

# NEIGHBORS



LIVING THE REVOLUTION  
An Oral History of Contemporary Cuba

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## Moving to Miramar

EULALIA FONTANÉS:

I liked Miramar from the first. It used to be a zone where only the rich could live, where the husband and wife had their own private chauffeurs and went their own way, with a nursemaid to look after the children, a maid to clean the house, another to cook and serve the meals. The women of the family never did any housework. It was a quiet neighborhood, without heavy traffic. The only bus in that part of town was the one passing through Fifth and 20th.

This building was new and one of the prettiest on the block. It was quiet because there was only one family in each apartment. The front yard was beautiful, with flower borders all the way to the sidewalk—some kind of small red flower. A gardener took care of it every day.

The family I worked for, Evidio Carrera, his wife, Cristina, and their daughter, Tina, had the apartment on the second floor. We moved there in 1960, when Evidio decided to leave Artemisa<sup>1</sup> to take a job in Havana as an official in a government ministry. The apartment had three bedrooms, two for themselves and one for Tina. My room was on the back stair landing, between the second and third floors, and had a door independent of the apartment. I know they paid 105 pesos a month<sup>2</sup> for it because they once sent me to the landlord with the rent money. The apartment had an electric range and was complete in every way, except for furniture, curtains, and so on.

On the ground floor of the building lived a European diplomat, his wife and son, and their two maids. He and Evidio were on friendly terms, but they never visited us. On the floor above us lived an American couple who owned a big sugar-distributing company in Cuba. I believe they had a son and a daughter who used to come for visits from up North.

About two months after we moved here, the diplomat wanted to leave because Fidel had a disagreement with the ambassador from his country.

1. A city in the province of Pinar del Río.

2. After rent reduction (see Introduction, n. 16).

Evidio offered to assign him bodyguards but he said no, he preferred to leave. He took all his furniture with him—those were the early days of the Revolution when there was no problem about taking furniture out of Cuba.

And the next month the American couple left because the man's mother was ill and he wanted to see her again before she died. His wife sold or gave away all her furniture before leaving. She gave me a bed and left me the key to her servant's room. "Keep the key in case anything comes up and you need it," she told me. She was a warm, friendly person and wanted me to go North with them to take care of their granddaughter.

At that time Tina kept complaining that she didn't like Cuba, that there was no opportunity here. What she meant was there were no men for her to marry. Think of it—with so many men around she couldn't get one! It was because of her stuck-up ways, that's why. She was already thirty. Finally she decided to go back to New York to her former job at Bellevue Hospital. She was a doctor of pharmacy like her mother and had worked for years in her mother's drugstore in Artemisa. I went to the airport to say goodbye to her. Eventually she married an American up North.

After Tina left, Evidio got into some arguments because they took him off his post to make him minister of something or other. He refused to change posts, saying he was too old.

When the *doctora* watched Fidel on television, she'd cry and say, "You deceived me, Fidel. You said you'd never make Cuba communist. You deceived me!" She'd worked a lot for the Twenty-sixth of July Movement, giving them money and medicine. So she'd sit there looking at him and weeping.

"Ah, shut up now, Cristina," Evidio would scold. "Be quiet and forget it."

I moved into Tina's room, leaving the servant's room vacant. I told the *doctora* about my brother Pablo, who had no settled place to live. "Let him have one of the servants' rooms," she told me. "You may do as you please with those two rooms."

After the American couple and the foreign diplomat left, Mercedes, the wife of Juan Pérez, came around looking for an apartment. She came up to the *doctora's* apartment and from that day on was friendly with us. She and Juan rented the diplomat's apartment and moved in, in April, 1961. At first Mercedes had three servants—a cook, a nursemaid for her little girl, and a housemaid to do the cleaning. Mercedes and I talked often because I had Evidio's phone upstairs and I'd take calls for her. She'd come and say hello to me but that was all.

One day Mercedes invited Evidio and the *doctora* to lunch. "Look," Evidio told her, "you've invited only me and my wife. If Lala can't go, we

won't go either." And it's a fact that wherever they went, like to a good restaurant, they'd take me with them. They treated me like a daughter, not a servant. I slept in their apartment, I never wore a uniform, and I never called them *señora* and *caballero*. I addressed him as Evidio, his wife as *doctora*, and their daughter as Tina. That day Mercedes said, "All right, bring her along." But she didn't seat me at the table, she gave me my food in the kitchen. When we were back home, Evidio said, "I didn't like the way Mercedes treated you. She should have seated you at the table. If those people ever invite me again, I'll refuse."

"No, Evidio, don't take it that way," I said. "Why, I didn't even want to go in the first place."

"If you don't go, we don't go, and that's all there is to it," he said.

I knew my place, though, and I kept it. I never forgot that I was a servant in their house, and I always refused to sit with them in the dining room. The *doctora* would say, "But Lala, sit down with us," and I'd answer, "No, I'll eat later." In the kitchen we had a small table which I'd covered with a very pretty piece of oilcloth, and that's where I ate. Sometimes I'd put a tablecloth on it and Evidio and his wife would eat there with me.

When I moved here, the rich people didn't treat me like a servant either. Perhaps they thought I was the old couple's daughter because all the other servants around here—most of them were black—wore uniforms. In the afternoon I'd dress up and sit on the terrace just like Evidio and the *doctora*. Besides, whenever Evidio went he'd say, "Lala is one of our daughters." The *doctora* was naturally a bit fonder of her daughter, but she was terribly fond of me.

This block was full of people who lived well. It was full of doctors. You'd run into one no matter where you went. Clara Falcón's husband, Tito, was a doctor and he worked in a clinic in Vedado. Later, when I had my son, Tito came to the house to see him and prescribed medicines for him and everything.

Tito and Clara lived well. They had four maids, and in addition two men who helped out, plus a skinny *negrito* who did odd jobs like washing the cars. They had two cars and two garages.

Delfina and Georgina Soto were among the richest people here. They used to own four buildings in Miramar, and others in Old Havana and even in Varadero. Those little old women were rich, rich, rich! And yet, how miserly they were. You'd see them counting their money *centavo* by *centavo* when they paid for groceries at the Minimax, and they'd grumble about the prices. When they left Cuba in 1961, they gave the state a list of properties as long as your arm. I don't know how much money they left in the National Bank.

During the eight days before leaving Cuba, you used to have to move in with a friend or relative, unless you went to a hotel, because they made

you move out of your house. So Georgina and Delfina spent the eight days with Clara Falcón. They went to Varadero and from there to Miami. They still write to Clara and they've also written to Mercedes and told her to give me and the kids their regards.

Georgina's son William was a priest. He was abroad but came back about two years ago and has been doing works of charity ever since. He used to come here often to play with the kids and he was very affectionate. In 1962 he baptized my two oldest boys, and now he wants to baptize my youngest.

On the other side of my building, in no. 413, Josefa Llera lived all alone. That woman never gave the time of day to anyone. She was very proud because her father had owned I don't know what all—a cigar factory, a cookware factory. . . . She never married because she didn't want to divide her inheritance. She had a house built in Marianao especially for her, and she was the boss. After her parents died, she turned in that house and kept this one.<sup>3</sup> She had four maids but kept only two.

A brother of hers lived on the other side of her house, but I hardly knew him because he left only four or five months after I moved here. His sister was his only relative in Cuba. His house stood empty for a year, then it was taken over as an embassy, and whenever a diplomat came to Cuba he'd live there.

Josefa wouldn't even say hello to me, but in 1966 or '67 she became friendly all of a sudden. She was on a very strict diet, see, and needed *malanga*<sup>4</sup> and other things, but they didn't give her any. I used to get lots of it, so I always shared with her—that's what made her get friendly. Then when her relatives sent her a package from the United States, she'd come over and bring presents for my children. She'd bring cornflakes, applesauce, and gelatin for my son, who often had stomach trouble. When the children's birthdays came around, she'd have a sweet made for them in her house, or she'd send over candy or money or something. When she left for Miami in 1968, she gave me a box of crackers and 25 pesos for the kids. I think they got her out so quickly because they wanted to give her house to some foreigners.

An old lady, Carmen Tamayo, lived on the corner in no. 419. She's still there and so is my friend Norma, who's worked for Carmen ever since she was thirteen. Norma's thirty-five now and practically a member of the family. The old lady treats her that way, too. Carmen's daughter and granddaughter lived in the upper story and Norma used to take care of the girls. They had other maids, but only Norma stayed on.

The people in no. 412 left for Miami before we had a chance to get really acquainted. They left because they didn't like communism—that's the reason people go. The only one remaining was Graciela, the maid,

3. Under the Urban Reform Law of 1960, a person retained ownership only of the home he or she occupied. Exceptions were made in certain cases.

