

Dreaming on Paper chronicles the life of a Cuban author mentored by Hemingway and later jailed as a dissident. He struggles to find his missing manuscript while his family faces a criminal underworld intent on acquiring the valuable pages reported to be stashed in one of Hemingway's homes. Will his family lose everything including their lives?

## **Dreaming on Paper: The Life of a Cuban Author**

by E. G. Muesch Sr.

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# Dreaming on Paper

The Life  
of a Cuban Author

E. G. Muesch Sr.



## Acclaim for E. G. Muesch Sr.'s

### *Dreaming on Paper*

“E. G. Muesch’s novel *Dreaming on Paper* is a paean (joyous song of praise) to Papa Hemingway and a love letter to Cuba. The dialogue is realistic, and the narrative has an easy flow. Muesch’s narrative offers an unusual subject and delivers many rewards . . .”

***Blueink Review***

“Muesch charts the changing tides of belief and politics, reflecting both the promise and force of Castro’s revolution and its effect on individuals, families, and an entire nation. . . . *Dreaming on Paper* contrasts very different approaches to a social and political experiment that changes lives on many levels. . . . In doing so, Muesch creates a literary reflection that lingers in the mind long after Mendo reconciles his experience with his obsession with Hemingway’s political and literary prowess with the choices he’s made in life because of this.”

***D. Donovan, Sr. Reviewer***  
***Midwest Book Review***

“With its tantalizing glimpses of life in Cuba that incorporates important aspects of modern Cuban history, including the Bay of Pigs invasion and Ernest Hemingway’s affinity for the island, the narrative is grounded in reality. Historical events affect Mendo’s life in far-reaching, intriguing ways. Set in Cuba, the historical novel *Dreaming on Paper* concerns the allure and the power of writing.”

***Forward Reviews/Clarion Review***

# **Dreaming on Paper**

## The Life of a Cuban Author

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## Chapter One

### 1961

In the darkness, sixteen-year old Mendo Fomosa Lopez rushed to return to his father's fishing skiff bobbing in the shallows off Cuba's Playa Giron Beach. Earlier, in haste, he'd forgotten his precious pocket-sized notebook after he and his father had returned home from another night of unsuccessful fishing, one of many. Until now, he'd shared with no one why he'd placed such importance on his notebook and especially why he'd returned for it. At home, his mother knowing what he was up to, had implied her tacit approval by ignoring him climb out through his bedroom window. He'd been reminded frequently by his father that their family had lived by a strict code of conduct and ethics passed down from father to son, and generation to generation. Mendo avoided any discussion that would violate what his father had come to expect of him. His dreams were better kept to himself. It was enough for him that his mother understood.

The men in his village had for days gathered in small groups, whispering among themselves. It was Mendo's older brother, Luis, a sub-lieutenant in Castro's army, who warned their father of an impending invasion of the island by U.S. forces intent on overthrowing Castro. Mendo overheard his brother's warning – his father's angry outburst, and because

of this, had avoided asking for permission to return to the beach.

Mendo had seen his father's newspaper clippings of Castro's triumphant march from Santiago to Havana. Heavily armed men sat atop tank columns that rolled toward the capital city as the local population cheered them on. He believed in his heart that the entire world was thrilled his country had rid itself of a ruthless dictator who ignored the needs of his family and that of others in his fishing village. He asked himself, *Why would anyone want to invade his country.*

Mendo retrieved his small notebook from his father's skiff and tucked it in his torn shorts back pocket. Walking in the surf, the coarse wet sand oozed up between his toes. A distant hum sounded. The silhouette of black boxes appeared on the dark horizon. Was this the invasion his brother warned of? His curiosity peeked preventing him from fleeing. The mysterious shapes moved closer and the sound of men's voices grew louder. A grey box ground up on the sand of Playa Giron beach and the mouth of the dragon opened. Men rushed toward him holding rifles above their heads.

Mendo's limbs became rubbery. His father's angry response to his learning of an impending invasion filled his thoughts. Until this moment it had meant nothing to him.

From the group of armed men, a voice said, "He's just a kid. He could be useful to us so don't harm him."

A man dressed in camouflage fatigues stepped forward. "I'm Jose Alvarez, the commander here. What's your name, kid, and what village are you from?"

Mendo gulped.

"Kid, answer me. I asked what's your name and where are you from?"

His voice quivered. "I'm Mendo Fomoso Lopez and I live up there on that hill." He pointed to the house with the lighted kerosene lantern glowing in the window. Would his mother

tell his father that he'd returned to the beach to recover his notebook?

A tall, thin man with a deep facial scar dragged a second boy toward them and thrust him at Mendo. He said, "Go ahead, Carlos, tell us what his name is?"

He stuttered, "That, that, that's Mendo, Mendo Lopez." He pointed to the house atop the hill. "He, he lives up, up there on, on the hill. "His, his father and mine, fish, fish together when the weather is bad."

Both boys knew that the local villagers were aware that Carlos Gutierrez Senior and Ernesto Hemingway fished together. Rumors abound that Hemingway ran small arms for Castro revolutionaries prior to overthrowing Batista. Both boys understood any mention of Carlos' father befriending Hemingway might result in making their situation worse.

A voice from the group bellowed, "Don't waste your time. They're just local kids."

Thank god, he thought. He released his breath. For now, they remained nothing more than the sons of local fisherman to these people.

The commander, a tall man with a piece of his ear missing stepped forward. "You, Carlos, go back to your village and alert them we're here to overthrow Castro. We need men to join us. Go now and tell them."

Carlos frowned. "But, but you're only, only a...a small group."

One man laughed, and the others joined in.

A voice cried out, "Go on now and tell them we'll have all the arms and ammunition they'll need."

A man wearing a black beret said, "Sir! I've already sent an advance team to inform our contacts that the invasion has begun. The resistance forces should be here soon and as you requested, I've posted men between here and the main highway. They've been told to report back at the first sign of Castro's military."

The commander removed and swung his hat through the air. "They know we're already here. They would have seen our ships offshore on radar. As soon as all our troops land we need to advance quickly." He turned to Carlos. "Go ahead, get going and make sure you bring back as many men from your village as you can. Oh, and tell them to get word out to the other surrounding villages. You understand?"

Wide eyed, Carlos nodded.

"Go ahead now. Get your ass out of here."

Carlos Junior and Mendo made brief eye contact. If these men were to discover the villagers were pro-Castro, their lives would hang by a thread.

Carlos turned and ran off into the darkness.

Mendo gazed up at his mother's kerosene lantern burning bright in their cottage window. A make-shift lighthouse to guide their fishing skiff home in prevailing fog and spray.

A tall, thin man approached Mendo. "You ever fired a rifle, kid?"

"No, sir. I haven't."

A loud laugh erupted. The tall thin man extended his hand. "Like I said before, I'm Jose Alvarez, the commander in charge of the advance team and the main brigade. This other man standing next to me is Rafael Villalobos, my second-in-command."

