



EDITOR'S CHOICE

My grandmother passed away the day before I defended my MFA thesis, which was a novel that fictionalized her journey from Cuba to America. As I continued revising my novel, the line between fiction and nonfiction blurred like the edges of my dreams. “Taking Flight” is an excerpt from that transformation. It will be included in *Weathered Edge*, a collection of three novellas, published by VP&D House.

Taking Flight

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Nana wouldn't look at the fluttering topaz parakeet inside the silver-wired cage. “I don't want a bird,” she said.

This was when she was alive, when we lived in Miami. I couldn't have been older than five at the time. Back then, if my mother didn't go over to Nana's apartment to feed Pepe, her parakeet, he would have died of starvation. “I gave birth to you,” Nana said.

“And I gave birth to Tito,” my mother replied. “I have a child to take care of already.”

My mother claimed that until school started, she would be very busy watching me and working for my father. I remember my mother holding me against her chest while she said this. I remember how her grip tightened, squeezed fear into my thigh. I remember Nana's sharp stare, at both me and my mother.

“He's too big for you to carry him,” Nana said. “Put him down.”

“You used to carry me home from school when I was eight, embarrassing me in front of my friends. You didn't listen to Dada when he told you to put me down.”

“That was in Cuba,” Nana said. “Things are different in America.”

My mother always remarked how Nana was stubborn as a rock. Sometime during her forties, Nana had a dentist remove all of her teeth because she didn't want to pay for a filling. My mother used to tell everyone that Nana's “stubbornness is greater than pain.” At the time I was scared of Nana, scared that she was mad at me for something I didn't understand. When she talked about me to my mother, her voice became sharp. “I bet he loves spending the day with you all the time,” she'd said once, quickly like a guillotine. She walked around in platform shoes that made her taller than my mother, taller than my father even. Each step she took had the thunderous quality of crashing waves.

I remember her as the savage queen of a verdant jungle. She lived in an apartment with brown walls, mulch-colored furniture, and rows of plants. Failing to pierce my mother with her stare Nana stomped a foot down and the earth trembled. Pepe flew to the top of his cage. The plants rocked in their pots and a few white petals floated to the floor, landing among the dirt that never got swept. My mother squeezed tighter, the side of her breast pushing into my stomach.

“You don't even try to make friends here,” my mother finally said and walked towards the front door.

“My friends are in Cuba,” Nana said.

I'd never been to Cuba, where Nana was born. My parents had been there a number of times, but never spoke much about it. I imagined it to look just like Florida, but with mountains. Here, Nana was the only mountain.

“You've lived in Miami for twenty years now!” When my mother sighed, she created a pocket of air between her chest and my body. As my mother loaded me in my car seat, I looked towards the apartment and saw Nana leaning on the railing, watching us. The shadow of her figure split the sun's light and from inside the car I could feel her loneliness.

Despite my mother's threat she went to Nana's apartment once a week to refill Pepe's food and clean the cage.



The first Pepe Nana owned was lime green with chalk-blue circles around his eyes. When he lifted his white-tipped wings, he revealed yellow shadows on each side of his body. During our visits, I'd stare through the thin-wires of the cage and watch the bird bolt from corner to corner. I so badly wanted to hold Pepe, but feared Nana would yell at me to "put him down."

Once, when I was certain my mother and Nana were having coffee out in the kitchen, out of view of the living room where the cage was, I slid my pinky through the individual wires and nudged Pepe. His feathers felt firm but flimsy, like they'd dissolve in the wind but continue to float as individual fibers and brittle bones. He had a certain edge, despite how fragile he appeared to be. When I nudged him a second time, he turned around and pecked me. I screamed, and when I saw the drop of blood just above my finger nail I cried. My mother came running and scooped me into her arms. She took me into the kitchen and held a tissue over my injured pinky. Nana stared at me with a look as sharp as Pepe's beak, a look that I would later learn to identify as judgment. She said, "Don't poke around where you don't belong."

