

7. DECEMBER 2, 1956

The Arrival of the *Granma*

THE *GRANMA* WAS APPROACHING, slowly. The boat had lost nearly a day plowing through rough seas off the Yucatán peninsula, and only passed the western tip of Cuba, at the remote end of Pinar del Rio Province, at 5:00 p.m. on Thursday, November 29. It then made even slower headway as it traveled east the length of Cuba, following a safe route, far to the south of the island and well out of view of the Coast Guard. Friday, while they were still on this route, their radio had picked up news of the Santiago uprising, but there was no way to increase speed and make up for lost time. Finally, they had seen their beacon, the light at Cabo Cruz, on the night of the 1st, and set course for it. As they approached their destination, at about three in the morning of Sunday, December 2, they hit rough seas and lost a man—a guerrilla named Roberto Roque fell overboard. The sky was dark, the water choppy, but with very little hope of finding Roque, Fidel decided they must try. Reversing then moving forward, and repeating this in a zigzag, they found Roque, but used up time and fuel and left their pilot, Onelio Pino, disoriented.

They approached Cabo Cruz with only enough fuel to last a few minutes, and as they started up the coast toward Las Coloradas, Pino told Fidel they would have to land. Fidel asked him: “Is this Cuba? Are you absolutely sure it isn’t Jamaica or a key?” The

pilot assured him that it was Cuba. They were very near their goal, having reached Los Cayuelos, less than three miles south of the port of Las Coloradas. This put them, as Celia would later dryly comment, at about the worst place imaginable on the entire Cuban coast.

It was around 5:00 a.m. when the *Granma* hit a sandbar and simply came to a stop.

THIS WAS PROBABLY THE SAME HOUR that Celia, Beto, and Cesar got into the jeep and drove away from Crescencio's house, heading for Manzanillo. She had stayed on at her Ojo de Agua headquarters knowing that Lalo would have called off the landing operation. She had still expected someone to show up on the doorstep Saturday with Fidel. It had been a long 24 hours: without a telephone or radio, no couriers, but knowing full well that Frank's uprising would have caused a wave of arrests in Santiago and across the nation. But she had risen on this morning resigned to the fact that she had closed down her end of the operation; now she was headed to Manzanillo to meet Lalo, learn the damage her clandestine operators—her militants—had suffered, and begin her next job of figuring out a way to protect them.

THE ORDER ISSUED TO BRING IN CELIA SÁNCHEZ dead or alive caused one officer (whose name I have never discovered) to feel such horror and conflict that, on receiving it, he tipped off the priest in Media Luna. The priest contacted Celia's brother, Manuel Enrique, who lived in Media Luna with his wife. Manuel Enrique had no idea what Celia was up to, but he got in his car and began driving from town to town, anxiously looking for her on this Sunday morning as she, Beto, and Cesar were retracing their route north.

When he arrived in Media Luna with Celia and Beto, Cesar Suarez left the jeep. Acting for Celia, he would make contact with the town's directors and get a report, find out what had happened and who was in danger. Beto and Celia continued on to Campechuela, where they were going to do the same thing: learn whether there had been arrests, ask what they'd heard about Frank's uprising, and whether they could shed any light on Fidel's landing.

Celia and Beto parted in Campechuela, but not before arranging to meet later that day. Neither realized they were walking into danger; both were sure they would be continuing on to Manzanillo in time for Celia to make her meeting with Lalo Vásquez. They agreed to meet up in the afternoon at a small bridge located on the highway leading out of town.

Campechuela is a classic Cuban mill town: one- and two-story buildings cram a couple of noisy commercial streets of ground-floor shops—a company store, bodegas, bars, cafes, one or two tailors, hardware and feed supplies. Campechuela's two main business streets (one of them the route of the highway) now, as it did then, straddle railroad tracks that run from the mill at the edge of town to the port, where boats load sugar. Celia stepped down from the jeep in front of a taxi stand on one of those main streets. She was wearing the chocolate brown skirt she'd put on five days earlier. She left the jeep at a crowded drop-off point, the one most people used when they arrived or departed from town. Sunday was market day, and the whole town was teeming with people, and, almost immediately, she noticed her brother, Manuel Enrique, as he drove by looking for her. She was completely surprised to see him, but relieved that he looked past and seemed not to see her. She headed for a nearby bar.