Mendo swallowed hard. Frightened, he'd already forgotten the men's names. He took notice that the commander's second-in-command wore a short-sleeve shirt, had bulging muscles, and a sculptured chin.

The commander removed a walkie-talkie from his belt, turned, and mumbled instructions. When he'd finished, he swiftly turned back. Their eyes met. "So, Mendo, you must know this area pretty well. You could be useful to us. This location was a last-minute change in plan so none of us are familiar with the god damn place. I saw large swampy areas.



Do you think that will create a problem for people joining us from nearby villages?"

Mendo sensed both a toughness and kindness in the man that reminded him of his father, even so, he was an invader. He forced the words from between his lips. "The local people don't go into the swamps. Everyone says it's too dangerous. Our villagers walk to the highway first and then take the gravel road back down here to the beach."

A well-built man approached and stopped to listen. The commander opened a map, held it up for Mendo to see, and pointed to a spot. "Is there another way? How difficult is it to get to the main motorway right here without using the gravel road?" He tapped his finger on the spot.

Mendo hesitated. "There's a swamp on the left side between here and the highway. You can stay to the side beneath the trees, but it's narrow. The other side is open, but it's rocky." His quick response was followed by a sickening fear he'd just betrayed his own father.

Rafael threw his hand up into the air. "Great! Castro's army will be waiting for us if we use the gravel road. They know it's our only way out. If it's blocked that leaves us trapped with our back to the sea."

"And this mountain here?" Again, the commander tapped his finger on the chart. "How easy will it be for us to get up and over that mountain?"

Mendo struggled to remain silent, but the commander's eyes bore into him. He said, "I know how to get back to my village through the swamp, but not the passage to get up the mountain."

Rafael grumbled, "You'd better get us through that damn swamp and up and over that mountain kid if you know what's good for ya."

The commander turned to the man. "It's not much of a backup plan, but it will have to do."

“Yeah, right! In that case you better hope we don’t need one.” He turned to Mendo seated on the ground and pointed an automatic weapon inches from the boy’s face.

Mendo froze. Beads of cold sweat formed on his brow. If only his father had caught him climbing out his bedroom window instead of his mother, he’d now be at home safe in his bed.

The commander swiped the rifle away. “We’re not risking the boy’s life. He could be useful to us.” He turned to Mendo, “You’ll remain here with me. I don’t want you in the line of fire.” Jose kept looking at his watch and turning to gaze out to sea.

Mendo didn’t own a watch, but as the son of a fisherman he had a keen sense of time. No one in the village would return to join a group of anti-Castro Cuban Exiles. Even his own family was grateful to Castro for introducing improvements to their village that no one before had ever taken an interest in. Information he wasn’t prepared to reveal.

A short stout man ran toward them. “Sir, the CIA is on the radio. They need to talk to you right away.”

The commander said, “All right, Mendo, you stay right here behind this sand dune and no matter what don’t move. If anyone questions you tell them to see me. You understand?”

Shaking, he nodded.

The commander rushed toward a small group of men dressed in civilian clothes huddled at the water’s edge. Mendo stretched to look over the dune toward home. The kerosene lantern remained lit. A sign his mother expected his return any minute.

He removed the small journal and pencil from his pocket. Opening it, he described the unfolding scene. He counted the men, noted their khaki-colored trousers and shirts, and a description of their arms. He’d seen many Cuban soldiers and compared to them, these men appeared ill equipped.

## *Dreaming on Paper*

Mendo witnessed several barges stranded on the shallow reefs. As time passed, they were replaced by a continuous flow of small boats of all shapes, sizes, and construction. Rubber dinghies and wood rafts were lashed together. To him, few of these watercraft appeared seaworthy. The tide rose and the waves broke steadily. A sign to any fisherman that their small boats would soon have difficulty reaching shore. One inbound inflatable overturned in the surf, throwing soldiers and their equipment into the sea. Cursing and scrambling to remain afloat, they waded to the beach.

As the sun began to rise, a thin white line appeared on the horizon, revealing two ships in the bay and what appeared to be an unfamiliar floating island in the distance. A faint cool morning breeze brushed his face.

Sitting alone, Mendo sketched. A hand reached from behind and ripped the book away. He fell sideways. He choked, spit sand, and struggled to stand.

A soldier closely inspected his journal, then tossed it into the air. He grasped Mendo's collar, threw him down, and pressed his head into the sand with his boot. He unslung his rifle and held the barrel to Mendo's head. "We know what to do with Castro spies."

Like a wildfire, a surge of fear rushed through him. "I'm not a spy! I'm not a spy!" he screamed. "Please! Get Jose Alvarez! Get your commander. He knows me. He told me to stay here and call him if anyone questions me. Please! Get Jose Alvarez!" The rifle barrel was about to punch a hole through his skull. The face of Maria, the fifteen-year-old girl from his village, rushed to fill his thoughts. If only he'd revealed his feelings for her.

"Stop!"

Unable to move his head, Mendo shifted his gaze to see the commander rushing toward him.

"Soldier! That boy's under my protection. Go back and join the others now."

“But, Sir, he’s a spy. He’s been writing down how many of us there are and drawing pictures of the ships in the bay. Look here.” He pointed. “He even drew the location of the command center.”

“I told you to rejoin the others. I’ll take care of this. Now go!”

The soldier took his boot off Mendo’s head, re-slung his rifle, and stomped away.

The commander thumbed through the journal, examining each page. He extended a hand to help Mendo up. “If I hadn’t heard you, you’d be dead by now. What did you think you were doing?”

Jose’s second-in-command, Rafael Villalobos, rushed forward to stand next to his commander.

“My teacher told me to write down things that interested me and she’ll help me write a story...I want to be an author someday. She’s already helped me write one.” He blurted a secret he hadn’t shared with anyone, but his mother.

Rafael said, “Sir, I know for a fact none of these villages have schools or teachers. The boy’s lying.”

Mendo bellowed, “I’m not lying. I’m telling the truth! There isn’t a school here, but this woman comes every year to teach kids in the local villages to read. I’m telling the truth.”

Rafael said, “Tell me, what’s this teacher’s name and where is she now?”

“Tarna, Tarna Fernandez. Everyone calls her Tarna. She’s in our village now. I’m telling the truth. She’s from America and she comes every year with her child.”

“Sir, our medic is from an area not forty kilometers from here. I can check and we’ll know if the boy’s lying.”

The commander nodded. His second-in-command rushed off.

Mendo gulped. Would they believe him? My god, he thought. What would happen to him if they didn’t?

Jose lowered the journal. “Look, Mendo, I can see this pad is filled with things that happened long before now, so I

know you're not a spy. I'll keep it, so you don't get yourself shot. The men are edgy so don't give them an excuse to shoot you."

Rafael rushed back. "The medic's heard of this woman, Tarna Fernandez. Like the boy said, she's an American with a young child. She's a Quaker from New York married to a Cuban. She comes every year to help local people harvest sugar cane and teach children in the local villages to read and write. The medic says everyone around here has heard of her."