4. A root vegetable favored by Cubans.

and they left her all the furniture. At the beginning of the Revolution people would take everything, but now you must leave everything behind. Clothes and things are taken out, sold, or given away. Graciela was moved when the house was taken over for scholarship students.

Máximo Abay lives in no. 408. When I came, he lived there with his wife and daughter, but six months later the daughter married a Spaniard and went to live in Mexico. The next year his wife asked for permission to visit her daughter for three months, but she's never come back. The old man is all alone now, except for his maid, Ramona, but he says he isn't going to leave Cuba because he has a good house and is comfortable in every way. If you so much as mention his family, he changes the subject. I don't blame him a bit, because his wife abandoned him when he was ill with ulcers.

About three months after Tina left, she wrote asking the *doctora* to go North because she was lonely. My husband, Armando, and I were already sweethearts then, and the *doctora* said that before she left she wanted to see me married to him so both of us could stay in the house with Evidio.

I told the *doctora* we were going to rent a place but she wouldn't hear of it. "How can you do that when we have rooms to spare right here?" she protested. "If you don't want to use your old room, move up into the apartment with us." But I told her that Armando and I wanted a place of our own, for the two of us. "A married couple should live by themselves," I told her. Then she said, "All right, take the servants' rooms for the two of you."

After our marriage, Armando stayed on at his job with the military police and I kept working for Evidio and the *doctora*, but Armando and I lived alone in the servants' rooms.

In June, when the *doctora* was about to leave, I'd say, "Ay, why must you leave when you're doing so well here?" She'd burst into tears and answer, "I must go because Fidel deceived me." But she wanted to go because she and Evidio quarreled all the time over a mistress he had in Pinar del Río. I never met her but the *doctora* told me all about the affair. So the *doctora* went up North and left Evidio.

She went by ship and I saw her off at the dock. Both she and Evidio cried that day. Then Evidio began to talk of going. He said he wanted to move back to Artemisa and tried to arrange an exchange of apartments with Fela, his secretary, who lived in Las Cañas. His idea was to move all his furniture to her apartment and leave it there for me when she moved into this apartment. But exchanges weren't permitted in that zone, even though Evidio and Fela were big shots in the government. Then Evidio made a written statement saying that another couple—Armando and I—were to stay on, living in that apartment, and that the place was mine. I was to keep the lease and present it when they came. Evidio left me the

apartment keys and 400 pesos. Besides that, he paid all the household expenses, including the milk and electricity, for the next six months.

Then, one day he had lunch with me and said, "I'm going to Artemisa today, but I'll be back next week." I never saw him again. He left the country and never said goodbye to me. They say he left with the notary who married Armando and me. It seems that at my wedding<sup>5</sup> they made plans to leave in August on a launch out of Varadero.

Evidio went without permission from the government, but I sincerely believe his only reason for going was to join his wife and daughter. He never turned against the government, even when they took away his post. After he left, the government confiscated all the money they had in the bank, and everything else.

The apartment was mine but the rent was 105 pesos and how were we to pay that on Armando's 74 pesos a month? Armando said the two servants' rooms were plenty for us and went to explain our situation to Arturo Porullo, the man responsible for Urban Reform in our area. He'd been Armando's comrade in the Sierra. We told him we couldn't afford to keep the big apartment and that we wanted to be moved to a smaller place.<sup>6</sup> Arturo told us to stay in the servants' rooms until they found another place for us. Found another place! That was nine years ago and we're still here.

Then Aldita, who's the one in charge of Housing in Miramar-Siboney, took the remaining furniture from Evidio's apartment. I was supposed to have some of that furniture, but I was afraid to take it. Suppose later they were to say I'd stolen it? I could have taken the frigidaire, the TV set, the record player, and the radio, but like a fool I turned them in with the apartment.

Before Evidio left, he transferred his telephone to me. "*Muchacha*, have it installed in your room and you can keep it."

"What do I need a phone for?" I said.

I had a new job by then and I was away from home all day, so Juan Carlos Pérez, Mercedes's husband, came and asked me to give him the phone because he didn't have one. He said, "Look, Lala, you can make as many phone calls as you like from my place." I'm such a—I'd better not say the word—such a—something—fool, that I said, "Well, then all right, Juan."

That phone they have now is mine. When the black fellow came to disconnect the telephone he told me, "You sure are a dope, kid. Listen, all I had to do was attach a cable from there to here and you'd have had your phone. How could you give it away like that?"

5. May, 1961.

6. The rent ceiling for newly built and vacated housing units went into effect the month Armando and Lala were married. It is not clear whether this was known to them, whether the law applied since Lala was already living in the apartment, or whether they just did not want the expense and responsibility of maintaining such a large apartment.

Juan told me he didn't have a phone, but later on I saw another one in his kitchen. There was a shortage of telephones then, and it turned out Juan even had extensions in his apartment!

About a year later, they told all us tenants that we'd have to move out because this was to be declared a zone for scholarship students only. They gave me a paper saying I was to be at the Housing office at 2:00 in the afternoon. There they told us to look for another place. Armando and I looked everywhere and found an apartment in Almendares. It had two large bedrooms, a living-dining room, kitchen, a terrace in front, and another one in back. It was really a very good one.

A lady who lived in the building showed us her place and said, "That apartment will do fine for the two of you." She wrote down the address for us and we went to tell Aldita, who told us to wait for a call. We never went to see her again, because if you keep pestering them they say you're in too big a rush. So we just waited for word from her. And to this day we've been waiting!

Both the second- and third-floor apartments in my building were prepared for the scholarship students. Six or seven cots were put in the third-floor apartment; then they prepared the second floor but never moved anybody in there. The first students on the block were brought to no. 409, and about a week later they brought another bunch to 412—sixty or seventy girls in all. When those students arrived here, what an uproar!

Those girls changed the atmosphere. One of them sang on the third-floor terrace from the moment she got up. She sang well, too. Another, Eva Dulce, was very nice, and the Chinese girl was too. Later she wrote me from Santiago. All those girls are married by now. Every day they'd bring me some of whatever was prepared for lunch up there. They'd say to me, "Oh, don't bother to cook," and they'd bring me rice and chicken.

There were scholarship girls in the house next door, too; below Horacio's apartment. Then the girls were moved out and boys were brought in. The girls here fell in love with those boys and would slip down my stairs to see them. They'd tell the woman in charge, "We're going down to visit Lala," and they'd come down to talk with the boys. The woman would tell me not to let them in, but how could I do that? And they'd throw tomatoes at one another. One day the baby, Mandito, was lying on his cot and I found it filled with tomatoes that had fallen through the window. I went out and yelled at them and they came down, crying, because they were very fond of the baby.

The boys in 409 were nice kids and always asked permission before going down my back stairs. And they'd clean that staircase from top to bottom. I swear, the boys were a lot better than the girls! I was awfully fond of them.

The scholarship students stayed in those apartments from the beginning of 1962 to about the end of '63. After that, the house was left

completely empty until the apartments were fixed up—windows and everything. Then one day Aldita came to tell me that two families would soon move into the upstairs apartments, that Raúl Castro had given them to Bernardo Rojas and Domingo Labrada for having fought in Algeria. That's why both Ana Teresa and Leticia, their wives, moved into their apartments at the same time.

Domingo's wife, Leticia, came over to clean the apartment . . . alone, or with another man, I don't remember. At that time I had a job and wasn't home much. All I know is that at 7:30 in the morning, when I left for work, she was already cleaning up the place. A few days later, my sister Serafina and I were sitting on the garden wall after work when Domingo arrived with their furniture, or rather their beds, because they had no furniture to speak of. Later, I gave her chairs from my apartment from time to time. She also has some very pretty little armchairs that she made herself.

Well, anyhow, Leticia moved in and at first she seemed like a real nice person. She never argued with anybody and stayed home all day long with her three little girls and Tomasito, all nice and quiet. But lately she's become quite nasty. What a tongue that woman has!

One day Armando was helping Ana Teresa clear a clogged drain, and he said, jokingly, "There must be a Negro stuck in that toilet." Leticia blew up because she took that comment seriously. My goodness, he didn't mean any more by it than if he'd said there was a white man stuck in the drain. She really told him off! Armando has quite a tongue too, so he gave her as good as he got, and they flung perfectly horrible insults at each other. It was quite a blowup, let me tell you!

The second-floor apartment had been repaired and thoroughly cleaned, too. It was spotless, like new. Then they gave it to Bernardo, Sara, and all those people, and afterward it was horrible.

Nardo was still in Algeria, so his sister Sara signed the contract. One day they showed up with everything they owned in one little truck—four or five cartons, one spring and mattress, but not even one bed. Sara came with all her kids, her sister-in-law Ana Teresa, two military men, and Ana Teresa's sister Peregrina, with a crowd of kids. A world of people moved in! I had my wash hanging up there and when I went up to gather the clothes, Ana Teresa snapped at me, "We've come here to live."