Celia walked slowly and naturally to La Rosa. The building is still there, now an urban planning office with a plaque on the wall to commemorate December 2, 1956, the day heroine Celia Sánchez stepped inside to talk with the bartender. La Rosa stood on a corner, and its customers could enter from either street. Both doors were double panels of solid wood, swinging open from ground to ceiling. The barroom was not large, with only a few tables. The bartender, Enrique de la Rosa, was one of Celia's hand-picked militants. Campechuela's city historian showed me a snapshot of Enrique taken on that day: twenty years old, he wore a white T-shirt, sleeves rolled up over his biceps to enfold a pack of cigarettes, and straight-legged Levis with six or eight inches of cuff. His blond hair was cut very short, except for a wave held in place with Brylcreem. In lieu of a bar proper, he did business behind a waist-high, glass-fronted display case (with open boxes of cigars on shelves below). Bottles of beer, rum, and a few canned goods lined a shelf on the wall behind him.

With all doors open, the bar was flooded with morning light. Celia had been inside only a short time when a jeep and two SIM (Military Intelligence Service) cars pulled up: officers jumped out, entered the bar, and arrested her while soldiers closed the doors, sinking the room into near darkness.

Celia recognized one of the men. He worked for army intelligence; his name was Hatuey, which he had in common with a Taino chief famous for his valor, but this Hatuey was noted more for his violence, especially with union strikers. His trademark, beating his victims with the flat side of a machete blade, had earned him the title “Machete King.” Almost as quickly as they’d shut the place down, the soldiers reopened the doors, got back into their vehicles and drove off, leaving Hatuey and one other man behind to guard Celia. She knew him to be a member of Masferrer’s paramilitary group, the *Tigres*, now doing much of the army’s dirty work. Hatuey ordered her to sit down and not to move. He and the other man occupied an adjacent table.

She had come to the end of her life, she assumed, had been captured, defeated. She later recalled that her mind was frozen, dull, and her body felt leaden, although she claimed that fear wasn’t the source of it. She knew she’d be tortured—all of the revolutionaries were aware of what would happen to them if caught—and that she had to do everything in her power to resist for 24 hours, the time her comrades would need to go underground. She would be taken away for interrogation. This was a given. She understood and accepted this, at least until a momentary glimmer of resistance swept through her. It proved just enough to clear her mind, to enable her to analyze her situation. It was odd, she thought, that Hatuey wouldn’t look her in the eye; he didn’t seem to recognize or even acknowledge her, although she knew him personally.

Celia had known Hatuey since she was a child. He was one of her father’s patients. Why was he avoiding eye contact with her? He was the biggest braggart of them all, so why so quiet? And why were the three of them sitting in the open, on show, in complete view to people walking by on the street? Why were the doors open, and why had they reopened the bar after shutting it down? It hit her: she was being used as a decoy. The men were waiting to arrest anyone who might be coming to rendezvous with her. She willed her mind to function, to rise out of the stupor she

felt in every inch of her body, and ordered herself to think of a plan. It took her only a few minutes to decide what she had to do.

AT 5:30 A.M., IT WAS STILL PRETTY DARK. Those on the *Granma* could make out a coast that appeared to be forested. As they looked east into the sun, soon rising, the trees along the shore were backlit. They had to cover the distance between where they'd run aground, on the sandbar, and the shore, and realized it would be impossible to carry all their equipment under the circumstances. In addition, some were too weak, debilitated from four days of seasickness. They all began to fight their way through what turned out to be fairly deep water, over the heads of some of the soldiers. Raúl Castro's rear guard platoon was the last to leave the boat.

They had started to disembark when it was still dark, and when they got ashore, about an hour later, what had looked at first light like a line of trees on dry land turned out to be a mangrove swamp. There was no actual firm ground to stand on. This alarmed them—they were, fundamentally, an urban bunch, and no one was from the area. One guerrilla, Rene Ramos Latour, had worked in the nickel mines in Niquero as an accountant, but he was from Santiago. Celia had been right to wonder how these men were going to get off a boat anywhere in Oriente and be able to find their way; she would have been an asset had she been permitted to travel with them.