Mendo breathed a sigh of relief. Maybe now they would believe him.

"All right, pass the word among the men that no one is to harm the boy. He's under my protection." Jose pulled the book out of his pocket and held it out. "Take it and maybe someday you'll be an author who'll write about us." His chin protruded into the air. "You can tell people about the men who returned Cuba rightfully to its people." He frowned. "How old are you?"

"I'm seventeen. Well, I'm sixteen, but I'll be seventeen in July."

To his commanding officer, Rafael said, "Why are you treating this kid so special? Many of our men, not much older than him, could soon be lying dead out there on the beach."

The commander's fiery gaze drifted between the two until settling on his second-in-command. "This young boy didn't volunteer to be here. I have a sixteen-year-old son back home in Miami who'll be seventeen soon. Why would I treat this boy any different than my own son?"

The soldier's lip curled. "Yes, sir."

No wonder this man reminded him of his own father. There was both a toughness and kindness about him. His shuddering fear drained away.

Mendo took the small book and grasped it tightly. Rushing off, the commander left Mendo leaning against the sand dune. The two ships in the bay launched small

watercraft filled with soldiers. Men standing at the water's edge waved the latest arrivals where to go. In a short time, the sand dunes were packed with clusters of armed men sheltered behind them. One boat carried a half-dozen unarmed men dressed differently from the others. At the beach they rushed to a makeshift covered trench surrounded by antennas and equipment. Mendo recorded everything in his journal.

A voice roared, "First group, move out!"

Heavily armed men rushed over the sand dune, divided into two groups, and marched adjacent to the gravel road beneath the tree canopy toward the main highway. The same man shouted, "Second Group, move out!" They too disappeared down the road.

Mendo was overwhelmed. His father labelled these men invaders, but what did that really mean. Were these men capable of shooting his parents when they discovered they were Castro supporter's. He wanted to warn them, but he was a boy. Yes, how could they expect him, a sixteen-year old boy to do anything when he was the prisoner of armed soldiers. His fate was in their hands.

A muffled deep drone sounded in the sky distracting him. What appeared to be a flock of migrating birds moved toward them. Planes! Please let the Cuban Airforce rescue him!

A hand grabbed Mendo and jerked him to his feet. "The commander wants you in the command center."

He staggered forward until he found himself standing above a deep trench covered with sheet metal. Small gaps in the roof revealed several men peering at a chart stretched out on a wooden table made from strips of plywood and carpenter horses. A hand reached up through the opening and the sheet metal roof opened. Pushed, he lost his balance and tumbled into the pit. He became confused and disoriented.

The commander said, "Just keep your head down and stay out of the way. You'll be safe here."

Thank god he'd returned his journal to his pocket or he'd have lost it. Mendo covered his ears. Low flying planes firing their guns caused his legs to tremble. He leaned against the trench wall to steady himself. Muffled sounds of bullets hitting the beach erupted in puffs of sand. Closer. Louder. Men screamed in agony. Endless calls of, "Medic here! We need a medic here now!" cluttered his ears. He sought cover. He wanted to run. No, Jose told him to stay put. He froze.

A loud explosion caused Mendo to experience a momentary loss of hearing. Then a high-pitched ringing drowned out the panic in men's voices. Smaller secondary explosions shook the ground. His feet vibrated from the impact. Like a cascading fountain, sand tumbled into the trench. Would they be buried alive? Explosions pinged the metal roof.

Mendo peered through the gap in the sheet metal. He wiped his eyes to clear them from the burning smoke. One ship hard aground heeled grotesquely on its side. The second vessel erupted into a towering inferno. Black smoke filled the sky and drifted toward them. On the beach men removed their shirts to douse them in sea water and cover their faces to escape the choking smoke. Dizzy, he wobbled, barely able to stand. Warm urine drenched his trousers.

A man pulled Mendo back by his britches to take his place, he said, "Fuck! That's ten days of ammunition gone up in flames. Where the fuck is the American aircraft we were promised? We have no U.S. air cover. Tell our radio man to call the *Essex* and find out why they haven't launched their aircraft!"

Two men stuffed the sheet metal gaps with blankets to prevent the black smoke from penetrating the bunker.

Someone turned down the kerosene lamps to provide only enough light for the men pointing at the map. Their words became chaotic. Some threw their hands into the air. A radio operator pleaded for their promised air cover.

A man roared, "We have only enough ammunition to last us two days! Without more supplies we're dead."

A soldier grabbed another man by the throat. The gasping caused everyone to turn and look. He screamed, "The CIA promised us air support! We need it now, god damn it. Where the fuck is it?"

The man said, "There's an aircraft carrier, the *Essex*, right offshore, but the president hasn't given permission for the planes to take off. There's been a change in plan."

A pistol cocked, sending shivers through him.

Jose said, "Stand down, soldier. Stand down right now." He turned his attention back to the messenger. "I know you have a radio with a direct channel to your superiors aboard the *Essex*. I'll give you five minutes to contact your fuckin' CIA and tell me what our fallback plan is, otherwise, I'll turn my back if one of my men takes it upon himself to shoot you. Do you understand me, Harold?"

The man nodded.

"Well, for your sake, I hope you do." Jose walked back to the chart table to join the others.

The men talked among themselves. Explosions and gunfire intensified.

"Harold! Anything yet?"

"I'm on the radio now. Give me a minute and I'll have an update."

With his hand resting on his sidearm, the commander mumbled, "Shithead better have more than an update."

Afraid for himself and his parents, Mendo hid his pleasure at their apparent difficulties. If only his brother, Luis, and the Cuban army would come to rescue him.

Harold returned to the chart table. "I have bad news, commander." He paused, giving the impression he preferred to be elsewhere. "The pilots are in their planes aboard the aircraft carrier, but the President won't give them permission to take off. He says he made it clear to both the CIA and Pentagon that the U.S. couldn't become directly involved



because of plausible deniability. There's been miscommunication between the CIA Director and the President."

"Plausible deniability! Miscommunication! What the fuck are you talking about? The CIA guaranteed us the skies would be ours. That's the only reason we're here! We have no means of defending ourselves against the Cuban air force. We're sitting ducks here on this beachhead. What about the two B-26 bombers along with their air support we were promised? How about them?"

Harold leaned on the chart table and shook his head. "The bombers left Nicaragua one hour late because of a time-zone error so they arrived without air cover. Both B-26s were shot down by the Cuban air force and their crews killed. The Pentagon and CIA are still talking with the President about air cover. Once I have word, I'll- -"

A distant voice called, "Harold! The CIA is on the radio. They need to talk to you. They say it's urgent."

Harold rushed to the radio console in the rear corner of the bunker and mumbled into the microphone. He banged his fist on the metal cabinet. Then he rushed back to the chart table.

Mendo held his breath and prayed to Our Lady of El Cobre, the mother of the Cuban people for bad news.

"The President has approved air cover for one hour." He shook his head. "I'm sorry. There's nothing more that can be done."

