

PREFACE

Anita's Revolution is a work of historical fiction inspired by the success of the Cuban Literacy Campaign which took place in 1961. The book is about how Cuba began educating its masses of illiterate people, people long ignored by successive governments and society. It's about how the social classes of Cuba, so long separated, were united. It's about how illiterate people were introduced to the world of words thereby changing each person's future and the country's future. A dear friend who participated in the campaign provided the basis for much that transpires in the story. Some characters who people the pages of *Anita's Revolution* share qualities with some real-life persons. All other people within its pages and some parts of the plot are imaginary.

I lived and worked in Cuba almost five years during the mid-sixties, a few years after Cuba's National Literacy Campaign had accomplished its initial goal of basic literacy. Everywhere I went, I saw classes taking place: in the lobbies of hotels, in workplace cafeterias, in apartment building vestibules, even outside in parks. Adults who had achieved basic literacy in 1961 were studying throughout the years I was there to achieve elementary school levels. Public education in Cuba, including acquiring university degrees, was then and has remained a priority and is completely free.

Cuba struggles with many problems, but illiteracy is not one of them. 2011 was the 50th anniversary year of having reduced illiteracy nation-wide from 25% of the population to 3.9%. Cuba never slipped back. Today as I write this, organizations such as UNESCO and The World Bank state that Cuba enjoys a literacy rate of almost 100%. It all started with the decision in 1961 to make Cuba "a territory free from illiteracy". How it was done is an amazing story, one that most people I encountered over the years knew nothing about. This book then, not all fact but not all fiction either, celebrates the campaign, the people and the spirit that ended almost five centuries of ignorance when, on December 22, 1961, Cuba raised a flag declaring itself "A territory free from illiteracy."



A BRIEF HISTORY OF CUBA

Before the conquest by Spain

The Siboney people, aboriginal hunter/gatherers, were the first inhabitants of the island we call Cuba. They were followed by the fierce Taino, who settled most of the Caribbean islands. When Christopher Columbus reached Cuba on October 27, 1492, it is estimated that there were a half-million indigenous people living in small villages farming yucca, yams, peanuts, avocados and tobacco.

The time of occupation

The Spanish occupation began in 1514 when Diego Velasquez landed near Guantánamo Bay with 300 men. Smallpox, brutal treatment and malnutrition quickly decimated the native people. Thousands committed suicide rather than submit to the Spaniards. The entire indigenous population was wiped out by 1542.

Slavery, plunder and sugar from sugar cane

The first Africans were brought as slaves to work the mines and plantations of Cuba in 1522. Sugar cane, which eventually became a huge export crop, was first planted in 1512, but it was tobacco, a plant native to the island that became the first important commercial crop. The sugar industry exploded into importance in 1791 when French planters fled a slave revolt in Haiti and settled in Cuba. Sugar cane blanketed the island and 700,000 Africans were bought to Cuba over the next 40 years. Eventually, Africans outnumbered whites. Cuba was the world's largest sugar producer, and the newly-independent United States was its biggest market.

Wars of Independence

Criollos—persons born in Cuba of Spanish descent—were becoming wealthier and dissatisfied with Spanish rule. The US twice tried to purchase Cuba from Spain, in 1848 and 1854, but the colonial power

refused to sell. Pressure for self-rule began to build and erupted in a war of independence in 1888. The independence movement was exhausted by great expenditures and loss of life, forcing the leadership to sign a peace treaty. Spanish landowners were also bankrupted by the war. US investors took advantage, snapping up plantations being sold cheaply. By the late 1890s, 70 per cent of land in Cuba was in US hands, and 90 per cent of the country's sugar went to the US.

The second uprising against Spain began in 1895. Due to an incident arising between the Spanish colonial government and the US in February of 1898, the United States declared war against Spain. A few months later, in July, the Spanish surrendered and Americans occupied Cuba.