I was too young to have a pet of my own. At five, even a goldfish would have been too much responsibility. Besides, my father disliked animals. He claimed they were unruly. In my parents' home, file cabinets lined the living room walls and tax documents occupied dining room tables. My bedroom dresser had two drawers reserved for businesses cash receipts. I craved disorder. I spent my time at home exploring the fenced in backyard, trying to catch lizards. Every time I'd snare one, the lizard would snap its body free from its tail and flee.

Pepe, a live animal in Nana's wild apartment, had been an unthinkable prospect. This intrigue was heightened by my fear of both him and Nana. While I do remember not wanting to visit Nana's, I also remember my desire to hold Pepe in my own hands. I wanted to possess what made

Nana wild.

When my mother and I showed up one week, several days after my pinky had healed, we found Nana crying on the sandstone-patterned sofa. Pepe was lying on his side on the wicker coffee-table, his eyes closed and body motionless.

"Oh my God," my mother said as she sat on the sofa and pulled Nana's head into her shoulder, as if shielding her eyes the way she did to me when nude people appeared in a movie.

I stood by the front door. Despite being covered in sweat from a hot summer day, I was frozen in fear. The apartment seemed to have become a much wilder place since the last time. I could sense predators lurking in the plants, hunting me from the hallway. Growing up in Florida, I learned from school fieldtrips to the Everglades to stand still if facing a black bear, run in zigzags if chased by an alligator, and avoid eye contact if caught by a panther. I couldn't be sure which animal, if any, prowled this dangerous apartment.

"He stopped moving after I bathed him," Nana said, sobbing with her finger-locked hands in her lap and her face buried in my mother's neck.

"You bathed him?" The compassion in my mother's voice gave way to a bitter incredulity. "You don't bathe birds."

"He smelled bad."

"He's dead."

My mother stood from the sofa and went into the kitchen. She came back with a roll of paper towels and used them to wrap Pepe like a bird mummy. Then she carried him back into the kitchen. Nana's eyes were red and swollen, making her appear much more vulnerable than I'd ever seen her. Without her false teeth to prop up her lips, her mouth drooped onto her chin. She looked at me and I felt her sadness, although I did not move from the front door.

"I miss hearing him chirp," she said. "He almost learned to say, 'Big Mama's here.'" The way she pitched her voice so that it squeaked like Pepe's made me smile. My smile made Nana smile.

"You don't bathe birds, Mom. I mean, that's common sense."

“You always scold me like I’m a child.”

My mother walked back into the living room with a long sigh, like she created her own gust of wind. She told Nana to put on her shoes. “I can’t leave you alone now.”

Nana’s puffy eyes and the large swooping curls of her hair softened her look. I wanted to be next to her, to feel this new softness. My mother brought her back to our house, where she watched TV in the living room while my mother punched in tax codes into the computer in her office. I had crawled in an empty shelf in one of the metal storage cabinets in the hallway and from there spied on Nana. She seemed oblivious to the images flashing across the TV screen. Whenever the sound of laughter came from the speakers, she kept a stern expression, silent. All I could think about was Pepe. How did he die? Was it painful? What had my mother done with his body? Did Nana kill him? Did that make Nana dangerous? Pepe wasn’t safe in a cage, was I safe in a cabinet?

When my mother came out of her office and told Nana she had to take her home, Nana started crying.

“What’s wrong with your home?” my mother said in a voice strained by impatience and pity. While my mother inherited Nana’s sternness, she lacked her powerful presence. There were times when my mother and I shared a room and I could not sense her. I could feel Nana, though, even when we were at opposite ends of Miami.

“I miss him.”

“Well, Mom, you can’t bathe birds.”

“I miss your father,” Nana snapped, as if irritated that my mother didn’t understand her the first time. It was entertaining to witness these moments in which my mother became the child. So often did my mother snap at me for not getting answers right the first time.

My mother sat with Nana and hugged her so their heads rested together. They spoke to each other in Spanish, a language I did not know. Rarely did I hear my mother speak in Spanish, but when she did, she became someone else entirely. Her voice became urgent, powerful. I finally crawled out of the cabinet. My grandfather had died in

Cuba before I was born. I had never been to Cuba. There was no place for me in the moment shared between my mother and Nana. Despite how badly I wanted to join them, I ran to the bathroom.

