weary tone than warranted for her age, perhaps her later experiences in Spain and France permitted her to appreciate the reality of her father's circle.

Now set on a return to Spain, Joaquín became engrossed in organizing his reports on the results and proposals of the Royal Guantánamo Commission as well as his ideas for the reorganization of the island's defenses. The Guantánamo commission's final reports included representations for the establishment of settlements and fortifications in Guantánamo Bay, the Bay of Nipe on the northern coast,

and the Bay of Jagua (today the city of Cienfuegos) on the southern coast. There were suggestions for the further expansion of existing settlements in Mariel and Matanzas, as well as drawings and charts for the Güines Canal to connect the southern coast with Havana, running through the sugar-rich valley of Güines. The final report also included surveys of the lands and ports to the west of Havana and proposals for expanding the network of roads. Joaquín would take with him eighty-six intricately detailed drawings of native birds and fish, ninety-eight illustrations of insects and plants, and boxes of specimens of the island's flora and fauna, which would form the basis for a natural history of Cuba. The impressive submission is stored today in the Naval Museum of Madrid, including the startlingly beautiful drawings of tropical orchids and colorful insects.

Beyond his obligation related to the royal commission, Joaquín also wanted to bring some order to his "complex" business affairs. The naturalist Alexander Humboldt considered Joaquín to be "enterprising," and he certainly always looked for new opportunities to further his fortune. A pecuniary focus sometimes led to awkward situations involving close friends and relatives. While it was perfectly normal in Havana to have business dealings within the small circle of landowners, these exchanges often generated disputes, especially with inheritance and property rights. On top of that, Joaquín's inner restlessness seems to have caused unexpected conflicts in his business life. In April 1801 Joaquín bought another sugar mill, Jesús Nazareno, from his brother-in-law, Rafael Montalvo, for two hundred thousand pesos. Most of the sales price—165,000 pesos—was financed by a loan guaranteed by the sugar production at all three of his mills, plus mortgages on several other ranches, houses, and lands. Before the documents were even finalized, however, Rafael Montalvo heard that Joaquín was in the process of selling a valuable ranch, Aguas Verdes, as well as the sugar mill Seybabo, both part of the guarantee. A bitter dispute over collateral ensued, prompting Rafael to file a lawsuit against Joaquín.

Joaquín also hoped to negotiate yet another exclusive license to import flour to Havana, to recoup some of the lost opportunities

from his suspended concessions. New funds were desperately needed. Joaquín had great plans for tobacco at a time when its production was declining in Cuba as sugar took over more and more agricultural land. Moreover, his wish to be made a *grande* of Spain required proof of his ability to finance a decorous lifestyle. The accepted method required placing a portion of his estate, free of debt, in an entail or trust that would be tied to the title and peerage. However, Joaquín had amassed enormous debts over the preceding decade, both to private creditors and to the Royal Treasury. He had used debt in part to make payments for all his various honors, including gentleman of the bedchamber, colonel of the guards regiment, Count de Santa Cruz de Mopox; to finance his contributions to the war effort against France; and to pay the import taxes and the sales tax on transactions. All in all, his debts totaled some several hundred thousand pesos by early 1802.

The journey to Spain presented the opportunity to reorganize his muddled affairs. Joaquín hoped to consolidate his debts to various governmental departments into one massive obligation to the Royal Treasury, and he also had an idea for a favorable repayment scheme tied to his tobacco production. To raise some cash for his plans and to reduce his debt, he had already negotiated the sale of some land in 1799 to the Royal Tobacco Factory, the government department that controlled the royal monopoly on tobacco production.

While Joaquín worried about his business affairs and presentations and Mercedes spent her days in "sweet idleness" under the Havana sun, their actual travel plans depended on the constantly evolving political situation well beyond their insular world. Interminable battles between England, France, and their respective and changing allies exposed transatlantic crossings to more than the usual dangers. This was the age of Nelson, of great sea battles and endless games of cat and mouse on the high seas between the major naval players, including Spain. The safest plan was to wait for a lull in the hostilities—and to insist on an adequate convoy for good measure.