It was hell after that! There were twenty-seven of them in the apartment! The way they lived!

Their kitchen was terrible. I lived and died with my windows closed because of their smoke. And the dirt! They'd throw trash down into the street. If anybody happened to be crossing, *pam!* they'd fling the dirt right at them. It was unspeakable! The kids didn't shit in the bathroom but on the terrace, and then they'd throw the shit down into the street.

The outside drainpipes got clogged, and when it rained the water

backed up there. You couldn't live. It was hell! Then they'd get drunk on alcohol from the grocery store and start throwing the empty bottles down the stairs.

Whoever they ran into in the street they'd bring home. Every day they'd bring someone new to stay. And the fighting . . . *vaya!* Besides, they were always on the road, going to Oriente and coming back.

One day, Juan, Mercedes's husband, said to them, "I want to show you my house so you'll see what it looks like." I was doing wash out on Mercedes's patio when Juan led those twenty-seven people to his place. Mercedes wasn't home. Juan had called only Nardo, but Ana Teresa followed with her filthy kids and Sara with all of hers. They all went trooping behind Juan. When they saw his beautiful apartment, they just stood there in amazement.

In the end, Ana Teresa, the owner of the apartment, quarreled with Sara, who was part-owner. First they quarreled about who should pay the electricity, so neither did. Then they gave Nardo the money for the electricity, but he kept it and didn't pay the bill either. It was then that I had my own light put on a separate connection. Finally, Armando called them over to explain things. After that they divided the bills and kept their mouths shut.

Each of the apartments in the building had a garage belonging to it. Ana Teresa's sister Peregrina lived in the garage with her four kids and husband, and later Ana Teresa and her two little girls and her mother moved into it too and left the apartment to Sara. They cooked on the little outside door ledge and slept on the floor because they didn't have any beds. At night they'd iron clothes on a folded bedspread on the floor at the entrance of the building. People would be going in and out and there they'd be, ironing. There used to be a faucet outside, but they pulled on it so much it broke and Juan had it shut off. They'd wash clothes on the porch, too, and hang them up to dry on lines crossed in front of Mercedes's house. She told them off any number of times.

And then the fights: "This is my house, not yours . . ." and so on. Ana Teresa's mother has the temper of a wild beast and is real pushy. One night they started fighting at 3:00 in the morning because Concha, Sara's daughter, had bought a bottle of alcohol at the Minimax and Nardo drank it. Then Nardo grabbed his belt and started hitting everybody with it, even Sara.

The noise woke everybody else on the block. I put my head out and then went back to bed. Armando wasn't home and I said, "I don't want to get in trouble with anybody." Nardo threw the bottle down onto the street and then water by the pailfuls because it seems they were also sorcerers. They threw water here, there, and everywhere.

We put in a complaint. How can you expect people to stand by and let somebody iron their clothes right in front of an apartment building? In no time at all someone from the Committee was here and we talked it

over with her. I said, "This is the problem, Dora, the President passes by here, all sorts of people pass by, and can see them ironing out there. They've got no need to do that. They have a great big apartment upstairs." She told us, "Never mind, we'll see about that problem." Then she talked to them and everybody calmed down. Peregrina went to Oriente with all her kids and so did Sara. Ana Teresa stayed in the house.

There were other problems with the garages, too. Juan Carlos needed his garage for his car but he let Miguel, a friend of his from work, live in it for a while. Bernardo's garage was empty at the time so Juan Carlos had a talk with him. Bernardo had no motor for his water pump in his apartment and Juan Carlos said, "Look, *chico*, I'll install a motor for you if you'll lend me your garage." Bernardo agreed. But then Domingo Labrada's brother Dámaso was about to get married and asked for the garage.

Dámaso and Vitalia de Peña moved in, bringing with them a very pretty Empire bed, a stove with burners, a television, a refrigerator, a chest of drawers, and sheets. According to Vita, those things were Dámaso's from his first marriage. Vita was a slender little thing, with a very nice figure and lots of long, long hair. They lived there quietly and she was very nice and friendly. When my boy was sick, she gave him *malanga*. Then, when I had a hemorrhage, she went with me to the doctor and did all my housework. I'd say to her, "A, Vita, you've really got a sick taste, hitching up with that Negro." She'd laugh and say, "So what, kid? Such is life!"

One night two military men drove up in a jeep and took Dámaso away. Next day I asked Vita, "Where's Dámaso?"

"He's working," she said.

But Leticia, who can never keep anything to herself, told me, "No, he was arrested for stealing a TV set from his army unit." We couldn't intervene because it was a matter concerning the military.<sup>7</sup> Dámaso was sent to a prison farm for three years.

After Dámaso was taken away, Vita began to bring men to live in the garage. She went wild and used that place as a meeting place for her women friends and their lovers—black men, white men, even the Chinese butcher at the Mimimax. Then Vita went to Oriente with Sara's brother Panchito, with whom she'd been living.

At the farm where Dámaso was, the prisoners got passes every month or two to go home for five days. The first time Dámaso came home, he found out everything, because Sara, who'd just come back from Oriente, piped up and said, right in front of Dámaso, "Do you know who I saw out there in Oriente? Vita and Panchito."

7. "We" refers to the CDR in which Lala was an officer.

When Dámaso got out of prison, he asked me, "Lala, what happened?" But how could I butt in and tell him? So I said, "Look, Domingo wants to talk with you." He went up there and Domingo explained everything to him. Then he came down and asked me for the ration book. So I handed him his ration book and he took it and left.

In the end, Vita moved all her things out of the garage and went to stay at her mother's house. Now Leticia says she won't let anybody else have their garage. She keeps chickens and other stuff there. Well, we'll see. They're the kind of people who like to have the building filled up.<sup>8</sup>

Once, when Leticia was mad at us, she came around asking me which of the two servants' rooms belonged to her apartment. "I believe the one on this side goes with that apartment," I told her. Then she made a big fuss because we live in that room and it wasn't included in her contract. So they went over to the Urban Reform main office and got a military man to come over to scare us and get us out of here. But it happened that the little Negro in charge of Urban Reform was an old friend and comrade of Armando's from the Sierra. When he saw Armando he said, "Eh, *muchacho*, so you're the one who lives up there! Look, Armando, this comrade brought me here but now I see that you and I are old friends."

Then Domingo told him, "Well, comrade, in spite of that, you were sent here to take action and you must take it." Domingo never fought in the Sierra. He's been a revolutionary only since the day of the Triumph, that 1st of January when he got into a uniform and claimed he'd been in combat. That's a lie; he never fought at all!

"Listen, you, what is it you want anyway?" the little Negro asked him. "I want to get these people out," Domingo said.

"Well," Armando answered, "when anything comes up, we're supposed to ask Aldita about it. Let's go to the office here and see what she says."

So they went and Aldita told them that nobody had a right to interfere with us because she was the only one who had a say about such things. She explained that neither of the two servants' rooms was included in the contract and only when I moved out could anyone else have them.

Then Armando said we'd move immediately if they found us a place to live, otherwise we had to stay there. Where else could we go? And because of that Leticia said horrible things, really horrible things about us.

Later I went to the office to check up on it. They told me, "Relax, you've got nothing to be scared of. Aldita said you lived there and the place was yours." Then we went to the central Urban Reform Office, to

8. Vita's brother Daniel and his wife, Inés, had also been living in the garage and stayed there periodically after Vita left.

pay them to legalize our occupancy, but they said that wasn't permitted in the Frozen Zone.<sup>9</sup> We went back to Aldita and she told us, "Don't worry about it, *michacha*, nobody is going to make you get out of there. If I don't tell you to get out, nobody else can."

We pay no rent but that's no advantage at all, because if we did, they'd give us papers and everything and we'd be able to make an exchange. Persons exchanging houses must exchange these papers. We have nothing to give in return. All we can show is the receipt for electricity, because that's the only bill we pay. We haven't even paid for water since the Revolution. So we simply have to wait until they move us elsewhere.

Nobody can get me out of here because I've lived in these two rooms ever since the family I worked for went away. I could have kept the whole big place on the second floor and I turned it in of my own free will. I used the apartment kitchen to cook in and the terrace for hanging the wash, that's all. After they took over the place for scholarship students, I'd sometimes use the refrigerator, but I never stayed in the apartment. Now I wish I'd kept it. We live well enough here but we're cramped for space.

#### MERCEDES MILLÁN:

After our marriage, my husband, Juan Carlos, and I lived in Vedado with my parents until the government began to give out lists of homes renting for more than 100 pesos. They unfroze those in the higher price ranges first, and since my husband could afford to pay a high rent, we went to Urban Reform to get a list of the vacant houses that were sealed.<sup>10</sup> We looked at a lot of houses but it was impossible to go inside them. We could only look around the barrio and judge the houses from the outside. We'd find out from the neighbors the number of rooms and other details.