The commander screamed, "One hour won't buy us shit! We've already lost ten days of ammo aboard that ship out there in flames and we're stuck in a place there's no escaping from. What's the CIA's plan b?"

Harold's words became almost inaudible. "There is no plan b. The plan was always to win with plan a. The CIA believed that once people were aware of the invasion there would be a general uprising and you'd have all the men and supplies needed to overthrow Castro."

“On a beachhead surrounded by small villages and a swamp? Is the CIA *insane*? If my men must fall back to this beach are you telling me they’ll be no evacuation by offshore vessels? Is that what you’re telling me?”

Harold opened his mouth to speak, then stopped. Several moments passed. He said, “I’m told your only option is to defeat Castro’s forces or flee to the Sierra Maestra mountains and find support in the hills the same way that Castro did on his long march to Havana to overthrow the Batista Regime. The Pentagon and CIA still believe the invasion will succeed. If it fails, then that’s your only option.”

The commander smashed his fist down hard on the table. An ashtray fell to the sand and tactical pins rolled across the chart. He pointed his finger in Harold’s face. “Get out of my sight! Get the fuck out of here now!”

To sooth himself, Mendo pulled out his journal and focused on Jose and his second-in-command talking. The explosions and gunfire provided a background drone.

Rafael pounded his chest. “We can’t stay here at the beach or we’re sitting ducks for the Cuban air force! We must begin moving the remainder of the men forward right now. If we can make the main highway, it’s the only chance that the villagers rising-up can join us. The CIA says there are elements of the Castro army standing by ready to defect. That’s our only hope now.”

The kerosene lamps were turned up, making the men’s faces ghostly. Jose’s voice deepened. “I don’t think when the CIA changed our point of invasion, they knew they were setting us up trapped here to die. Look here at the chart.” He tapped his finger on the table. “We’re surrounded by swamps. If we don’t reach that main highway so dissident army factions and villagers can join us, we’re trapped here like fish in a barrel.”

Rafael said, “Unless we get that air support we were promised, we either surrender or get butchered right here where we stand.”

Jose spit on the ground. "There's one more problem. Castro's army is well trained and he has 25,000 Cuban Revolutionary Guardsmen with another 150,000 for backup and we're only 1,400 trained by the CIA in the jungles of Guatemala and Nicaragua. We have no idea how many of the Cubans will defect and unless we reach that main highway we'll never know."

Rafael said, "The CIA are fools. It's them we should put on the front line. We should have never changed our first point of invasion from the city of Trinidad. There we would have landed in a city filled with anti-Castro Cubans ready to rise up. We could have moved easily from west to east."

A man covered in sand jumped into the pit. He brushed himself off. "Sir, we've already taken nine casualties and thirteen more are wounded, all by the Cuban air force."

Mendo peeked through the metal roof. Tattered burning wooden powerboats littered the beach. Bodies lay stacked like chords of wood. Mendo had never seen dead bodies. Lifeless forms so fresh he expected that at any moment they would rise up. The wounded were being placed on stretchers and rushed behind a sand dune marked with a white flag embroidered with a red cross. Flashes of light and intense heat from incendiary bombs dropped from overhead aircraft caused the hair on his arms to rise. He turned to look at the commander's sweaty, drawn face. Still, he wanted the Cuban forces to prevail. A sense of unknown dread hung over him.

Jose said, "Move the remaining men out, but leave a few here at the beach around the command center who can alert us if the Cuban military attempts to outflank us through the swamp or from the sea...Rafael, I need you on the front line with your men."

"Sir, I've assigned two officers that responsibility. It would be better if I were here with you in the command center. If our men must split-up, I'd be of more value here than on the front lines. We need that flexibility if the situation goes south."

The commander stared at the ground. "Our men were recruited from the streets of Miami and trained by the CIA for this invasion. Out of this entire lot we're the only two professional battle-hardened officers here. We're sending these men, some of them boys, to the front lines to confront a highly skilled and trained force that potentially outnumbers us 200 to one. Given our situation, I'm not sending these boys into the jaws of death without experienced leadership. I can force you to go, but I won't. You go or I will. What's it going to be?"

Rafael nodded and climbed out of the trench.

Mendo overheard him instruct them to place land mines along the front line to slow the advance of Castro's troops and equipment along the gravel road. "Yes sirs" rang out again and again. Mendo peered through the open crack. A large group of men disappeared beneath the tree canopy lining the road. When he was sure that no one could see him, he made the sign of the cross, and thought, please god, protect my brother, Luis when he comes to free me.

The commander said, "All right, kid, I'll be remaining here in the command center. As for you, you're not to move from this spot. If my men are forced back here to the sea that's where you'll come in. It will be your job to guide us through the swamp and up into the mountains. You understand?"

Mendo nodded.

"I want a yes or a no. *Do you understand?*"

"Yes, sir. I understand."

Mendo looked up at his house. The kerosene lamp was out. What if his mother had told his father he'd returned to the beach? Would he come looking for him? Would they take him for a Cuban soldier and shoot? Mother-of-god, keep him safe! Everyone was occupied and not paying attention to him. Should he flee? Did he have the courage? No, soldiers were everywhere. He'd be considered a spy and shot on sight before he reached the swamp. There was no choice but

to stay. Only Jose, the radio man, the CIA man, and an ordinary soldier remained in the command center. The commander paced the length of the trench, talking on his walkie-talkie to Rafael. His voice rose to a fever pitch, then fell off.

A soldier carelessly dropped boxes labelled *Ammunition* into the trench. He said, "Kid, you need to give me a hand with these. I'll lower down these crates and you stack them over there with the rest and be quick about it."

Mendo stared at the man's blood-stained shirt.

He shook his head and ripped it open. "It's not my blood, kid. Just do as you're told."

Mendo jumped and began stacking boxes. Every half hour the man lowering the cases was rotated, but it remained his job to stack them. His arms ached.

The radio operator removed his headphones and rushed to the chart table to deliver a handwritten message to Jose.

After reading it, Jose said, "I've just been informed that both beachheads, east and north of Bahia de Conchosare are being bogged down by twenty-thousand Castro regulars and from everything I'm hearing they're well-trained forces. The only good news is that we've initially inflicted heavy losses before their reinforcements arrived. All we can hope for now is to hold them off to buy time."

The noise from the low-flying aircraft diminished. Thunderous shelling sounded in the far distance. As the hours passed, the shelling became louder and the ground tremored violently beneath his feet. The background noise of yelling, screaming, and automatic weapons coming over the radio created a surreal illusion he was present with the men on the front lines in battle.

Mendo peeked through the gaps in the sheet-metal roofing. A hand rested on his shoulder. Jose stood behind him. "Mendo, there are blankets at the end of the bunker. Go lay down and try to get some rest. Tomorrow is a new day

and we'll have a better idea of our situation. Go, rest now." The commander returned to the radio console.