The chance finally appeared in 1802 with the Peace of Amiens and the April arrival in Havana of a squadron under the command of Admiral Gravina. Gravina, a friend of Joaquín's, was happy to offer

space on his flagship, the eighty-gun *Nepituno* with a crew of over seven hundred, to her father, Mercedes, and their servants. It was a magnificent escort to Cádiz. Admiral Gravina was one of Spain's finest commanders. His elite squadron was in Havana after supporting France's attempt to wrest back the sugar-rich colony of Saint-Domingue from the liberated slaves. Three months of intense fighting had temporarily placed General Leclerc and his wife, Pauline Bonaparte, in control, freeing Gravina's ships to return to Spain via Cuba.

Now with a fixed date for their departure, Mercedes began her final preparations and farewells. She worried about the impending separation from Mamita and the abandonment of her small world. Her memoirs dedicate a substantial number of pages to conjuring up the feel of the Havana heat, the soft breezes, and the moonlight on the ocean water during these final days. The older Mercedes savored memories of the sights, sounds, and pleasures of Havana life that she would have to leave behind on her journey. It is unclear if she knew how long she would be away from Cuba. Still, as with anyone planning to leave a beloved place, it made sense for Mercedes to soak in the atmosphere of Havana, prior to her departure. She took late-night *paseos*, carriage rides through the Havana streets, drowsing in the breeze. The breeze and the moonlight on the water drew her to the balcony when she should have been asleep, lying on the bed made of stretched canvas, cool linens, and swathed in yards of mosquito netting.

As the final day approached, Mercedes had two personal issues she wanted to resolve. She wished to reconcile with her two great-aunts, the sisters in the convent of Santa Clara, and settle Mama Dolores's future. Her first task was straightforward, if perhaps awkward. She asked to be taken to see her great-aunts to say her farewells. Thus, she entered Santa Clara's doors one last time, meeting with them as well as some younger girls. Mama Dolores presented a more complicated problem.

Mama Dolores had previously been offered her freedom after serving as Mercedes' wet nurse, but she had refused it, not merely because of her attachment to little Mercedes but also because she had children. A Cuban slave owner could easily free a slave, and

there were often clauses in wills liberating a longstanding servant, but they did not necessarily free the former slave's family. Likewise, the Spanish colonies were notable for their laws allowing a slave the right to request a new owner as well as the right of *coartación*—the right to buy one's freedom at a set price. Once the price was set, the slave could try to earn the money over time or through a gift from another free family member or friend. The slaves were also allowed to hire themselves out for pay, which was then shared with their owner. It appears a contradictory system—brutal slavery side by side with these seemingly entrepreneurial opportunities. Alexander Humboldt, a committed abolitionist who called slavery “the greatest of all evils to have plagued mankind,” was struck by how manumission was more frequent in Cuba than anywhere else in the slave-owning world. He attributed its frequency to Spanish laws, which were “directly the reverse of French and English,” although he also thought religious belief and the affections that grew from the close domestic life all contributed.

Offering Mama Dolores her freedom would not have been so unusual in a wealthy and religious family, but the offer of freedom did not extend to her children. Dolores's only hope for reuniting her family would have been to work for years to earn their *coartación* price. So Mama Dolores stayed on as a slave, caring for Mercedes. Now, however, Mercedes would be leaving and Mama Dolores staying behind in Cuba. Mercedes was already thirteen years old. There would be no role for Dolores in the new Spanish life and no mention was made of a return date. Joaquín had even arranged his own attendants so that Mercedes would not need additional personal servants. Their entourage included a French valet as well as two young slaves, Blas and Tomás, to act as footmen for his carriage, another slave, Felipe, and his wife who would see to Mercedes' needs on ship. Mama Dolores's depression upset Mercedes, who many times would sit on the woman's knees, “crying while trying to console her.” Mercedes and other family members finally convinced Dolores to accept her freedom, but with her children still enslaved and with no real possessions.