I would have preferred Vedado to Miramar, but there was nothing on the Vedado list that suited us. The places were all big, but very old or in apartment buildings. There are too many people in apartment buildings; Juan wanted us to have a house of our own. He wanted a garage for the car, and I wanted a yard large enough for our daughter to play in. She was only one year old then. All the houses we saw in Vedado had two floors and I was afraid the baby might fall downstairs. I'd have to watch her all day long.

We finally chose this place because the building had only three apartments, one on each floor. At least that was better than one with thirty or forty apartments. At that time the people Lala worked for, Evidio Carrera and his wife, lived on the second floor, where Justa now lives. They were very nice, polite people, well educated too.

9. Presumably such papers were unavailable to Lala not because she lived in the Frozen Zone, but because no title deed existed for the servants' quarters.

10. Vacated homes were sealed by the Urban Reform Office to indicate they were being held in reserve for future allocation.

The day we looked at this place Evidio was at home alone. He let us look at his apartment because it was almost the same as the vacant one on the ground floor. The third-floor apartment was also vacant. We liked the floor plan, saw the private garage, the yard, the separate entrance, and decided to take it. They say that a European diplomat used to live in our apartment but I never met him. The apartment had been empty a long time and the grass had grown high around it. The building itself was better maintained at that time. In front, at the main entrance to the upper floors, there were fine plants that spilled over the sides of the planters. The entrance was always very clean.

Juan was in the militia and away on duty, so I signed the contract. Then I made a list of everything we already had and another of what we needed to get for the house. We bought all the kitchen utensils and the frigidaire, too, which we got through the classified section of the newspaper.

In January or February we talked to the man who was going to make our furniture, and to an interior decorator about the drapes. He calculated the amount of cloth necessary and went to the stores for samples. That was the way it used to be done. I'd already chosen the color of the furniture for our room, the baby's room, the parlor, and the dining room, so I chose drapes to match. I gave the decorator the money for the cloth, he had the drapes made and came and hung them himself. He charged 500 pesos for all his work.

After we painted the apartment we hung the curtains. The furniture was brought in gradually, as we bought it. By April all our things were here: Mercedes's crib, bureau, chair, bathinette, baby carriage, playpen, toys and clothing, our TV set, and the record player that we'd had at *mamá's* house. Then we brought the bedclothes, tablecloths, ornaments, china, silver, goblets, pictures, and other things we'd bought or been given and had stored at *mamá's* house. The only furniture we took to the new place from *mamá's*, aside from the baby's, was the Hollywood bed that Juan and I slept on.

At first I had two live-in maids; one did the housework and the other cooked and washed clothes. It's such a big apartment, you see. Then one left and the other one did nothing but the cooking, so I sent the clothes out to be washed. I kept that maid until she got married. Then there were others but none lasted long.

We had the Carreras for neighbors only a short time before they left. They were always so polite and thoughtful. When the gas in my tank gave out and I had no fuel for cooking, they offered to send us our meals, or if we preferred, to let us use their kitchen. They also let us use their phone while we were waiting for one. And when they left, they had their phone transferred to us.

Lala got married on May 29, before the Carreras left. She invited us to the wedding in her hometown in Pinar del Río, but of course it was too



far for us to go. The Carreras went—in fact, I think they paid all the wedding expenses. They were fond of Lala and treated her very well.

The next people to move into our building were scholarship students. They assign as many as possible to an apartment, sleeping on cots lined up one next to the other. Since these apartments have three bedrooms, there were fifteen or twenty children in them. They weren't right above us, but it was noisy, and sometimes they threw things. Oh well, the people who live up there now aren't students and *they* throw things and make a lot of noise, so maybe I shouldn't be too hard on the kids!

Shortly after we moved here, a young couple moved into our garage: Miguel Sardiñas, a man Juan knew from the market, and his wife, Leonora. They were about to get married and had no place to live, so Juan told Miguel they could live there temporarily, for two or three months. He wasn't Juan's employer or a close friend, only a mere acquaintance. Frankly, Juan didn't know him well enough to do him that kind of favor. But Juan is such a benefactor, the kind who'll give the shirt off his back. He's always doing favors for people. But at least Leonora wasn't the type of person Sara is. Leonora and Miguel were clean and neat. They weren't rich and didn't live in luxury or anything, but they had more or less what they needed—their bedroom set, tables, chairs, and the necessary number of beds.

Our garage is better than the others in the building because it has a small room and a bathroom attached. The garages in front of the building are just rooms with no toilets. Miguel got married and came to live there. Well, he didn't stay three months, but seven or eight years! His daughter was born there and his son. Then his mother-in-law moved in.

Miguel worked in food distribution as long as he lived here. Leonora worked in an office. We never charged them 1 *centavo* for rent. Why should we? We didn't need any extra money. In fact, we even let them have their electricity on our bill. But after a while they quarreled with us and accused us of trespassing. If I went through to hang clothes on the line, they objected. Mercedes would play in the backyard sometimes and Leonora complained that the noise woke up her children. One day when Mercedes was six, Leonora dragged her to our door and said, "This is the limit. This child insulted my mother and that's something I won't put up with."

Mercedes was sobbing hysterically and Juan was so angry at the child that he lost control and spanked her. He hardly ever does that. He may punish her by making her stand in a corner or by sending her to bed, but only rarely does he lay a hand on her.

I know Mercedes shouldn't have talked back to an older person because it's disrespectful, but after all, she was only a child. Leonora should have complained to me or else reproved the child, but not in such a rude way.

I'd never quarreled with those people before. I prefer to lose my rights than to have quarrels and problems. I always said hello when we met and I tried to keep Mercedes from playing in the backyard next to the garage. But from that day on, I never spoke to them again. After that they went around talking about us and put up a fence around the garage. Finally they moved away.<sup>11</sup>

#### SARA ROJAS:

When I first came to Havana,<sup>12</sup> I looked around at everything and thought, "Oh, how beautiful it all is!" I loved it. There's a big difference between the city and the country. In the country one walks in the dirt, but here in Havana everything is paved. Paved streets and sidewalks are such a good idea because your shoes don't get dirty and you can walk outside no matter how hard it's raining.

I brought my children Concha, Hilario, and Amanda Maria, and left Estelita, Gerardo, and Violeta with *mamá*. My husband, Eduardo, and my cousin Gloria met us at the railway terminal in Havana. We all stayed at Gloria's house, but it was a tight fit because she had several children of her own. We had to sleep in the parlor.

We needed a place of our own, so Gloria took us to an empty house with several rooms. We decided to break the seal that the government put on the doors of empty buildings. At 2:00 o'clock that very night, we broke the seal and moved in. But somebody from the block Committee saw us and right away they took us to the police station. When the guy there saw our shabby clothes I guess he was sorry for us because he gave us a letter to take to MINFAR.<sup>13</sup>

At MINFAR the comrade with us said, "Please give these comrades an occupation permit." Then, after Eduardo showed proof that we had no place to live, they gave us a letter and told us to look for a room or apartment with the MINFAR seal and when we found a place big enough for us, to break the seal and move in.

We found a room in Marianao, in a *solar*<sup>14</sup> that was only one story high and had a wide hall lined with rooms, one after another. In each room

11. Mercedes's husband, Juan Carlos Pérez, was very critical of the practice of permitting private garages to be used as apartments. Not only did he have a bad experience with his own garage but also with his mother's. A woman had moved into the rooms connected to the garage of his mother's house in La Vibora and had then refused to move out. He said he had suffered intimidation by a brother and three military friends of the woman and had to go to court before he got her to move. He was so upset by these two experiences that when a neighbor asked him to loan his garage to a sick relative, he refused, saying that he wasn't the Urban Reform Office.

12. In 1961.

13. *Ministerio de las Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias* (Ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces). Housing problems were usually handled through one's work center and Rojas was in the Army at that time.

14. A low-rent multiple-family structure, usually one story high, with one or more rows of single rooms or small apartments opening onto a central patio.

lived a married couple—eleven families in all. We were busy cleaning when a woman from the Committee showed up and made a fuss about it. We told her we hadn't broken in on our own but that we had a letter from MINFAR.

"That's all right, then," she said. "Tomorrow I'll see about filling in the blanks for your ration book."

That night we slept on the floor. Next morning the same woman comrade showed up and took me to MINCIN<sup>15</sup> to tend to the matter of the ration book. Then I went to the marketplace in Marianao and bought a big bed and a table with matching chairs. I also bought a small stove, a child's dresser, a kerosene burner, pots, pans, spoons, dishes—we equipped the house in no time at all. I got everything we needed. A lady next door lent us another bed, and since our electricity hadn't been connected yet, another neighbor gave us two candles.