Getting through the mangroves was not easy. They had to step on the roots rising out of the water. Each man needed both hands free to hold onto the trunks as he climbed over the network of slippery, tangled roots. Their uniforms got caught on the branches and were torn. Since the men had to maneuver through the grove singly, or at best in pairs, platoons could not go ashore in an orderly or organized manner. The guerrillas ended up scattered all along the shore, dispersed, having made their way through the trees as best they could. This cost them yet another hour.

At about 7:00 a.m., one of the men with Fidel, Luis Crespo, climbed a tree and saw a house beyond the line of trees. A group of eight got to the house an hour later (about the same time Celia was sitting in the bar in Campechuela) and Fidel greeted the man who met them, Angel Pérez Rosabal, with his famously grandiose "Hello, I'm Fidel Castro. We are here to liberate Cuba." This

farmer was outside Celia's network and didn't recognize his name. On Miret's last trip to Mexico, Frank had sent word to Fidel to find Mongo Pérez in the lower reaches of the Sierra Maestra, but now Fidel needed to find the Sierra first.

AT THE TABLE IN THE BAR LA ROSA, Celia pulled a cigarette from her pocket. She asked her captors, in her soft voice, if they'd permit her to buy some matches. They agreed. She walked over to the bar—only a few paces—and got a box from Enrique. She returned to her chair, sat down, lit up, and smoked as naturally as she could. After putting out the cigarette, she said apologetically, possibly even smiling faintly, "Oh! I forgot. May I buy some Chiclets?" Again, they agreed.

The little boxes of gum were inside a small display case that stood on legs near one of the doors. She walked over to it, hesitated a moment in front of the case, then bolted outside. Both men came after her, firing their pistols.

The street was crowded, people shrieked, grabbed their children, shop owners rushed outside, saw the police, closed shutters, and some knowingly helped by dashing back and forth and causing confusion. She zigzagged through the streets, running from door to door, one street to another—"I ran like a rabbit"—until she recognized the sugar mill. In total dismay, because now she was on the edge of town and could go no farther, she dropped to the ground: "I came to an open lot, with sunlight, that was level and full of grass. I stayed right there and hid."

In Oriente Province people call such a place a *solar*, a piece of empty land that gets enough sunlight to produce ground cover. The grass was short, and the sugar mill, Dos Amigos, close enough that people were moving about in the area. She waited for the police to discover her, and when they didn't after an hour or so, she began to move just a few inches at a time, sliding, pressing flat against the ground, carefully, slowly, hoping that no one would see the grass move. It took hours. It was afternoon when she reached the edge of the lot, where she crawled into a spiny grove of trees—slightly akin to a cactus patch—and sought protection in a *marabu* grove.

Her hiding place at the base of this group of thorn trees was invisible only because the *marabu* is considered so detestable that

everybody avoids its extremely hard, spiky thorns, which reach out threateningly from the trunk, the branches, and even shoot up from the tree's exposed roots. The species (*Dichrostachys cinera*) was imported from Africa in the nineteenth century as a cheap way to fence in roving cattle. Celia covered her face with her arms and crawled over the roots as thorns cut through her hair and dug into her scalp. *Marabu* isn't especially thick, and she wasn't completely out of sight, but she knew she was safe. Nobody ever looked at these sinister thickets, and Celia, with her shrewd country woman's instinct, expected the police would not bother to check there either.

FIDEL AND HIS GROUP OF EIGHT MEN spent the rest of the morning eating pork and fried bananas prepared by Angel Pérez Rosabal's wife. And then they rested. But as they rested, a Coast Guard plane flew in from the northeast and Fidel began to worry whether the army had already sent troops to the area. His guerrillas were so completely dispersed, broken up into such small units, defenseless, that he was afraid of being attacked by land troops. He decided to hide. He marched his group to a small hill and was surprised to find a few other guerrillas hiding there. At 11:00 a.m., Angel showed them a road to follow, and Fidel's group began their march east toward the Sierra Maestra, the heart of which lay 50 kilometers in the distance. At noon, they came to a small ranch and spoke with two farmers, Pedro Luis Sánchez and Juan Herrera. Sánchez offered them well water—repeating this offer throughout the day to all the guerrillas who came by—and showed them to the best road to follow.