In 1902, the island finally gained its independence after being forced to accept a made-in-USA constitution. A clause, the Platt Amendment, gave the US the right to intervene in Cuban internal affairs whenever it was deemed necessary to protect American interests. It also allowed for a US naval base at Guantánamo Bay which remains to this day.

Dictators and gangsters

The next five decades were dominated by corruption and increasing American control of the economy. Tourism boomed along with gambling and prostitution as mobsters from Miami, Florida and New York moved into Havana. Poverty and unemployment increased. The countryside and its agricultural working people were virtually ignored. In 1933, a young mulatto army sergeant, Fulgencio Batista, seized power and ran the country until ousted in 1944. Batista staged another successful coup in 1953. Elections were cancelled, and for the next six years Batista and his cronies lined their pockets by opening the arms of the government to organized crime. Order was maintained by the army and secret police. Hundreds of government opponents were tortured and murdered.

The revolution triumphs

In December 1956, a young Fidel Castro and 82 cohorts sailed from Mexico in a small yacht called *Granma*. The Cuban revolution had begun. Of the 81 original men, only 12 survived the landing in Cuba. Betrayed by a guide, the rest were ambushed and killed by the army. The survivors established themselves in the Sierra Maestra mountains

in the eastern part of the island, and slowly gained support among the rural *campesinos*, the peasants. Underground resistance grew in the cities. Protests were staged and new recruits joined Castro's guerrilla fighters. As popular support for the guerrillas spread throughout the island, Batista's troops became demoralized. When the army collapsed, the dictator Batista fled to the Dominican Republic on New Year's Day 1959, reputedly carrying \$40 million.

Fidel Castro arrived in Havana on January 8, 1959. Now 33, Castro was named prime minister, and on January 25th over a million Cubans filled the streets to hear Fidel Castro define the goals of the Revolutionary government. The new government immediately nationalized all landholdings over 400 hectares. Racial discrimination was abolished, rents slashed and wages increased. Some land was redistributed to landless peasants and the rest was turned into state farms where agricultural workers were given secure, paid employment for the first time. Fidel Castro and his close colleague in arms and friendship, Ernesto "Che" Guevara set out to build a utopian state that included a complete shake-up of the economy, a ban on all forms of private enterprise, and the intention to create an enlightened "new man" and "new woman" to fulfill the revolution's goals.



Thousands of volunteers were needed to teach one million illiterate Cubans to read and write. It is at this juncture of Cuba's history in 1961 that the story *Anita's Revolution* begins.

THE WARNING

Until now, Anita thought that murder happened only in the adult world. The newspaper article beneath the stark black headline—**Volunteer literacy teacher captured and murdered by rebels**—said counter-revolutionaries had grabbed literacy teacher Conrado Benitez on a mountain path when he was on his way to teach and had hung him from a tree. Anita's stomach lurched imagining Conrado dangling from the end of a rope. *Why had they done that? What had that boy ever done to them?* Her father was a news editor at Cuba's largest daily newspaper, El Diario, The Daily News, so she knew about counter-revolutionaries, how they wanted to sabotage the work of Cuba's new revolutionary government. *But this!*

She moved the newspaper spread out on her desk aside and tried to focus on her algebra homework. Heaving a great sigh, she raised her eyes from her homework and looked again at the picture of the murdered boy in the newspaper, but the room was now too dim to see it clearly. How long had she been sitting at her desk, staring at the page? Long enough for day to become almost night. When the sun sank into the sea off Cuba's shore, it was as though it dragged the darkness right behind it. The floor in front of the windows was striped with bars of last light seeping in between the *persianas*, the polished louver boards of the shuttered windows. Anita got up to turn on the light, but instead, opened the shutters and leaned out the window into the cooling air of the Cuban twilight.

Lights were turning on throughout the wide streets of Miramar, the suburb where she lived. Just a few blocks from her house lay the sea, the Caribbean. Only the western horizon flared orange and magenta in a sky the colour of ink. The sea itself was already swallowed by darkness. Anita looked eastward, where the great city of Havana, sparkling with a million pricks of golden light, stretched as far as the eye could see.