I liked living there; we were real comfortable. The neighbors were very nice, the room was spacious, and the hall was big enough for the kids to play in. There was only one bathroom but all of us *compañeras* kept it spic and span because a number of little kids had to use it. Later, my brothers David, Pancho, and Bernardo, who were all in the Army, came to stay with us.

I had a very good friend, Olga, in Marianao. Olga took my kids to the park and spent a lot of time taking them places and keeping them amused. She looked after my kids as well as I did. She was very, very, very white but had no racial prejudice—at least she never showed any prejudice against me. She was always generous with help and advice. When I didn't have money, I didn't have to ask her; she herself would come over and offer me some. She had a refrigerator, and when she went to the butcher shop she'd pick up my meat for me and keep it till I needed it. She often helped me with the housework, and when she didn't, I'd drop in on her. After we sent the kids off to school, we'd sit chatting and watching TV.

We lived in Marianao two or three years. Then, while my husband was still stationed at Managua, my brother Bernardo was sent to Algeria, although at the time we didn't know where he was. He left his wife, Ana Teresa, and little girl, Melinda, in our charge because he himself had no idea where he was being sent.

Because Bernardo was in Algeria, Raúl gave him a present, a new apartment on the second story of this building. When Bernardo filled in the blanks before leaving, he put everything in my name. His salary was to be sent to me and everything. So when they gave him the apartment, they naturally put that in my name too.

I didn't want to move and neither did my husband. "We'd be taking a

big risk," he said. "In the end we might lose this house and that one." I was happy living in Marianao but I had to give up my place and move, because if not, Bernardo would lose his right to the apartment. The comrade said, "Your brother did this for your benefit and that apartment is roomy enough so that you can all live in it comfortably." But I think the real reason Bernardo did it was that he didn't want his wife, Ana Teresa, to be all alone because of her asthma.

Well, anyway, we moved to Miramar, to this building we're living in now—Ana Teresa with her daughter and me with all my family. I made all the arrangements for the move—the contract, the electricity, and everything because we were told to move in before my brother's return. Bernardo was the one in charge of the apartment but the contract was in both our names. My signature was in the contract, where it said, "Arranged by Sara Rojas." It said half the apartment was mine, to make up for the one in Marianao that I'd given up.

The only people living in the building then were Mercedes and her family on the ground floor and Lala and Armando in the servants' rooms. When we first arrived, I asked Mercedes to help me get the apartment door open because we didn't understand how the key worked.

Leticia and Domingo got their apartment the same way we got ours—as a gift from Raúl for going to Algeria. The first time they came to see the apartment, they cleaned it. Domingo walked down to ask Mercedes to close her shutters because they were going to scrub the floors and some water might drip through the open windows. They also came down to our apartment.

"Oh, so you're the ones who are going to move in there?" I said. "I want you to know that we're your friends." Two or three days later they moved in. Of course I was glad to have new neighbors because Lala and Mercedes stayed in their own homes most of the time.

#### EDUARDO ROJAS:

I was against moving from our room in Marianao to the Miramar apartment. I didn't want to lose my room only to have somebody say I was just an extra in the new place. And also, I didn't want to go because Sara's and Bernardo's brother, who has about six children, wanted to live with us in the new apartment. So did Ana Teresa's mother with all her children, five boys and three girls. I wasn't going there with such a mob because I'd lose the room I had. It was as big as this garage, and besides, it had a bathroom and everything. "So far as I'm concerned," I said, "the answer is no. I don't want any company. I just want to be left alone here in my little room. I'm fine here and so are my children."

The man who came with the document explained that if we didn't make the change, they wouldn't give Bernardo the house because Sara was the principal on the contract.

15. *Ministerio de Comercio Interior* (Ministry of Domestic Trade).

Everybody got on my tail, but I always told them I wasn't interested. They even came to talk to me at work. They'd been to see the apartment so they were pushing me. "Come on, Eduardo, you're going to miss out on a terrific house." I didn't bother to look at the place and I didn't plan on going.

After several days of this, I finally said to Sara, "Well, you go ahead and do what you like, but I'm not responsible for anything that happens. I'm going to move over there with you, but I never want to hear one word about it. Don't forget, we're losing our own house this way." I also told Sara that if all those people were going to live there, I wouldn't move.

Until I told her to go ahead, Sara hadn't done anything. She'd never do anything on her own. She simply wouldn't say anything. But as soon as I gave permission, things started moving. The man who first told us about the house said we had to move right away. He took Sara over to see the house and then to see Aldita, the woman in charge of the Housing office in the Frozen Zone, to draw up the contract.

I didn't do anything except go over to see the house, but when I did I felt pretty happy. It was a wonderful house, a knockout of a house! "This is really something!" I said to myself. I thought that now we'd be able to live well. But there was always a feeling in the back of my mind that something would go wrong. And it did.

So Sara and I went to live there with her children and ours. My brother Luis went with us too. Ana Teresa and her little girl moved in at the same time.

#### ANA TERESA RAVENTOS:

When Bernardo returned from Algeria, he was given the house in Miramar as a gift. We gave Sara and Eduardo a room because she was my husband's sister. But even though I was the mistress of the house, I couldn't say a thing, not a word, because everybody would jump on me. It was my own house but my sister-in-law wanted to be the mistress.

I'd been living in a room in La Asunción with my daughter, Bernardo's brother Fabiano, and his wife and daughter. Some of us slept on the floor and others on the bed.

The floor had holes, tremendous holes, in it. It was of mosaic tile and was never dry. The roof was a sort of cardboard and the rain would fall right into the very bed we were sleeping in, so that at night we didn't know what to do with ourselves. The room didn't have any toilet, so we used a potty and emptied it in a sewer ditch. One of the ditches passed right under the house, and when that overflowed it was terrible, let me tell you.

Just one room! Really, I felt embarrassed. We've always lived in the midst of all this hubbub, always. But I didn't want to come here because I

was living in one place and Sara was living in another. I really didn't want to come. Wasn't I brave! I kept telling Sara, "Come on, *chica*, you go. I'm not moving from here. I'm not going anywhere." But they kept nagging and nagging at me until finally I came. Sara herself insisted on it. "Come on, let's go, Ana Teresa," she kept telling me. My mother told me, "Well, if it suits you, go. If you want to stay, stay. It would be better for you to stay here where you're living." That's what my mother told me, but what else could we do? When a man provides for you. . . .

Instead of putting us in the contract, Bernardo listed Sara and their brother David, who wasn't even on our ration book—he was stationed with the Army at La Cabaña. I didn't know anything about it. Listen, I was the mistress, but even if I hadn't had any right to it, the children he had with me did have a claim. He and I were married in court and people who doubt that are making a big mistake.

When I got to the Miramar apartment, Bernardo hadn't arrived yet. I came with my daughter Melinda, and nobody from my own family. From Bernardo's family there were his brother David and his woman, Panchito, Marcelina, Eduardo, Sara, and their children. All those people came to live with me—and from my own family, nobody. Eduardo's *mamá*, who's my aunt, did come to stay for a few days to have an operation. Since she didn't have any place to stay, she had to look to her family, isn't that right?

It was four or five days before Bernardo arrived. To tell the truth, when he'd left for Algeria he was a little on the thin side, but he came back nice and fat. We hardly knew him, he'd put on so much weight. He was really good-looking. He even had a beard. I couldn't pick him out. "This is Bernardo," they told me, and I said, "Oh no, that can't be Bernardo!" But Sara was hugging and kissing him and the others were coming at him, so I hugged and kissed him too. And all the things he brought!

The first night Bernardo spent at home, I slept in a bed. I think it might even have been Sara's. It was the end room that fell to me, and Sara's was in the front. And so Bernardo stayed with me that night. After that we were fine, nice and quiet, getting along well. He gave me some money and things, because now he had some, but I swear before that I had given a little money to the family when they needed it, chiefly to his mother and such. Not to my *mamá*; my *mamá* has never needed money or anything from him. She's been the one to help Bernardo.

#### SARA ROJAS:

I don't know but I've got a hunch that my sister-in-law had never lived in such a house in all her born days. I'd have to explain to her, "Look, Ana Teresa, here we have a special place to throw the garbage, a place to put the food scraps before throwing them in the

garbage can." I even had to tell her, "Listen, kids aren't allowed to make *caca* all over the place. That's what we have two bathrooms for." But no, the kids would shit on the floor and she'd scrape it up and throw it away.

Another thing I had to tell her, "You've got to sweep all the trash off the floor before you douse it with water and mop it up. You aren't supposed to sweep water with trash in it down the drainspout. If you do, it gets stopped up, the water backs up, and our apartments get flooded." That happened many times. Juan Pérez, Mercedes's husband, came up to complain about it. The scraps of papers, the beans, all the stuff Ana Teresa washed down the drainspout, landed downstairs in the Pérezes' place, and, as he said, they have small children.