Later, we took Nana to the pet store and bought her another parakeet, Pepe II.

The new Pepe looked almost identical to the old one, save for two apple-red pinstripes on either side of his tail. Also, Pepe II’s eyes seemed wider, more alert, as if he sensed his predecessor’s demise. I doubt, though, that parakeets have clairvoyant abilities.

After about a month passed, I heard my parents talking in my father’s office. Apparently, Nana had drowned Pepe II. I leaned on the door frame and listened. Even though his office was in our home, I often felt prohibited from entering. My father sat in the center of the room, enclosed by a fortress of a desk that seemed to extend out from his body. A computer screen cast a cold blue glow on his wide-frame glasses and shiny forehead. He had paper stands and two calculators arranged all within arm’s reach. If not a fortress, the desk appeared to be a spaceship with a 360 degree control panel. I had always wanted to sit in his chair and imagine cruising through space.

“You think she’s doing it on purpose?” my father asked. He poked at his calculator with one rigid finger that made him look like a captain. Blast off!

My mother leaned against the wall adjacent to the door. This was really the only space where one could fit in my father’s office if not in the captain’s seat. “Why would she do it on purpose?”

“Does she even like birds?”

My mother looked over at me and her eyes became heavy. Something about her stare weighed on me, so I did my best to stand firm and carry it. She reached out and ran her fingers through my hair.

“It is hereditary,” my mother said.

“That doesn’t mean she has it.” My father’s voice seemed to follow the rhythm of the calculator’s taps and clicks. The blue screen of his computer reflected on his

glasses. Despite my mother's world falling apart, everything about my father remained in order.

"My aunt died asking for relatives who'd passed away years prior. Before my grandfather's last heart attack, he went around the house smashing picture frames and toppling furniture because he didn't know where he was."

"Buy her another bird."

My father had the final word.

My mother led me out of his office and as we walked into the living room she began to cry. When I asked her if something was wrong with Nana, she told me "We can't find a bird she actually likes."

I sensed in my mother a need to protect me from something, and I understood the only way she could do that was by not telling me the truth. As a five year old, I began to fear truth.



At the pet store again, my mother sought an attendant while Nana and I walked to the glass cage full of parakeets. Feather bolts of sapphire and lime dashed in every direction. Colorful ribbons blurred with soft palpitations of air as the birds flapped their wings. Nana leaned on my shoulder and lowered her head so it was even with mine. The tip of her nose touched the glass. In that instant the parakeets became connected by some invisible thread. They swarmed to the opposite side of the cage. There they froze, motionless. Their fragile heads stared straight at us and their backs pressed against the far glass wall. Nestled together, they appeared to transform into one giant parakeet, too big for Nana's wire cage. Their beady black eyes didn't move from us. Never in my life have I seen birds so still, so watchful, so aware.

My mother arrived with the attendant, a young man with a beard and a concerned look. "She just needs a replacement is all," my mother was telling the attendant.

"Replacement?" The attendant's eyebrows pinched the bridge of his nose and he chewed his bottom lip.

The attendant asked which one we wanted. My mother

told Nana to pick.

"This is your third parakeet, right?" the man asked. His worrisome expression bled into his voice, which was as shaky as the parakeets.

"No," Nana said. "I'll only have this one." She pointed to a gem-shaded parakeet with black spots on his belly.

The attendant stared at Nana, then at my mother. "I picked out the other parakeets for you." He said it as if he felt he needed to remind them. "You said they are gone?"

"They were gifts for other family members," my mother lied. He retrieved the parakeet Nana wanted and placed him carefully in his travel box.

After he sealed the parakeet in the box, the attendant looked through the air holes with worried eyes. His shoulders sunk as he handed the box to my mother. "You know parakeets are very toxic?"

"Who would eat Pepe?" Nana shouted. She stomped her platform shoe against the floor.

My mother nudged Nana toward the exit. "Thank you for the advice," she said to the attendant and paid. With one hand carrying the box and the other hand holding Nana's arm, my mother hurried out of the store. If I didn't follow, I would have been left behind.