Anita closed the shutters, screwed the *persianas* closed and turned on the light. Blinking, Anita surveyed her bedroom. A little messy, but nothing like her brother's. She glanced at her reflection in the full-length mirror of the closet armoire. Tall for a Cuban girl, she took after

her father—slim and wiry. Her shoulder-length chestnut-coloured hair and full arched eyebrows were her best features. People told her she was pretty, but she knew she'd never be beautiful like her mother, a petite, buxom, always elegant woman who spent a lot of time taking care of her looks. Anita's eyes rested on the armchair she loved to curl up in and read. The book she had just started, *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, lay balanced on one armrest. The armchair and the book beckoned her, but she returned to her desk, to her algebra homework.

Still, her eyes kept sliding over to the newspaper. Anita stared at the picture of the murdered youth again. A couple of days ago hardly anyone in Cuba knew anything about Conrado Benitez. Now, his face was everywhere, in all the papers, on TV, on posters—Conrado staring out of the grainy black and white I.D. photo. He had been at her school assembly a few months ago speaking about the importance of literacy; promoting Cuba's pilot literacy program run by volunteer teachers. The presence of the young black man in her all-white school was quite a novelty. Inspired by his talk, Anita had hurried up front to talk to him before he left.

"I'd like to teach literacy someday," she told him. He had been so serious during his talk that she was relieved when he smiled.

"That's great!" he said. "Cuba needs people like you."

They had talked a while more before she had to return to her classes. The stark black and white photo in the paper showed an unsmiling young black man who looked older than his eighteen years and revealed nothing of Conrado's personality. Anita shut her eyes to recall his big-toothed smile, his contagious enthusiasm for teaching. Now he was dead. She opened a desk drawer and fished out scissors. She cut Conrado's picture out of the newspaper and taped it to the wall above the desk, right at eye level. Giving up on homework, Anita flipped her algebra book closed and ran downstairs, heading for the patio.

"Where are you going, Anita?" mamá called out as Anita passed by the living room. "Dinner will be ready soon."

"I need some fresh air," said Anita.

Her mother and father put down their evening cocktails, got up and came toward her.

"You're feeling upset about the murder, aren't you?" said mamá, placing her hands on Anita's shoulders.

"Yes. Aren't you? Isn't everybody? He was so young, and doing such good things." Anita fought back tears.

“Yes, he was,” mamá said, pulling Anita close to embrace her.

“He was a real child of the Revolution,” her father said thoughtfully.

She and her father had had a few good conversations recently about the revolution. Only last week her father had tried to explain what made counter-revolutionaries tick; why they were constantly doing awful things like blowing places up and sabotaging machinery.

“What alarms these people most,” her father had explained, “is the new government’s program of nationalization—that means the government taking control of banks, large businesses, land, mines, the fishing industry . . . of many, many things. You know that the newspaper I work for was nationalized. That made the owner angry, very angry. He could have stayed on, continued as the boss, but he didn’t want to be an employee of the government, so he left the country.”

“Why does Fidel want to nationalize everything, papá?”

“He says the wealth of the country belongs to all the people, not to just the few who use wealth and power to benefit themselves. Fidel says that having the resources of the country in government hands will make things fairer for everyone.”

“What do you think papá? Is Fidel doing a good thing?”

“It could be good, Anita. Cuba is a poor country, and for many years there has been terrible corruption. Government has ignored Cuba’s poor. So we need change. But these kinds of changes have made a lot of people furious—especially the very wealthy people who were used to sharing the loot gained from government corruption. Some people are so furious they are prepared to do anything to get things back to the way they were before the revolution.”

“Furious enough to kill people?”

“Yes, Anita. Furious enough kill people.”

Hearing those words then, Anita had shuddered, and she shuddered again now. They had killed. Anita wanted to talk more about all this with her father, just not now. She felt she would suffocate if she didn’t get outside. Pulling away from her mother’s embrace, Anita bent to kiss her rouged cheek, then headed through the dining room on her way to the patio.