Another thing about Ana Teresa is her language. She's apt to speak kind of dirty. Most people paid no attention to her, but one day Juan Pérez came and complained to my brother about it. They talked just outside the apartment. Then my brother called Ana Teresa over and told her, "You better remember that this is the city, not the country."

Then Ana Teresa's relatives decided they wanted to move in with her. "Let's wait till Bernardo comes and let him decide," said I. "There simply isn't room for more people here." "All right," the girl said. And the next day she moved all her family—her *mamá*, her *papá*, and some kids—into the garage that was empty. They didn't live like Christians there, they just managed any old way. They cooked and ate outdoors and bathed in shorts at Mercedes's faucet as if this was a beach. They let the kids run around naked or in rags and the women sat immodestly and all that. They lived badly, country-style, only that isn't the style in the country anymore.

Imagine, living that way here! In the Frozen Zone no less, where people aren't supposed to make noise or pick fights or use swear words. If you live here, you've got to live like people.

I guess Aldita and the people who made the arrangements about the contract found out how those people were living because they called and asked me with whose permission I'd moved that bunch of people into the garage. They said I had to go over to their office and explain everything. I told them that *compañera* Ana Teresa was the one who'd broken the law by getting her relatives in there. Then they said I had to get them out immediately because those *compañeros* weren't living like people. Well, Bernardo was back from Algeria by then, so I turned the problem over to him. I told him, "You're the principal owner of the apartment so it's up to you to go talk with those people and resolve this problem. I've solved enough problems for you."

The patrol car came around and they drove Ana Teresa and my brother to the police station, but they didn't take me because they found nothing against me. There they gave the two of them a talking-to, telling Ana Teresa to quiet-down and stop making such a rumpus. They told

her I never interfered with anybody and it was plain to see that I was a noble-hearted person and that I never made any noise.

Then came the fight about the ration book. Out in the country I had a ration book of my own, but when I moved here they told me I had to put down my name in my brother's ration book. "I don't like that," I said. "I'm used to having my own ration book." But the girl from OFICODA<sup>16</sup> explained, "When two families live together, comrade, they must share one ration book." So I went back home and explained it to Bernardo and Ana Teresa. But she burst out, "Oh no, I don't want anybody else in my ration book!"

"Well, whether you like it or not, we'll have to put Sara in our book," Bernardo said, "because she can't live without a ration book, to say nothing of all those little kids of hers."

So what does Ana Teresa do but take off and fetch a patrolman! My brother, she, and I were there in the apartment. I didn't know what it was all about or why the patrolman was there. He took them to the police station with the contract, and they were told they had to put me down in their ration book because half the apartment belonged to me. "Just take a look at the contract—it's signed by her. Her signature is the one that counts there. You're trying to deny food to her children by refusing to have her in your ration book and that's no joke!"

After that, Ana Teresa holed up in one of the rooms and did her cooking and everything there. As for me, I kept on using the kitchen and I shopped for my own food. I have no idea how Ana Teresa lived. I never set foot in her room or in her bathroom, either. I simply refused to go where she was. What really got her goat was that I never talked back at all. She wasn't anything so wonderful that I should have to lower myself to her.

They say Ana Teresa cooked in the bathtub but I knew nothing about it. If I'd seen her doing such a thing, I'd have given her a talking-to. Anyway, if there's a stained bathtub in that apartment, it must be Ana Teresa's and my brother's because it isn't mine. For all I knew she cooked on the floor. I was just waiting for the day when the Ministry of Health would come to kick her out, because that sort of thing is against the rules, especially in a building like this one.

I had to disconnect the stove and heater because they used up more electricity than I could afford to pay. Sometimes Ana Teresa didn't have a match and she'd plug in the stove, though she must have known that every time you light one of those stoves, you spend a kilowatt. So I simply had it disconnected. Ana Teresa didn't get mad, because the stove gave off electric shocks from a length of cord and we were both afraid of it.

<sup>16</sup> *Oficina de Control para la Distribución de Alimentos* (Office for Control of Food Distribution).

## EDUARDO ROJAS:

For the first few weeks things were fine in some ways, since we were beginning to live in comfort, but they weren't so great in other ways. In fact there were disagreements from the very first. The day after we moved, there was an argument because Ana Teresa's mother and one of my uncles both wanted our old room in Marianao. She got a seal for the door from her place of work and he got one from MINFAR, but that day the house was sealed by either the Defense Committee or Urban Reform, I don't remember which. Anyway, the two of them raised an awful rumpus about it. And in the end it was given to another woman.

Even before we moved to the new apartment, Ana Teresa was always griping because Bernardo's checks came addressed to Sara. I didn't mix into all this because I never interfere with their affairs. And finally one day Sara told them, "All right, you people take it. We don't need it. Just take it and do whatever you like with it."

Then they started fighting over the problem of Ana Teresa's mother and family moving in. Ana Teresa was always asking why they shouldn't have a right to live there. Well, *we* didn't take the right away from her. Aldita said that only the people included in the contract could live in the house, and if anybody else wanted to move in, he had to check it out with her. Sara told them Ana Teresa's family couldn't live in the house. So they moved into the garage, without notifying Aldita.

Bernardo came in March or April, about two months after we did. Both Sara and I welcomed him with open arms. We hadn't seen him for a long time. He only stayed a few days, long enough to say hello, before he went off to see his family in Oriente, because he hadn't seen them for ages. He didn't take Ana Teresa with him.

Sara and I first learned that he and Ana Teresa were on the outs when Bernardo and my brother Luis went out drinking together. The next day I asked Luis where they'd been. "Oh, tanking up with Bernardo and a plump chick," he said. A day later Bernardo came home and told me his story. "Yes, I was visiting a plump chick up there. I swept her off her feet," he said. That meant he'd slept with her. After that he began to visit there from time to time and finally went to live there for good. I think Bernardo's relation with his woman Catalina was the reason he wanted to get rid of the house and find another place for his wife.

All the time Bernardo was still living at home, I never said anything about it to Ana Teresa. I don't mix in such things, because I've had similar problems myself. If somebody butted in, I wouldn't like it at all.

Bernardo and Ana Teresa were a strange couple. They had their spells of getting along fine and their times of squabbling. They were always separating. They'd be apart for a few weeks and then come back together again. Since we were living in the same house, we couldn't help overhearing their fights. Ana Teresa and her mother were always kick-

The electric company<sup>17</sup> said the apartment needed a whole new installation but that it would be a long time before they could get around to it. I did most of my cooking on an electric hot plate after the stove was disconnected. I hardly used my little kerosene burner at all while I lived up there because I didn't want to get the ceiling all smoked up.

Then *mamá* got sick and I had to go home to Oriente for a while to take care of her. I returned to Havana all by myself. Eduardo stayed in Oriente for the sugar-cane harvest and I left the kids with him. I wanted to go back alone because I knew how I'd find the apartment.

I arrived at about 11:00 in the morning; the minute I opened the door the smell hit me. The place stank like the devil; it was enough to scare you. There were worms in the bathroom, the garbage, everywhere. There was dried shit all over the floor. An inspector from the Ministry of Health had already been there and filed terrible charges against them. Somebody told me they were even going to kick Ana Teresa out.

Four whole months I'd been in the country and in all that time that woman hadn't cleaned anything. I said to her, "If you can't clean up yourself, you might at least have paid somebody to come in and do it." Bernardo cleaned up whatever was most urgent and that's all.

I rested for three days after my return, then I really pitched into the job of cleaning and straightening up the place. I scrubbed the walls with a mixture of *Campeón* scouring powder, detergent, and wood ashes, up to the ceiling and down to the floor, and I washed off the window shutters with the same mixture. Fifteen whole days I had to work on it to get it clean, but when I was through the place shone. The kitchen walls were all tiled and so were those of the two bathrooms. The floors were of granite tiles. It was a real good apartment.

After I finished, a friend came to visit and said, "Oh, I see the apartment has been repainted." "No, just washed off," I told her. "It was shit that made this place look old and shabby. Now you can see how pretty it really is."

I had that place as clean and shining as a little golden cup. Everybody who went there asked me for a drink of water. Nobody would take the risk of drinking water in that place when Ana Teresa was in charge. "Ay, Sara," they'd say, "how nice the place looks!"

Ana Teresa got things dirty again just as fast as I could get them clean. I didn't complain; I simply went back a little later and cleaned it up again. It was the same with the steps outside. She never cleaned anything. You can go ask, neighbor by neighbor, if they ever saw Ana Teresa do any cleaning around here. They all complained because of the filth she threw down. Then Ana Teresa began to bring the police to the house and to annoy me in every way she could.

ing up a fuss. In fact, Ana Teresa's mother was behind most of the scenes. She'd get Ana Teresa worked up over nothing.