Mendo covered himself with a blanket. The earth trembled beneath him as explosions continued throughout the night, preventing him from sleeping. The radio broadcast a foreign language made up of words that made no sense. Foxtrot, echo, sierra, whiskey, alpha, zulu, and others were repeated over and over. The radio operator frantically took notes on a clipboard, tearing off the pages and intermittently delivering them to a second man, who rushed to lay them on the chart table. Jose read the communications. At times he crumpled the paper and tossed it beneath the table or read it to the others.

A shadow approached. "Mendo, you asleep?"

Mendo opened his eyes.

Jose's face, dirty and sweaty, gazed down at him.

"No, I'm awake."

"You dropped your book while stacking the ammunition. One of the men found it in the sand. You should be more careful with it if you hope to be a writer someday." He paused. "So, tell me, why would the son of a fisherman want to be a writer? What inspired a kid your age to want something like that??"

"Tarna, my teacher. She gave me a book, *The Old Man and the Sea*. When I finished reading it, I told her I wanted to be an author just like Hemingway."

"I'm busy fighting a battle, but I have to ask, one short story and you decided to become an author?" His eyes widened. "Tell me, what was so special about the book?"

Mendo shrugged. "The old man in the story reminded me of my father. Everybody believed he had bad luck. My father has only one good arm. His other one got tangled in line when he was bringing in a marlin. My brother said our skiff was filled with blood."

Jose whispered, "And other fisherman in your village stopped fishing with him because he couldn't carry his own weight. Is that it?"

"It's just...it's just like Hemingway knew my father and wrote about him. My father said he could only kill a large fish because he loved it. Sometimes he would cut the line and release a fish for the same reason."

With a blackness in his eyes, Jose mumbled, "In a way it reminds me of war." He squeezed Mendo's shoulder. "You cried, didn't you?"

"Cry! I never cry. I'm almost seventeen."

He rubbed his hand across Mendo's arm. "Look around here. All I see is carnage. Do you think I don't cry?" His eyes became narrow slits. "I think you do cry and that's why you want to become an author. It's nothing to be ashamed of, Mendo. It's a strength, so cherish it. My son Miguel is your age and he talks about wanting to follow in my footsteps." He sighed. "He dreams of being an officer in the army someday. This will be our little secret, Mendo, but when we liberate Cuba, I'll take you myself to Hemingway's home. Would you like that?"

Although tempted, Mendo restrained himself from revealing he'd been to Hemingway's home. Instead, his mouth opened and his face burst into a broad unrestrained smile. "Really? You will?"

"Yes, really. We must defeat Castro first, but you have my word on it. I'll take you there myself. I need to get an hour's rest and you need to take advantage of what's left of the night. In the morning, I need you to pitch out all this sand that's been falling into the trench."

"Yes, sir," rolled from his lips.

Mendo liked the commander. Still, he wanted these men to fail. If the invaders were captured, he would tell those in charge he had been treated well.

A sheet metal panel opened and a soldier said, "Sir, we've slowed the Cuban advance, but they have the

advantage of heavy artillery and tanks. We think we can hold them until we get reinforcements.” The metal panel closed and reopened. “I forgot to mention that our radio man picked up a communication that Castro and Che are here to oversee their men. We’re trying to learn where they are, but they’re coding their locations. If we learn anything we’ll inform you immediately.”

A boom shook the earth. Men coughed and cursed.



## Chapter Two

**A**rtiltery explosions kept Mendo awake. A soldier coughed and frantically fanned his face to avoid breathing in sand that now covered everything.

The commander said, "Christ! That was a close one."

Mendo feared for his brother's life. To distract himself he pulled his pad out and turned to the back pages where he'd copied two passages from the *Old Man and the Sea*. In the semi-darkness, he ran his finger across each word: *He no longer dreamed of storms, nor of great fish, nor fights, nor contests of strength, nor his wife. He only dreamed of places now and of the lions on the beach...He was shivering with the morning cold. But he knew he would shiver himself warm and that soon he would be rowing.*

Although unclear to the exact meaning of the passage, he found strength and peace in Hemingway's words.

The haze began to clear. Someone brushed sand off the chart table, and relit the kerosene lights. Above the sound of explosions and distant gunfire, a woman's voice pleaded with someone outside, a voice Mendo recognized. He jumped up, slid back a metal panel, and squeezed his head through the opening. The cool breeze was refreshing.

A tall, thin woman turned. "Mendo! Thank god you're safe." She brushed past one soldier and abruptly pushed the other aside.

The commander said, "All right, help that woman down."

The soldiers held her arms and lowered her carefully down into the trench.

"Let me guess, you would be the boy's teacher, Tarna Fernandez."

She rushed past the commander with a cursory, "Yes!" and hugged Mendo tightly, ignoring everyone but him. She stroked his back and pushed him away to see him better. She brushed her hand through his wavy black hair. "Are you okay, Mendo? Are you hurt?"

"I'm okay." What a relief to see his teacher again, but at the same time he was embarrassed. A grown man among soldiers, being treated as a child. Her warm caressing hands, her loving eyes, and tender words quickly overcame all else. He gave way. Tarna had become his lifeline.

The commander, Jose stood gazing at the two.

Anyone could see she wasn't Cuban. Mendo recalled saying she was married to a Cuban American and came here summers to help the locals harvest sugar cane and teach. Tarna was tall, thin, and mud dripped from her rolled-up skirt and her white tattered blouse. Jose's slow gaze up and down his teacher gave way to a broad approving grin.

Jose said, "A Quaker, huh. Quakers have always been a thorn in my side with their peace demonstrations and putting themselves in the middle of everything." He threw his hand into the air. "So, who is it you side with here, Castro?"

"I'm not here to side with anyone. I'm here to pick sugar cane and teach kids to read and write. That's the only reason I'm here."

"Is that right?"

She waved her finger at him. "Why are you holding this boy? He's sixteen years old and his parents are frantic. When I learned his father was on his way here to claim the boy, I pleaded with him to let me come instead."

"Why you? Why not the boy's father to speak in his own son's behalf. He should have come, not you."

Mendo stiffened at any suggestion his father might be a coward.

Tarna said, "His father would have taken the highway to the gravel road that leads here. The village isn't deaf, they hear the explosions. Even if he had gotten past the Cuban Army he would likely have been shot by your men once he reached the gravel road."

"And how did you get here?"

"I know these swamps better than anyone. I walk from village to village so- -"

"I know. So, you can teach the children in the villages around here to read and write."

"Mendo told you then, I'm his teacher."

"My medic says everyone in these parts has heard of- -"

"Never mind that. How long do you intend to hold the boy?"

"It depends. Once we break through to the main highway we're expecting to be joined by army and village dissidents. It would help if you would guide the men from your village through the swamp to join us here."

A deep creviced frown crossed Tarna's brow and joined above her nose. "Every local village here is pro-Castro. No one here is going to help you."

Mendo stepped back and waited.

The commander's eyes bulged. "I don't understand. We've been told by the American CIA that people all over the island are ready to join us. We're here to return Cuba to its people."