“*Hola chica. ¿Cómo está Anita la cubanita?*”

Even though she was a head taller than Tomasa, the family maid, Tomasa still used this affectionate nickname she had given Anita when she was a toddler—*Anita la cubanita*, Anita the little Cuban girl. Anita

didn't mind. She adored Tomasa. She flashed Tomasa a smile, slid open the patio door, grateful for the cool air that enveloped her.

Anita wandered around the patio, kicking a seed pod from the *al-mendro* tree across the flagstones, thinking about what her father had said about Conrado being a child of the Revolution. *La revolución!* That was practically the only thing everyone ever talked about since the Revolutionary government took control just two years ago. Before that, there had been years of violence and struggle in Cuba. Until recently though, Anita hadn't been paying a lot of attention to the ups and downs of *la revolución*.

Even at school *la revolución* was like a school subject. Photographs of Fidel Castro and all the other revolutionaries who had fought along with him to get rid of Cuba's dictator hung in the halls and in every classroom of her school. They studied *la revolución*: how it was fought; how it was won. School field trips to observe new government programs first hand were frequent. The agricultural and fishing cooperatives her class had visited had been kind of dull, but the brand new daycare centre they went to see was interesting. Hundreds of day care centres were being set up because *la revolución* was urging women to enter the workforce or get more education.

Last week her class had gone by bus to see a newly constructed junior elementary school in a small village outside Havana. The students—mostly mulatto or black—had never been to school before. Some of the kids were barefoot. She had tried not to stare at their dirty feet. Anita remembered feeling strange, feeling . . . too white. Afterwards, her teacher had explained many parents were simply too poor to buy shoes, but that she knew the government was importing shoes so that no child would have to go to school barefoot. *How could anyone find fault with that?*

Anita leaned against the mango tree, thinking about all the people deserting Cuba because they thought Prime Minister Fidel Castro was ruining the country. Six months ago her uncle Eduardo, her father's brother, had left for the United States with his whole family. The faces of her cousins rose in her mind and she wondered if she'd ever see them again. Neighbours had left, and lots of other people her family knew. She didn't want to ever leave Cuba—especially not leave her friends—but knew she would have to leave if her parents decided to. Anita thought back to the evening, not long ago, when she and her parents were out strolling in Banyan Tree Park after dinner. She had

suddenly decided to test her parents about this, so skipped in front of them and started walking backwards.

“You wouldn’t ever leave Cuba for good, would you?” she asked.

Her mother remained silent, but after a moment her father began speaking. “You know, Anita, several months ago your mother and I thought we should leave Cuba. I was feeling that adjusting to all the changes going on since Fidel took over was too overwhelming. Everything felt so unstable. I speak decent English . . . I’m an experienced newspaper editor, so I was thinking I could earn a good living in the United States. My brother leaving suddenly with his family really shocked me—especially since he had just received a promotion at the hospital. And I suspected that many of my colleagues at the newspaper were planning to leave. In fact, since that time, many have left.”

“But here we are, so that means you and mamá have changed your minds, right? What made you change your minds?” She glanced at her mother who still hadn’t said a word.

“We have changed our minds . . . at least, for the time being. Do you remember the reception at the newspaper we all attended a few months ago?”

Anita nodded. How could she forget? Fidel Castro was to be the guest-of-honour. People arriving were invited to sign a guest book, and after signing she had turned to hand the pen to the person waiting behind her to sign . . . and there he was! Fidel had taken the pen from her hand, looked at her signature and said, “Thanks, Anita.” She had bragged about this for days afterwards.

“That evening,” papá continued, “Fidel described his vision for change in Cuba. If you remember, Anita, he spoke at length about Cuba’s poor who have been ignored by government and society for centuries. I’ve always felt rather self conscious about being part of the haves when there are so many have-nots. So . . . well, I was really impressed. He’s very convincing, you know. I decided then that we should stay; that we should give the new government a chance and help make Cuba a better place.”

“Great!” said Anita. “Because I want to help make Cuba a better place too. I never want to leave. What about you, mamá?”