Those people are pretty low-down. They'd start a fight over the least thing. When Bernardo and Ana Teresa fought they'd call each other names, like "bitch" and "faggot" and a thousand more. It got so bad that I reported their bad language to Lala, who was president of the Committee. Lala said, "Yes, I've been hearing them myself." But she didn't lecture them or do anything else about it. If I were the head of a Committee and somebody called me about such a thing, I'd explain that they couldn't go on that way with so many children around.

Finally I went to Ana Teresa myself, but she just started arguing with me. I didn't want to get mixed up in their quarrels, so I just went off and let them wear themselves out shouting bad words at each other. I only fought with Ana Teresa a few times and that was over the ration books.

When Sara got into one of those quarrels, I didn't think it was my place to intervene. If a man had been fighting against her that would have been different. Sara's able to fend for herself against another woman. But when Ana Teresa said the house didn't belong to us but only to her and her children because she was married to Bernardo, I said, "Look here, don't talk that way. A lot of things may not be mine but one of these rooms here is mine, and that's that."

#### ANA TERESA RAVENTOS:

One day Eduardo brought another woman, called Pomposa, to the garage where my mother, father, and sisters were staying. When Sara saw her there, a free-for-all started between the two women. Sara was going to pounce on her, but they pulled them apart. It was a really low scene, but they didn't do any more than hit each other. Pomposa may have been the one who pulled a knife, but I think it was Eduardo. He kept saying, "Go ahead, get her! Get her!" wanting her to attack Sara. It was really something to watch him egging the two of them on.

Bernardo gave Sara an awful trouncing because she'd tangled with Eduardo and told him he was a no-good. How could she continue to live with him? Bernardo was mean because he'd been drinking. He hit her with his hand, not with a stick or anything. Sara cried so much she woke up the whole building. They must have heard her screams up in heaven. A group of people downstairs calmed him down but I went to my room in a hurry. Since we didn't have anybody to stick up for us, I yelled, "Sara, come here, bring the children over here."

I thought blood would flow, that Bernardo was going to kill us all, but he left. Later I told her to report him to the police. What could he have said? He was drunk as a skunk.

The next day he came and set things straight. He said, "Oh God, sister, it was the liquor that made me do those things to you," and Sara forgave

him. He didn't leave bruises, but I heard Sara say that her body ached a lot. Things like this went on a few times because Bernardo was drinking too much then, and when drink went to his head he'd start beating his sister.

Now it seems like justice that Sara and Eduardo separated,<sup>18</sup> because I know she's the cause of Bernardo's separation from me. There was a woman called Vita living in the garage and she was a real tart, another hot number. Vita and Sara kept egging Bernardo on. They were always showing that woman Catalina in his face. It was all because Sara wanted to be the mistress of the house. After all, Bernardo is *my* husband.

One day, when I was leaving Leticia's place, I saw Sara let Catalina in our apartment. I'd seen her before with her husband; she has seven children and none of them has the same father. When I saw that woman's face, I said, "This *compañera* here in this house?"

When I saw how things were going, I didn't make a move. I just kept my eye on things. But one day while my mother was at the Plaza de la Revolución, where Fidel speaks, she saw Bernardo strolling about with Catalina and Vita. So I said to myself, "Well, isn't that nice!"

When Bernardo came home and knocked on the bedroom door, I didn't let him in. I locked the door on him and he slept in Sara's room. The next day he came and opened the closet and took out his clothes. I didn't say anything. I kept quiet. He took the clothes and moved them to Sara's room. Then he went out and I couldn't tell him not to.

That day I went to the Club Obrero, and on the way back I saw Nardo and Catalina across the street. They had their arms around each other and were fooling around, but I didn't say anything. They came to the house and I didn't say a word to them, not a thing. They made a terrible scene because there was nothing left for them to do.

After that Bernardo didn't speak to me and didn't give me anything anymore. My children were having a bad time because of that, so I went to Leticia, the only friend I had left, to get a little food and such. She was the one who helped me while I was living there in the building. Then Bernardo left, and instead of giving me the money, he played a trick on me and gave it to his sister. Every time I went to ask Sara for the money, she'd say, "No, that money belongs to Bernardo and nobody can touch it until he comes."

"What's the matter with you, *chica*? Is he your husband or mine? Are you living with him or what? Tell me," I said. I didn't say anything stronger to her. Well, then Eduardo started to act like a shit too, to put it vulgarly, but I didn't pay any attention to him. I just wanted what was mine. Finally I got my nerve up and took all the money.

<sup>18</sup> Sara and Eduardo were separated from 1964 to 1967, during which time he married, under civil law, and had two sons.

Bernardo was even worse than Eduardo, because when Eduardo went off with that girl he kept sending money to his children—he remembered them—but Bernardo never gives a thought to his children, except once when I sent him a telegram that the little girl was sick. As long as I was living in the building, Eduardo would come with that woman and bring Sara money. He'd call her or whistle, and she'd meet him on the sidewalk.

I'd always gotten along pretty well with Sara. But after what she did to me, I don't feel right about her anymore. I know that Sara and her daughter Violeta visited Bernardo's woman plenty of times and fought with her because she'd practically taken the food out of their mouths. That's something they never had to do with me. Not only that, when Violeta comes to visit me, I give her clothes, shoes, everything, even though I've hardly anything to wear myself. Sara caused me to suffer greatly in my own home but I was always good to her.

#### LETICIA MANZANARES:

When my husband, Domingo, was with the Cuban Army in Algeria, he wrote saying that I should go to Havana because a comrade's wife had gone there and the government had resolved her housing problem right away. I'd been living with my mother-in-law in Regla in a tiny wooden house and it was very crowded. There were twelve people living there. So I went to the High Command and asked for a place to live because my husband had been sent out of the country. They told me they'd let me know as soon as they could.

I went back to my home in Limón to wait for the High Command to find me an apartment. A week later the political instructor, who brought Domingo's salary every month, told Domingo's sister they had a place ready for me and she sent me a telegram. I packed all my stuff and rushed back to Havana.

When I first saw the apartment I was happy they were giving us such a good place. The best of it was that we could live by ourselves and be the bosses of our own home. But the apartment had no furniture and I had none of my own. So I said to them, "I want the apartment but you'll have to give me furniture too." They had furniture but didn't give me a thing, even though they promised. That's the way those people are. The apartment remained empty for about a month while I was waiting.

Domingo came home that same month<sup>19</sup> and we decided to sign the contract, because if we didn't move in soon we'd lose the apartment. There were lots of people in the same fix. The government gave thirty-five apartments in Miramar to the men who went to Algeria and many lost their places because they didn't move in right away for lack of furniture.

19. March, 1964.

The Army gave Domingo a month's leave, which we spent at the High Command trying to get them to resolve the furniture problem. Every single day we'd go there and they'd tell us to wait. We filled in a request the year before last and they still have it. We even wrote to Raúl and he sent word that we'd get the furniture, but they still haven't given us a thing.

That's injustice and I don't care who hears me say so. If Domingo had been a lieutenant or a captain he'd have gotten the furniture from them. I'd say that right to Fidel's face. In fact, if I'd gone to Fidel with the problem, he'd have made them give it to us. That's a good thing about this government—that Fidel and Raúl will solve your problems if you talk to them. You can also go to Celia Sánchez.<sup>20</sup> The trouble is, how are you going to get to them? Just as during the previous government it was hard to see Batista. Only powerful people can go straight to them. But it's true that to get a problem resolved right away, those are the three people to go to—Fidel, Raúl, or Celia.

The first night we spent in the apartment we all slept well, but the mattress was ruined from being put down on the floor. It was the only furnishing I owned. Little by little we bought the beds and everything else we have. My brother Tomás got four chairs for us where he works. Domingo put in the woven straw seats and backs and painted them. They brought them to the apartment and it was a great surprise for me to see how pretty they were and of what good quality. And it was all done free of charge. Our style of living has improved since we moved into this apartment. We're as well off as we can be, considering everything.

The first person I met when we moved here was Ana Teresa. There were always lots of people in her apartment and her door was always open. From the very first, we talked together. I invited her to my home and she invited me to theirs. We never quarreled. When I said, "Ana Teresa, let's wash the stairs," we'd wash them from top to bottom and scrub the walls and everything. Domingo always scrubbed the whole wall from our apartment down to the street door, every inch of it. Ana Teresa and Sara and all of us cleaned those stairs and Sara always cleaned the walls of her apartment. Every time a child shit on the stairs we'd throw a bucketful of water on it. These stairs were always wet, that's how often we washed them. As for Ana Teresa and Sara, they're country people and they may have been careless and sloppy at home but they were never as bad as some people say. Not a bit!

The first day we came here, we asked about the gas tanks that were outside Mercedes's apartment. But it seems she'd already taken a dislike

20. Celia Sánchez Manduley, a heroine of the Sierra Maestra campaign, one of six women on the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, and Minister of the Presidency until 1976, when she was named Secretary of the newly appointed Council of State.

to us, because she didn't explain anything until she was good and ready. Mercedes is like that. She tries to act better than everybody else. At least that's the way she acted with the people on the second floor. But she can't treat me that way because I don't allow anybody to put on airs around me. Nobody is better than I am and they'd better not go thinking they are.