Tarna shook her head. "This was always a poor place inhabited by fisherman intent only on feeding their families and long neglected by the Batista Regime. Because Fidel Castro was an avid fisherman and came here often, he introduced changes to benefit the small local villages that surround this bay. Within just the first year of the revolution, Fidel made the bay accessible by a paved road, introduced electricity, water, and sanitation to everyone's benefit."

He stood. "And for that they became communists! How about the people who brought wealth and prosperity to Cuba? Where is Cuba now without those people?"

Her voice grew soft. "The people here have never been interested in the differences between socialism, democracy, and communism and they certainly don't understand the fundamentals that separate them. They support the changes that have improved the lives of their families. The people who live around Bahia de Cachines gave their loyal support to the first person to improve their lot with the promise of more to come. They've become true Castro supporters. I can't speak for the army, maybe there are some who'll support you, but many of them come from areas like these who've reaped the same benefits as the people here."

His nostrils flared. Tarna's mild temperament and non-threatening delivery made it difficult for the commander to lash out at her.

"Look, I'm busy here. You and the boy find a place to sit and stay out of our way."

Tarna wrapped her arm around him. "Can I take Mendo home to his parents where he belongs? I give you my word they'll be no mention of what's happening here."

He gazed at the boy, then back at Tarna. "Unless we can break through Castro's lines blocking the main highway, we'll need him to get us through that damn swamp. If our situation improves, I'll see to it the both of you get home safely. That's the best I can do. I'm sorry."

"I can be of more value to you than the boy. Mendo can get you through the swamp but then what? He can't take you past his village. Let me take Mendo's place. I can take you up into the mountains where you'll be safe. I know where many of the villages are and which ones are best to avoid."

Mendo had never considered his teacher to be so fearless, he said, "I *want* to stay!" Tarna's hand squeezed his shoulder to silence him.

*Dreaming on Paper*

Harold tugged Jose's shirt sleeve. "Listen to her. She might just be our best chance of reaching those mountains where we can reorganize and rebuild our ranks. It could be our best, no our only chance of avoiding surrender if it comes to that."

Jose's arms, legs, stomach and back stiffened. "Tarna, you have a child. Think about what you're saying. If we find ourselves cornered, you could be shot. Your son could be without a mother. Are you willing to take that risk?"

A metal panel slid open. Everyone turned. A man's grimy face peered down at them. "Sir, I need help with the wounded. Two medics are on the front line and I'm the only one here. I need help now. There are just too many wounded to deal with."

Jose said, "There are soldiers stationed around the perimeter. I can spare two or three, but that's it."

"Sir, I don't need that kind of help. I need people who can assist with triage. You know, people who can dress wounds or we're going to lose more men."

"Out of 1200 men there must be some with- -"

Tarna said, "I have two years of nursing school. I didn't finish but- -"

"That will do. Go with him. The medical area is between dunes, so you'll have cover just be careful. Now, get going."

Tarna said, "You stay right here, Mendo, and when I return we'll see to it we get you home safely." She grazed the back of her hand on the side of his face. and then scampered up through the metal opening and disappeared.

Mendo stood alone listening to the sound of explosions. He felt deserted. The sound of bombs and firearms directly outside had diminished. All he could think of was Tarna's and his brother's safety. The men in the command center became preoccupied between radio messages from the field and moving about pins on a map. When Jose turned his back, and talked into his walkie-talkie, Mendo stood and peered out through the metal roof opening. Two men carried

a soldier on a stretcher rushing toward the white flag with a red cross sitting atop a sand dune. He carefully slid the metal roof panel back, jumped up, clawed at the sand to raise himself, and swung his legs up and over onto the beach.

“Hey you! Kid! Get your ass back here now.”

Another voice said, “Let him go. We have no time for this shit. There’s nowhere for him to go anyhow.”

Mendo ran toward the flag, up the sand dune, and over. Unable to stop he slid down the other side into a large trench covered by an undersized camouflage net and atop a stack of piled dead corpses. He clawed his way over bloodied bodies to escape the horror. A hand grasped his shirt and yanked him free.

A man with a beard and crewcut wearing a white vest with a red cross held Mendo by the arm. Shaking him, he said, “What in hell is a kid doing here?”

“It’s okay. I know the boy. He’s with me.” Tarna wrapped her arms around him and squeezed. “I thought I told you to stay where you were, and I’d come back for you and we’d get you home.” A loud explosion caused sand to flow down into the pit. Her frown faded. “You’re here now so we’ll make the best of it. I have wounded men to help.” She turned and pointed. “Go over there and sit down and I’ll come when I can.”

Sheepishly, he obeyed.

She rushed to a man screaming in pain. Over her shoulder he observed a man on a stretcher with a gaping hole in his belly. Tarna stuffed rags into the wound and began wrapping tape around his middle. She reached for a syringe from a small table, stuck it into a bottle, held it up until filled, and plunged it into the man’s arm. She held a paper cup to the man’s lips and attempted unsuccessfully to get him to drink.

Mendo lurched forward. “I can help.”

Tarna swirled around, her mouth forming a perfect circle.

Mendo said, "My father cut himself with a fishing knife many times and I watched my mother sew his wounds. I'm not afraid. I know what to do."

"Oh, you do, do you? Then you hold this cup and try and get some water into him. I'm needed elsewhere. I'll be back when I can."

Mendo took over holding the cup to the soldier's mouth. He used his fingers to part his lips and allowed water to trickle one drop at a time on the man's tongue. His eyes were open, staring blankly at the sky. He choked and attempted to expel the water. Blood-curdling screams came from a nearby soldier. Mendo approached the man with a paper cup of water and raised it to his lips. The man's stomach was ripped away and his entrails exposed and bloodied. Tarna rushed forward to wrap the man in a blanket and return to the soldier she was ministering to.

"Mendo, come here, I need your help."

He put down the cup and scampered to help. A man lay on a gurney with blood gushing from his neck.

Tarna said, "Just press this bandage as tightly as you can against the wound to slow the bleeding while I get the medic."

He did. The young man's head rolled to look at him, exposing a large section of grey corrugated brain matter. Mendo jerked away while attempting to apply pressure to the bandage.

The man said, "Johnny, you should be at home with your mother." He rolled his head. "What are you doing here? I told you I'd be home soon." The man's hand crawled along the blood-soaked bedsheet and squeezed Mendo's arm. "How is your mother? She mustn't worry about me. You must tell her I'm okay and I'll be home soon."

Mendo squeezed his eyes shut to stop the tears. He whispered, "Momma is okay. She says she'll be waiting for you when you return. She says she loves you and everything will be all right."

“Johnny, you must go. This is no place for you. Your mother would be angry if she knew you were here.”

“It’s okay, Father. She knows I’m here with you. It’s okay.” He leaned over the man and kissed him on the cheek.

The man’s lips appeared to smile and then froze. Mendo gazed into his pale eyes as the man’s hand went limp in his own.

A hand rested on his shoulder. Tarna said, “The man has passed. It’s okay, Mendo. You did your best.” She unclipped a locket from the man’s neck and covered his face with the blood-stained sheet. Tarna motioned for two men to come. They placed the dead soldier on a gurney to transport him to the pile of nearby corpses.