“We’ll see,” was all her mother said.

Anita wasn’t surprised. Her mother was crazy about everything American. She always dressed in the latest American fashions, she was a fan of American movies and movie stars—she never missed a film

starring Marilyn Monroe. She was always looking for opportunities to speak English, embarrassing Anita by striking up conversations with visiting English-speaking tourists. Family and friends were always teasing her about loving the United States so much. “The stork delivered you to the wrong country, Mirta,” they would say.

Since that conversation in the park, Anita had relaxed despite hearing people talk about the waves of people leaving or wanting to leave. *But now, there was this awful murder! Would this kind of violence by counter-revolutionaries affect how mamá and papá felt about staying in Cuba? Especially mamá?*

Anita slumped onto a patio chair, shivering as her back pressed against the cold metal. She could hear the clatter of pots and pans as neighbours prepared dinner. Voices and music from the radios of neighbouring houses drifted out through open shutters mixing with the chirping of crickets sounding from the shadows. Underneath all these sounds floating on the evening air, Anita could hear the rumbling of the ocean at the bottom of her street as waves surged onto the rocks and retreated.

The radio was on in her house too. Tomasa always kept the radio tuned to stations that played popular Cuban music. She could see Tomasa moving between the kitchen and the dining room, not dancing exactly, but sort of shuffling in tempo to the rhythm as she set the table. She wondered if her parents were talking about Conrado. Being murdered had turned the young literacy teacher into a hero. Already people were calling him a martyr. She had looked the word martyr up in the dictionary:

Martyr: one who suffers keenly, especially for a cause or principle.

“Anita . . . dinnertime,” mamá called from the doorway.

Everyone was already seated around the glass dining room table when Anita entered, blinking in the light. Mamá was serving out a traditional Cuban dish of black beans and rice. Her long, crimson fingernails flashed as she spooned out the food and handed the heaped plates around. As usual, her brother Mario was already wolfing down his dinner.

“Anita, even though it’s only January, it’s time to start thinking about your *quinceañera*, your coming-of-age party,” said mamá. “We should get started on the invitation list and look at patterns for a dress. I’ll call the Country Club tomorrow to reserve the dining room.”

“Almost fifteen, and never been kissed!” said Mario, his mouth full of rice. Anita kicked him under the table.

“I’m not sure I want to have a *quinceañera*, mamá.” The words seem to

have spilled out of Anita's mouth and she felt her face burning. Everyone stopped eating, and looked at her as if she'd turned into an iguana.

"What an idea, Anita! All Cuban girls have a *quinceañera* party when they turn fifteen," said her mother. "It's an important Cuban tradition."

Anita twisted and untwisted her napkin.

"Why don't you want to celebrate your *quinceañera*?" papá asked. "I thought you were looking forward to it." He spoke in a quiet voice, continuing to eat, but her father's calm voice and reasonable manner often unnerved Anita more than her mother's temperamental ways.

I was looking forward to my quinceañera, Anita admitted to herself. She began pushing her rice and beans into a hill in the middle of her plate, then began dividing the hill into smaller mounds. *What did make me say that?* As soon as she asked herself that question, thoughts came flooding randomly into her head.

"Cousins and some kids from school I would have invited have taken the ninety," she said.

"Taken the ninety?" said mamá. "What's that mean?"

"What planet are you living on, Mirta?" said papá, laughing. "It's the ninety miles between Cuba and the tip of Florida. 'Taking the ninety' is the slang expression used when talking about people who have left Cuba for the USA."

But mamá was too concentrated on Anita at the moment to be amused.

"It's true that some of your friends have gone," she said, "but many others are here, including Marci, your best friend. You are planning to go to Marci's *quinceañera* in July, I imagine, so there must be something other than friends 'taking the ninety' behind this."

Anita pushed her food around on the plate, but didn't eat. *Only the other day Marci and I spent hours talking about details of our parties, looking forward to being debutantes for a day. So what has changed?* As she sat thinking, it seemed to her that her feelings had something to do with the death of Conrado Benitez, something to do with *la revolución*, but she didn't know what exactly.