One day Mercedes called me to say that my kids had thrown paper down from the balcony. That's when I got good and mad at her and told her forty truths. I said, "You're dead wrong, kid, if you think you're worth more than anybody. This apartment was given to me, it wasn't lent or anything, so you can..."

Mercedes's husband, Juan, is something else. He's a nice guy and we get along fine with him. When we stood guard, he'd talk with us out there. Every time he sees us he stops for a chat. He's very sociable, very different from her.

Lala always talked with me and acted friendly. She's the one who finally explained the gas tanks and Mercedes to me. We got along well from the very first, though we weren't as good friends then as we are now. I did have a problem with Lala and her husband once because they were taking their electric current from us. All those rooms and the garages get their electricity from my apartment and the middle apartment. One time I came back from spending a month in the country and my electricity had been cut off. "How can they cut off my light when I haven't been using it?" I thought. Well, it turned out that the electricity that was owing hadn't been used by us but by Lala. I went and had a talk with her and then they had a meter installed. After that, Lala and I never had any problems. That business of the electricity was the only argument we've ever had and it wasn't really an argument, only an explanation.

#### DOMINGO LABRADA:

My brother Dámaso and I returned from Algeria in March and we went directly to the High Command. An officer there said to me, "Look here, *chico*, we understand that your wife hasn't wanted to take the apartment that's been assigned to you. I advise you to go see the place for yourself and grab it, you hear? Don't waste any time."

Dámaso and I and Eladio, a friend who'd been in Algeria, went to see the apartment. A few days later they gave him a place too, on 6th Street. When I opened the door of the apartment and looked in I only saw the parlor and the kitchen. I said, "Gentlemen, we'll have to gather up bricks like crazy to divide up this place. I can get at least four rooms out of this parlor!" I looked out the kitchen window at what I took to be another apartment across the way, but when I went to look at the bathroom I found two more bedrooms in back. "Hey look," I called to the others, "this is where most of the apartment is, back here!" Then

Dámaso and Eladio joined me and Eladio said, "*Compadre*,<sup>21</sup> you'd better run back to your wife and tell her to move in today, this minute!"

"I don't have to say anything to her," says I. "She'll move when I tell her to, furniture or no furniture! If they give us some, fine! If not, at least we'll be living here."

The truth is, I got real enthusiastic about the apartment the minute I saw it. For one thing, I didn't have a home. And then, when I saw this place...! I've lived in comfortable houses before but never in my life in a place like this.

I went to the unit right away and talked with a friend of mine who was in Transportation. "I need you to take the truck over to my house to-night; we're moving."

When I talked to my wife about it, she objected; "Don't you agree to move in, old boy, not until they put furniture in the place."

"Look, let's move in right away so we can have a place of our own," I told her. "I saw the apartment and it's very good. Very, very good."

But Leticia said, "Let's at least wait until the furniture arrives. Comrade Larrazabal told me, "Don't go taking any old junk there because as soon as Raúl Castro signs, they'll give you all the furniture you need. They're going to give you a TV set and everything."

"Don't rely on Larrazabal," I said. "He's going to doublecross you. One of my comrades didn't move into the place they assigned him and they simply gave it to someone else."

And so we moved in, that very night, bringing nothing but the mattresses. I thought, "If it's the way they told Leticia, they won't wait two years or ten to give us all the furniture we need." I gave our bed to one of my aunts, my old lady kept the porch rockers, and we divided the few other things we had between them. Well, we put the mattresses on the floor and that's where we slept, and that night I said to myself, "This is magnificent! A fine apartment, *compadre*!"

Later, when my brother Dámaso needed a place to stay, I traded my garage for Bernardo's because his garage is better ventilated and has a closet. My brother and his wife, Vita, moved into the garage and gave me more trouble than if they'd moved right into my apartment. For one thing, the garage had no toilet, and they had to use ours.

Dámaso was in the Army and was assigned to a military unit in Mariano. His unit headquarters occupied a country house nearby where there was a TV set. Dámaso and another fellow took the TV over to the unit barracks but Vita asked him to bring the set home. Dámaso said no at first but she kept insisting. Being in love with her, he finally gave in. They made a big fuss at the unit and filled reams of paper about

<sup>21</sup> *Compadre* and *comadre* are terms used by a child's parents and godparents in addressing or referring to each other.



it. In the end, Dámaso was arrested and jailed, first at La Cabaña and later on at a prison farm, for about a year and a half.

When Vita was all by herself in the garage, she carried on something awful. She stopped going to our house and started using the toilet in the house next door, where Horacio lives. She began to bring men to her place. She couldn't have behaved worse. If I should ever have the bad luck to be jailed—God forbid!—and while I was away my wife started laying on the makeup with a heavy hand. . . ! I mean, it's just too vulgar. I'm sure my wife would have her supper at 7:00 as usual, go right to bed, and fall asleep at once.

Vita's first husband, the one she was legally married to, was one of those who visited her. If you walked into the garage, you'd find the place full of men without their shirts on. She called them her "cousins," but I never saw one of those cousins as long as my brother was there. I saw all those things but kept my mouth shut. I simply wanted to get her out of the garage, and once she was out I would never, never let anyone else have it.

Vita had struck up a friendship with Bernardo's family and became very good friends with Sara. Then she made a play for Panchito, one of Sara's brothers, and began having relations with him. In the end, she went off with him to Oriente. All this while she was supposed to be living with my brother, who was in jail.

Altogether Dámaso spent almost two years in jail. While he was in La Cabaña, Vita would go to visit him but she'd never mention what she was doing. Instead, it was always, "Your brother did this and your brother did that." When his sentence was up, my brother arrived here one night and didn't even come up to say hello to me. "So that's the way it is!" I thought. "That woman has turned Dámaso against me somehow. Well, never mind, he'll come to me eventually."

By the next day I couldn't stand it anymore. I decided to wait until the two of them were together so I could talk to them both at the same time. At noon I went down while she was serving my brother's lunch. I told him, "A man who's a man doesn't go around spreading gossip; he says what he has to say right to people's faces. I wouldn't ever gossip about Vita behind her back, but now you're home, I'll have my say right to her face."

Then I told him everything she'd done while he was away: that she'd brought men to the garage, that she'd gotten involved with Panchito, that she'd hung photographs of herself and her first husband all over the walls of the garage. He just sat there as if he didn't give a damn and didn't say anything, but Vita started arguing with me.

My brother stopped speaking to me because of that. Days and days went by, and he kept on living in the garage with Vita but he still wouldn't speak to me. One day, while Dámaso was away at work, Vita

packed her things and went away. To this day I don't know what happened and I've never asked my brother about it. When he got home that day, he called me over and said, "We're brothers and there's no quarrel between us."

"No, and there never will be either," I agreed. "I'll always be the same. Understand?"

It's more difficult now for a person to let someone live in his garage because of the confusion over ration books. A law has been passed which says a ration book can't be given to anyone living in a garage with no bathroom or toilet. They send an inspector around to check on it before they issue a ration book. Some people solve that problem by putting down their names in the ration book of the family who lives in the house or apartment to which it belongs. But after my brother moved out of my garage, I made up my mind not to give it to anyone else.

#### JUSTA DÍAZ:

Four months after the Triumph I joined my husband in Havana. I wanted to surprise him, so I didn't tell him I was coming. I set out by train from Oriente with his mother and all the kids. A comrade told us how to get here. When we got to Havana we went into the first police station we saw and asked for Captain Reynaldo, who was from my hometown. He told us where my husband's unit was and phoned him.

Like all the other comrades who came to Havana, I felt we were in a new place and not civilized enough to be living in the capital. The government hadn't been installed yet and nobody knew what was going to happen, because at that time the imperialists began to play all their tricks. We didn't know what to think, or where and how we were going to live—the thing that mattered was fighting off imperialism and trying to figure out when and where it would attack us. All the comrades were in a state of alert. Nobody had time to stop and say, "Hernández's wife arrived here with five kids; we've got to find a house for them!"

I took all our clothes and the boxes full of china and odds and ends and went to my brother-in-law Felipe's apartment. My sister-in-law was bowled over with surprise when I told her we were going to move in with them.

When I saw how small her place was, I almost went out of my mind. My problem is that I'm a very nervous person. To make things worse, that apartment was so dark the electric light had to be kept on in the daytime. It had windows but it was between two four-story buildings and the electric fan had to be running all the time, even in winter, because it had no kind of ventilation. The doctors have told my sister-in-law to move because it's impossible to keep the children healthy in such a place. She still lives there though and has to walk to the park to give her kids some sun.