BY THE AFTERNOON Celia had gotten her bearings and realized that her *marabu* thicket was not all that far from the highway, but on the other hand, it was dangerously close to the back of the police station. It would only be safe to move after dark, but soon fed up with that idea she took a chance and crawled out of the grove, this time backwards, reversing her painful route in. Once out of the *marabu* she scrambled, still on hands and knees, along a path to the highway, where she lay in a ditch. If she heard a car coming she would raise her head. She concluded that the military was traveling to the coast; she even saw planes overhead, and took this as clear indication that Fidel had arrived.

AT ABOUT 3:00 P.M.—around the time Celia would have been lying in the ditch—Fidel and his small group came to a clearing and rested. So far they had seen only one reconnaissance plane, in the morning. Now two Coast Guard Catalinas flew over. One machine-gunned a house, which they feared belonged to Angel Pérez Rosabal and his wife, who'd been so kind to them. As it turned out, the house attacked belonged to a farmer who knew nothing about the guerrillas and had no idea why his little coconut grove was coming under attack. The guerrillas had seen enough; they had to get into an area with better cover, but to do that they had to get across scrubland with low vegetation without being spied by any planes overhead. They decided to attempt this after dark.

HATUEY, THE ARMY OFFICER who had arrested Celia, drove down to Pilón that afternoon to speak with Dr. Sánchez in person. Hatuey informed him of her arrest and escape. “But I can assure you, the second time she won’t escape,” he told the doctor. He explained that she had been spotted very early that morning, and the call had come in while he was at the army post in Manzanillo. He’d gone to arrest her but, as he tried to make clear to Celia’s father, he did not expect to find her so easily.

The hardened, brutal military policeman stood before the doctor, filled with remorse. His face was pockmarked, and one side was covered with a big scar; at times during his career he’d been evil incarnate, yet now he tried to apologize for what was happening. He claimed that he didn’t want to have any part of what was going to take place if they found her. He told Dr. Sánchez his reason for coming: he was grateful to the Sánchez family, referring to a time when Dr. Sánchez had cured his father of typhus. Hatuey implored: “Try to get her out of here because they are going to get her, and torture her. They have to make her talk. She knows a lot. They are going to make her talk.”

SOMETIME THAT AFTERNOON, General Pedro Rodríguez Avila, commander of army operations in Oriente Province, issued a statement: forty members of the 26th of July Movement had been annihilated, among them their chief, Fidel Castro. Their bodies had been collected, he said, but some of the bodies had been “literally pulverized” and were therefore unrecognizable. By this

time the *Granma* had been confiscated by the government with the harbor maps that Celia had given to Fidel still on it.

IN THE LATE AFTERNOON Celia heard a car approaching; she lifted her head from the ditch and, recognizing the driver, an automobile upholsterer named Grana, leaped out onto the road to stop him. She asked for a lift to Manzanillo. He looked at the scratches on her face, her clothes covered in dirt and grass stains, and asked, “Celia, how did you get like this?” She supplied him with a scarcely plausible explanation—that her car had broken down “somewhere nearby”—and appealed to his compassion: “Look at me. It’s been raining, look at the state I’m in. Just take me to Manzanillo.”

Once they were on the road, she said she had a friend “who’d gone to buy a car part” waiting for her on a bridge ahead. And in fact, serendipitously, they came upon Beto Pesant. Grana stopped the car and he got in. As Grana drove on, Celia and Beto questioned him about the military activity, visible everywhere. He told them that the army had called that morning for a general mobilization and that the military had taken over the airport. He had seen many planes take off that day, and didn’t know the reason because there hadn’t been any news bulletins. He added that everyplace in Manzanillo was being systematically searched by the police. Hearing this, Celia knew they’d be caught if they stayed in his car; they’d eventually be pulled over or come to a checkpoint. She told Grana to stop the car. She quickly contrived a new reason—her family wasn’t in Manzanillo, but waiting with a car at a farm nearby—and she and Beto got out. They hid in the underbrush at the side of the road until it was dark.

After nightfall, Beto took her to the house of a 26th of July Movement member who lived not too far from this stretch of the highway, where both husband and wife welcomed them. Celia was desperate for information, but the couple did not know much, although they knew through the grapevine that Frank’s uprising had taken place. Around midnight (as December 2 turned to December 3), after they were sure that all traffic had ceased on the highway, Celia and Beto got back on the road and started walking toward Manzanillo under cover of darkness.

IN CAMPECHUELA, the police went to the house of the young bartender, Enrique de la Rosa, took him outside, and fired forty-two bullets into his body.