Everywhere—at school, in stores, on the street, on the bus—there were heated discussions about *la revolución*. People were either enthusiastically for it: "Fidel and his people will end corruption and give Cuba back to ordinary Cubans," or they were violently against it: "That man is destroying the Cuban way of life. He has no right to change everything without our consent!" People either loved Fidel Castro, or

hated him—both with a passion. And now, some people who were against *la revolución* had killed someone who was for it. She felt her mother's eyes burrowing into her.

"Anita, we're waiting for an answer." Papá's voice had sharpened a little, and he had removed his glasses, which always made Anita nervous.

"I know papá. I'm thinking."

"It seems to me you are stalling more than thinking," mamá said.

"Mamá, if I could explain, I would . . . honest," Anita replied, rolling her eyes. "It's just . . . it's just that the idea of a fancy *fiesta* seems wrong somehow. It seems kind of . . . kind of . . . frivolous."

"Frivolous! Did you hear that, Daniel? The child is telling us we're *frivolous*."

"Mamá, papá, I didn't mean to be disrespectful, but why aren't we talking about why Conrado was murdered instead of my *quinceañera*?"

Her parents just stared at her. Mario stopped eating, his fork suspended in mid air.

"I don't know why I blurted that out about the *quinceañera*," Anita continued. "It just doesn't seem right to be talking about having fancy parties at the Country Club when Conrado's parents are probably crying their eyes out this very minute. And I bet they are poor people who have never even seen the inside of a country club!"

"You're talking nonsense, Anita! One thing has nothing to do with the other," her mother said.

But the rest of the meal was eaten in silence.



At school the next day, Anita and some of the students in her class asked the teacher if they could talk about why counter-revolutionaries had murdered Conrado Benitez. Why him? they wanted to know. He wasn't a celebrity or some important person.

"I could tell you what I think," responded the teacher, "but I want you to try to come up with some possible answers to that question yourselves."

The teacher drew a circle on the blackboard, and inside the circle wrote the words: Why did the counter-revolutionaries kill Conrado Benitez? Then she drew lines like the rays of the sun. "Each one of these rays is a possible answer to the question. Who will start?"

The answers came faster than the teacher could write.

“Because he was black and they were racists. People who hate the idea of a black person teaching their kids.”

“Sabotage! They were showing their hatred of any program started by the Revolutionary government.”

“If all Cuba’s poor people become literate, they will have more choices about where to work. They could ask for higher wages.”

“It was a dramatic warning to stop the pilot literacy programs—to scare people so they wouldn’t volunteer as literacy teachers.”

The teacher turned to the class with an approving smile. “All of your answers are probably correct. His murder was a violent warning that if literacy programs continue, more literacy teachers will be killed,” she declared, her voice trembling with emotion. “We will watch with interest to see how the government responds to this warning.” The classroom conversation continued in earnest until the bell signalling the end of class rang. As Anita walked to the next class with her friends, they continued talking about the murder.

“I had nightmares about it,” said Marci, Anita’s best friend.

“¡*Caramba!*” exclaimed Anita. “Murdering someone just because you don’t agree with what they’re doing . . . Especially a teenager! ¡*Qué horror!* How horrible!”

“I bet there won’t be many people volunteering to be literacy teachers now,” said Marci.

“That’s just what the counter-revolutionaries want to happen,” said Anita. “They want to ruin everything that is changing things. If people let that happen, then the counter-revolutionaries win.”

“Since when did you become such a red-hot little revolutionary, Anita?” said one of the girls.

“And why shouldn’t she be?” said another, placing an arm around Anita’s shoulders and giving her an affectionate squeeze. “Aren’t we all supposed to be super revolutionary these days?”

Anita noticed that Marci said nothing.



Anita had finished her homework and was just coming downstairs to watch TV when she heard her mother call out to her father, “Daniel, come see this! Hurry!”