Hearing Dolores sighing and whispering “you are leaving and I am staying,” while she carefully, almost tenderly, folded and caressed her mistress's belongings, Mercedes resolved to help this proud woman who had cherished her for so many years. Relying yet again on her father's affections and overall generosity, Mercedes made two requests. She wanted ownership of Dolores's children and a few *caballerías** of land. When Joaquín asked what she would do with these, Mercedes explained her grand plan. She would free the children and gift the land to Mama Dolores so that the newly freed family would have some financial security. Generous Joaquín agreed, and Mercedes began plotting her surprise parting gift for Dolores. The four *caballerías* chosen were already partly planted with tobacco. This was a substantial gift, as good agricultural land could sell for between four hundred and a thousand pesos per *caballería*. Mercedes also had a small *bohío* built, ready for Dolores and her family. Planning her surprise, Mercedes told Dolores that they were going to the countryside for two days, and that Dolores should take her children as well. Joaquín couldn't resist joining them, and they both anticipated the joy that was to come. Mercedes showed them the land and the *bohío* and explained that Dolores was now the owner. Mercedes then added: “Mama Dolores... you are already very happy, but wait, I still have something more to give you!” Dolores then replied, “I [do] not want anything more; I be [am already] too fortunate to stay alone!” all the while crying. Mercedes then took Dolores to where her children were and told her:

‘Here, take them. They are mine.... I give them to you!’ Until that moment, I had been happily laughing at her surprise and exclamations; but in that instant I began to cry uncontrollably and my father had some difficulty in calming me.

While meant as a loving gesture, Mercedes' final memory of her first thirteen years on her island homeland holds the bitter irony

* One *caballería* equals thirty-three acres.

inherent in this colonial world, where a teenager could "own" the woman who had raised her. The memory also encapsulates Mercedes' particular experience of the complex relationships between the landowners and their slaves. The story of the gift to Dolores combines all the dispassionate cruelty and personal warmth that could coexist in Cuban slavery in the dawn of the nineteenth century.

Mercedes also cherished the ideal, often repeated in her memoirs, of her father's nobleness, his sincere care for his slaves, and his overwhelming generosity. Surviving letters and documents confirm that Joaquín was a generous man, well-loved by his close friends and relatives. He planned to reward several other close servants with freedom after his death, and he was certainly generous whenever Mercedes called on his charity. Yet Joaquín remained very much a man of his time and position. He may have been moved to ease the workload of the slave Cangis or to donate over one hundred acres to Mama Dolores, but he also was greatly concerned with possible slave revolts. As sub-inspector general, he outlined a plan for rural militias to maintain order.

The slave rebellion of Saint-Domingue and the wars with England had heightened the Cuban landowners' fear of revolts. Cuban landowners feared internal unrest if their slaves and the free black and mixed-race populations became aware of the bloody details of the conflict in Saint-Domingue. Additionally, landowners feared that England might try to undermine Spanish rule by supporting or even inciting rebellion. Cuban landowners may have benefited from the ravages to Saint-Domingue's agriculture, but they so feared the precedent set by the newly liberated population that they were willing to aid the French with food and supplies in their attempt to retake the colony. These major landowners, including Joaquín's uncle the Marqués de Cárdenas de Monte-Hermoso, fiercely resisted any government constraints on their ability to punish slaves or regulate their working conditions. They felt that any reduction in their "rights" would be perceived as weakness. The landowners vividly recalled the Count de Casa-Bayona, a devout man, who one Easter decided to make a pious act by washing the feet of twelve slaves and

then serving them personally at dinner. The chosen slaves, held in awe by the other slaves, then led a particularly violent revolt. To Cuban landowners, the best strategy was to prevent any perceptible of weakness.

Admiral Gravina's squadron was set to leave Havana on April 22, 1802. Mercedes recounts that on the eve of sailing, she said farewell to Mamita and then spent the night crying. One can only imagine how wrenching the moment must have been, both for Mercedes and for Mamita. Mamita had taken care of her from her first moments, and she must have felt that separation much as she still keenly felt the distance from her son Gonzalo O'Farrill. The next day, Mercedes, her father, the admiral, and their party boarded a launch and rowed out to the *Neptuno*, which was already at sea just outside of Havana harbor. As they sailed out, various ships and forts fired salutes. Mercedes recalled it years later:

The noise of the cannon, the voices of the sailors, the varied movement of the sails and the rigging would have provided me with an agreeable distraction with their novelty, were it not for the profound sadness that overwhelmed me. Moving away from my country, I was leaving all that I loved, all that I had loved until then.

Mercedes kept her eyes on the city of Havana until it disappeared into the distance as the *Neptuno* sailed away. In the immensity of the open ocean, the *Neptuno* would be her home for the next month. But at the end of the long sea journey, Mercedes would arrive in a new country, to a new home and family.