We took Pepe III to his wire cage. He lived six weeks, and then "drowned."

Before that happened, though, there was a day when my mother had to attend a conference with my father and left me at Nana's apartment. It was the first time I'd been left alone with Nana. I spent the first hour sitting on the couch, staring out the window at the traffic-congested street. The heat from all those cars made the world blurry, like they were a big puddle of gasoline. I could see the humidity.

Nana asked if I wanted to hold Pepe III. Of the three Pepes, this one was the calmest, the most subordinate. He never pecked, never flapped his wings in an attempt to escape. Perhaps he had already accepted his fate.

While holding Pepe III, feeling his soft body made of toothpick bones and silk feathers, I said to Nana, "Please

don't hurt him."

Nana gasped. She took up almost half of the couch. I feared I'd angered her. She could have easily drowned me. She held her hand to her chest and her brows went straight up past the curls of silver and black hair that hung down to her eyes. "Mí Dios. I do not hurt my Pepes."

The hyper but brittle patter of Pepe III's heart pounded into my thumb. I felt a pulsing connection between the two of us. I felt responsible for his life.

"What happened to the other Pepes?"

"Has your mother taught you Spanish yet?"

"No."

"It will only make sense to you in Spanish, but I will try to tell you in English." She went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. Alone with Pepe III, I opened my hands so that Pepe III could stand on my open palms, unrestricted by the chains of my fingers. If he wanted, he could have flown away. The sliding door leading to Nana's unscreened porch was open. The warm spring breeze teased the air of the apartment, beckoned the bird to soar. Instead, he balanced himself and stood there, facing me, obedient. Too obedient.

Nana returned with two glasses of orange juice, which she always fresh squeezed each morning. She placed my glass on the wicker coffee-table and sipped the juice from hers. Pulp stuck to her lips.

"Before I left Cuba, I learned magic. The first trick I learned was the story of Yahubaba. Before Spaniards came to the island, there was a man who lived all by himself in a cave. His family had been taken by a hurricane, so he became very lonely and never left the cave. But inside the cave he could hear the voices of children coming from outside. He loved those voices, so one day he stepped outside and the sun was so bright it transformed him into a nightingale. He had a long, beautiful tail that was purple on the top and a deep ocean blue on the bottom. His body was the color of dusk reflected in the sea. And he discovered that his voice had become the sound of all the children singing and playing. He spent the rest of his life flying above Cuba,

singing the songs of youth and joy. That is what happened to the other Pepes. They are now nightingales soaring above Miami. I leave the back door and windows open so we can hear them."

"Is that a real story?" I asked.

"It's what my memory says."

"You didn't make that up?"

Nana laughed so hard her teeth rattled and the couch shook. Her bracelets chimed against each other when she clapped her hands. "One day," she said, "you will tell your grandkids this story, and in that moment your memory will create a new story."

"Isn't that lying?"

Nana smiled and combed my hair with her fingers. I felt as fragile as the parakeet the instant she touched me.

"It is magic," Nana said, her fingers drawing circles on my scalp, leaving trails of stardust in my imagination. "Now drink your orange juice. The longer it sits, the more of its nutrients vanish."

"Why didn't you just have Mom buy you a nightingale?"

"I told you. The story only makes sense in Spanish."

"Can I watch you transform Pepe III into a nightingale?"

"Not yet," Nana said. "You're too young. But I can eventually teach you how to transform yourself into a nightingale, like Yahubaba. You'll have a long purple tail, too, and indigo wings that can fly you anywhere you want to go. And your voice. You'll be able to sing all the dreams that children have."

Nana took Pepe III from my hand and held him close to her face. She made kissing noises with puckered lips. While staring at her parakeet, she said to me, "You have to be careful, though. The wind will carry away un flaquito like you. You'll vanish."

I sipped a mouthful of orange juice. Nana noticed me staring at her and rolled her eyes.

"Look at you," she said. "You're skin and bones."

My tongue drowned and all I could do was look at Pepe III, trying to imagine him as a much more majestic bird, eagle-sized, capable of withstanding the wind.