Mendo lunged forward and pulled the man back. “Stop! He’s not dead. He’s still alive. Please, put him back. I know he’s alive.”

Confused, the two men froze. Tarna wrapped both arms around Mendo and nodded to the men to continue their duty. She placed her hand behind his head and forced him to lean against her chest. “Men cry in the dark, but author’s tears flow from an eternal spring whose source can sometimes emerge from the pain of life itself. Don’t shy away or be afraid of it. Write from your heart. Let it be your inspiration. That’s what it takes to be an author.” She placed her hands on both his shoulders and pushed him back. “Now, we must be strong if we’re to help those who need it most. Do you understand, Mendo?”

Her eyes appeared to burn into him. He nodded.

“Okay, I’ll need your help later, but for now go back and sit down.” Her face was drained of color. “Do you still have the small pocket journal and pencil I gave you?”

He pulled it out to show her.

“Good! Then find yourself a spot out of the way and do what we talked about, record everything you see and someday when this is over I’ll help you write a story about the things you’ve witnessed, and your feelings about



everything that's happened here. It will be your first true test of becoming an author."

It sickened him to see a pile of corpses. He remained silent for as long as he could. He said, "That locket you removed from around the man's neck, what was it?"

She opened it and gazed at the picture. A tear welled up in her eye. "This is probably a picture of his wife and young son." She handed him the locket and said, "You tended to his wounds and you were the last person he saw. Take your pencil, sit down, and write his wife and son a personal letter. He's wearing a dog tag so he can be identified. When you're done give it to me and I'll see his wife gets it."

Mendo found a corner refuge, and to distract himself began to write. The unbearable screams of a soldier destined to die echoed through the pit. His head throbbed and his gut ached. So many emotions welled up within him he had difficulty separating them. Mendo opened the locket and saw the young boy, Johnny.

In his letter he revealed how Johnny's father believed he was his son and how it had given him peace to share his final words with him. Mendo ended the letter by describing how he'd comforted the man in his final moments. Tears ran down his cheeks. He turned away in an attempt to go unseen. When finished, he tucked the letter into his pocket to give to his teacher.

He remembered hearing of the Castro revolution overthrowing Batista and its glorious outcome, but never had he imagined the horror of battle. The stories shared among his friends became meaningless. In a remote corner he observed three locations inside the trench. The first was reserved for dead soldiers, the second for soldiers too badly injured to be saved. Their cries of agony went unanswered. The third group was reserved for wounded soldiers whom the medic and Tarna believed could be saved. The dying soldier whose stomach was blown open and whose entrails were torn away stopped screaming. Tarna held a rag over the

man's face, suffocating him. The man's hands grabbed hers, his knees arched, his body stiffened, and went limp as his arms dropped. Death claimed its prize. Tarna collapsed against the sand wall. She shook as she threw the rag forcefully down and stomped on it.

Helpless, Mendo turned away. He recalled his mother telling him that when the Batista Army went from village to village recruiting fisherman to fight Castro's rebels, they rejected his father because of his crippled arm. Now, he considered cutting his own arm off so he'd never see such horror again.

The medic called out to Tarna to take over for him while he attended to another wounded soldier. When she didn't respond, he bellowed, "Tarna! Pull yourself together. I need you now!"

Tarna rushed to the wounded man. Voice quivering, she called out, "Mendo, I need your help here."

She bent over a critically wounded soldier, stuffing gauze in a gaping hole. Her hands and bare arms were smeared with blood.

She said, "This one is lucky, he's taken several bullet wounds, but all passed through him. I can't be sure, but I don't think any organs were damaged. I have my bag over near where you were sitting, bring me the box of tampons."

"Tampons?"

"Never mind, just bring me my shoulder bag where you were sitting and be quick, he's lost a lot of blood."

Mendo rushed to recover her bag and returned. Tarna removed the cotton rolls and inserted one into each wound to stop the bleeding. She handed Mendo the box. "Keep an eye on this one, if the bleeding resumes then replace the one I inserted." She held one up for him to see. "You understand?"

He'd often seen the wounds fisherman incur, but the sight of gushing blood sickened him. Bile rose-up in his belly. The welcoming sound of Tarna's voice rescued him from his thoughts, he said, "Yes. I'll do it."

She rushed off to attend to another wounded soldier.

A hand reached up and grabbed Mendo's wrist. "Mendo, it's me, Garcia Valladoriz from your village. Don't yell out. Just be quiet like you don't recognize me. Okay?"

He whispered, "I don't understand. What are you doing here? You don't belong here. How did you get shot?"

"Your father was afraid if Tarna came alone she might not be able to rescue you. I came because he has three kids and I'm not married and don't have any. I lied and said I had to come down for a cousin to prevent your father from coming. I didn't know the swamp route, so I took the main gravel road, that's how I got myself wounded. I'm not wearing a uniform so these people must have assumed I was just a villager caught in the crossfire, but if these people were to discover I'm one of Castro's men, I'd be shot. You can't tell anyone, do you understand? And that goes for your friend Tarna as well? You mustn't give me away. Do you hear me?"

Mendo nodded. "I promise, I won't say anything."

A procession of incoming stretchers transported soldiers from the front lines into the triage area. Men were carried from the area reserved for those who could be saved to the area set aside for the dying. Those transported from the dying area to where the corpses were stacked bothered him most. The sand had turned blood red. His sandals squished as he walked.

Tarna ushered him back to the corner of the triage area. "It's gotten quiet again outside. We need to get you back to the command center so I can talk to the commander about getting you home."

Mendo frowned. "I'm not leaving you. I'll stay."

She climbed up and out of the trench. She reached down to grab Mendo's arm and pull him up. The two rushed back to the command center and sliding the roof open, jumped down inside.

Jose raised his arms into the air. "Well, what a surprise. Mendo's finally decided to rejoin us."

Tarna struggled to regain her breath. "I don't have time to waste. There's a lull outside and I don't know how long it will last. I've come back to see that Mendo is returned to his family. If you won't release both of us right now, then my mind is made up." Her loud trembling voice caused him to step back, she said, "I'll exchange places with him. I can do for you what the boy can't. I'm the only one here who can guide you up into the mountains." She stomped her foot. "You have no choice but to accept my offer."

The radio operator rushed past the table, knocking over a glass of water, spilling its contents on the chart. "Commander, we've just received an urgent communication from your second-in-command requesting permission to pull back two quadrants. He says they're unable to hold the Cuban tanks and heavy artillery any longer without sustaining heavy losses." He paused. "What should I tell him?"

Mendo strained to hear.

"Tell Rafael he has my permission to pull the troops back one quadrant. Be sure he understands he's to lay land mines along any path conceded to Castro's forces. Tell him, we need to slow them down to buy more time." Staring into a void, he paused. "Forget that last comment. Tell Rafael to stay close by his radio man. I'll contact him in a few minutes." He wiped beads of sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. Black streaks crossed his forehead.