A program about the literacy campaign usually came on every night

at this time, but an announcer was saying the usual program was being replaced by a special broadcast. Anita was disappointed. She loved watching the nightly literacy program. She was fascinated seeing how *campesinos* lived in the countryside and remote mountain regions, seeing their huts called *bohíos*, the tiny country villages, the sugar cane and coffee plantations, *campesinos* on horseback, the slow-moving zebu oxen pulling carts, their flabby dewlaps hanging down from their chests swaying heavily as they plodded along dusty roads.

Fidel's unmistakable voice snapped her attention to the TV.

"Last September, I announced at the United Nations that by the end of 1961, Cuba will be a *territorio libre de analfabetismo*, a territory free from illiteracy. The Revolutionary government asked the Ministry of Education to develop a program that would make that pledge a reality. To achieve that, the Ministry of Education is enlarging the current pilot literacy program to make it a countrywide campaign. Thousands of young volunteer teachers are needed to join special student brigades we will call Brigadas Conrado Benitez in honour of the young hero. Members of these volunteer brigades will be called *brigadistas*."

Anita felt her whole body start to buzz.

"When the current school term ends," continued the Prime Minister, "volunteers will be given a special teacher training course. Some *brigadistas* will go to live in the *campesino* homes of those they will be teaching to read and write. Others will be assigned to teach in towns and villages, and will be billeted in homes and community centres. Supervision and services for the health and safety of student volunteers will be provided by teams of responsible adults."

The buzzing in her brain increased with each word Fidel said. *Could I become a brigadista?*

At the end of the broadcast, Fidel said, "Young people of Cuba, make history by helping your country eliminate illiteracy. Volunteer now! Become a *brigadista*!" *Would her parents let her volunteer?* Even as she was thinking these words, her question was answered.

"Is Fidel crazy?" her mother said, raising her voice over the TV. "Who would let their kids volunteer since that poor boy was killed? And what parents in their right minds would consent to let their sons and daughters go and live for months with strangers in *bohío* huts with dirt floors, thatch roofs over their heads, no electricity, no running water, chickens and dirty barefoot kids running around. And where

would they sleep—in hammocks? Literacy may be important, but sending kids away from their homes for months in these troubling times? Fidel must be dreaming!”

“Calm yourself, Mirta. I doubt that many parents will let their kids go,” her father said, returning to his armchair and book.

Thoughts of being a *brigadista* zipped around in Anita’s head all evening. Sitting up in bed, she rested a blank diary she had received for Christmas against her knees and wrote her first words.

January 7, 1961

Dear Diary,

Volunteering for the literacy campaign is a chance to do something adventurous, something important, like Conrado did. Of course there is the danger of being kidnapped by counter-revolutionaries! My friends tease me about being super revolutionary, but I don’t want to do anything stupid. And what about my quinceañera—the whole coming-of-age thing? Mamá and papá would be really disappointed if we didn’t have a celebration. But what exactly is one coming-of-age for? The day after the quinceañera, it’s life as usual, whereas helping make Cuba a *territorio libre de analfabetismo*—now that’s really important! I’ll have to think this over carefully. I don’t think I should mention anything about volunteering yet because obviously mamá and papá think it’s too dangerous. They don’t want their darling little girl having to sleep in a hammock in a *bohío*. Oh Diary, just think—as a volunteer I might get assigned to teach in the Sierra Maestra Mountains where *la revolución* started. Or maybe go to Guamá where there are crocodiles and giant sea turtles to see. Just having an adventure away from home would be GREAT! I have decided that my diary-signing name will be the more grown-up form of the nickname Tomasa gave me when I was a little girl.

So long for now,
Anita la cubana

Anita wandered around her room looking for a good place to hide the diary. *I don’t trust my mother . . . Papá never comes into my room . . . I don’t have to worry about Tomasa because I don’t think she can read anyway. And Mario? He’d never be that sneaky. At least, I don’t think he would.*

She tucked the diary behind the tallest books on her bookshelf.