The commander turned to Mendo. "The shelling's moving closer. You haven't much time. You need to return to your village and don't wander outside the swamp. There are Castro snipers everywhere, and they're moving closer by the hour." To Tarna, he said, "Since you'll replace Mendo, you might as well be useful, so start scooping out the sand that's filled the trench before we all find ourselves buried in this grave. Then return to the triage center. You'll be more help there than here."

*Dreaming on Paper*

Tarna placed her arm around Mendo. "If I don't return in a few days ask your father to see to it my son, Miguel is returned to his papa, Johnny Fernandez. He's in Havana and should be back to your village when this is all over and the roads are clear." She gripped him firmly. "Go now, Mendo, and be safe."

He reached into his pocket and withdrew the letter. "Here, you promised to send this to the family of the dead soldier."

She placed the letter inside her blouse and wrapped both arms around him in one final hug. "Go now and follow the route through the swamp like I taught you." Tears overflowed as she scooped up sand.

He climbed out and gazed down into the trench. Tarna's long black hair rolled up into a bun, her pretty face, her long plain black skirt and white tattered blouse would become a memory forever cast in his soul. Mendo recalled his mother's kerosene lantern was out. He stretched to see down the road. "Tarna! My father's come looking for me."

A dark silhouette appeared. Rifle shots shattered the silence. A dark shadow fell to one knee, then lay on the ground.

Tarna lunged to grab his leg. "Mendo, quickly, get to the swamp and go straight home. You must go as fast as you can. You mustn't walk down that gravel road no matter what. Whoever was wounded I will tend to his needs. Listen to me now, you must return home. Do you hear me?"

Mendo froze. An image of his father flashed before him. Please god. No!

Tarna shook his leg. "Are you listening? Do you hear me? You must go into that swamp now."

Frozen with fear, he could do little but stare.

Tarna screamed to the shadows nearby, "The boy is leaving. Don't harm him." She climbed out of the trench and pushed him forward.

Mendo fell to one knee, stood, and expecting to be shot, rushed toward the swamp.

A rifle shot rang out.

“Run! Keep going. You’re almost there.”

A second shot rang out. Mendo’s heart raced. His sandals sank in the mud. Branches tore the skin from his bare arms as he forced himself onward. He wheezed, coughed, and stopped to take a deep breath. Mendo ran his flattened hand over his shirt. Dry. He hadn’t been wounded. Were the soldiers shooting at him or someone else? Oh god, the man on the road. The lantern was out. His father, had they killed him? Please god let his father be at home, waiting for him.

In the swamp, Mendo climbed a tree limb to see his village. Moving lights blanketed the streets. He trudged through the swamp and up the mountain. Emerging from the brush a floodlight blinded him.

“Stop! Don’t move.”

Mendo shielded his eyes to see two uniformed men with raised weapons rushing toward him.

“On your knees and put your hands behind your head.”

A man patted him down while the other held a rifle barrel to his neck. A soldier said, “He’s unarmed, sir.” The floodlight faded. “What’s your name, kid, and why did you come out of that swamp?”

“I’m Mendo Lopez, and I live there in that house.” He pointed. “I was just coming home.”

“How many men are down there on the beach?”

A lump rose up in his throat. “I don’t know, sir. When I saw them, I hid and ran off into the swamp.” Would his expression reveal he was lying?

Two soldiers turned their backs to him and mumbled incoherently. The officer spun to look at Mendo. “You’re in the army now. Your first assignment is to take my men through that swamp back to the beachhead. *“Entiendes?”*

“But- -”

*Dreaming on Paper*

“But nothing! You stay right here and wait till we come for you. You hear me, soldier?”

“Yes, but can I go home so my parents know I’m okay? I need to find my father.”

“Never mind about your father. We’ll take care of that.” The officer left, leaving behind two soldiers to guard him.

A soldier lit a cigarette and flipped the lighted match into the air. Mendo waited for the men to turn their backs to him, but the opportunity to escape didn’t come. In the distance, an officer talked to soldiers. He pointed to Mendo, and the men rushed toward him. A hand grabbed him by the t-shirt. Mendo led the group into the swamp. A half-hour later they came to the beachhead. The man motioned to the others to spread out. Mendo slowed, falling behind.

Loud bursts of gun fire rang out. Screams of “The perimeter! Cover the perimeter. Over there. There, over there.”

A soldier standing near Mendo fell, staring blankly up at the sky. A red dot appeared in the center of his forehead as a narrow red stream flowed down the side of his face. Men dashed to the ground. Those who could hid behind Cyprus trees. Bursts of automatic weapons boomed. Bullets ricocheted, throwing bark splinters into the air. Mendo hid behind a tree. He lurched forward, narrowly escaping a bullet. A sandal slurped from his foot, left buried in the mud. Deep in the swamp, he stopped. His chest pumped. His head throbbed. Gunfire continued to rage in the distance. His village lights shone brightly. Home wasn’t safe. He’d be arrested for deserting Castro’s troops. He cupped his face in his hands. His brother’s girlfriend! Yes! His only hope of escape.

Mendo’s father used the stars far out at sea, beyond range of his mother’s makeshift kerosene lighthouse. He searched the skies for his father’s favorite, Cassiopeia constellation, shaped like a ‘W’. In the clear night it stood out like fresh fruit on a vine ready to be picked. Perched on a

tree limb, he turned northeast. In the distance, the Havana city night sky cast a white, yellowish, hue. The main road that separated access to the Gulf of Cazones and the road leading to Havana would be filled with military equipment and soldiers. Please god, don't let them see me.

Mendo pushed on through the night. Leeches burrowed through his skin. He stopped to dig them out with a small homemade fish knife. Dark, he came to the edge of the swamp, and the main road. An endless string of headlights paraded past as a military convoy moved southwest. Mendo lay flat, covered in mud, blending into the brush lining the side of the road. The vehicles unexpectedly stopped. In the distance the loud voices of soldiers rang out.

His heart thumping, Mendo rolled beneath a truck and lay frozen. The smell of diesel fumes nauseated him.

A voice commanded through a truck radio. "Everyone, remain in your vehicles. Don't move!"

He turned to see up and down the road. Above him, voices came from inside the vehicle. A cigarette butt landed nearby and rolled toward him. He squirmed to distance himself. Mendo's fists tightened like steel balls. Holding his breath, he rolled to the opposite roadside and lay motionless in the thicket. Thorns pricked his arms and legs. He waited. No truck door opened. Thank you, Jesus. Thank you! When the sound of truck engines resumed, he crawled into the brush until the hum of machinery faded. He reached an open field. The Havana lights were as beautiful as any sunrise he'd seen from sea.

His torn shirt and thorn-flayed arms brought back the memory of the dark silhouette walking down the gravel road. The memory of gunfire and the falling shadow caused him to cover his ears. Bile rose to his mouth. He held his stomach and puked. Please god, don't let it have been my father. He wiped his mouth, stood, and walked toward the city lights.

As the sun rose, he reached the outskirts of Havana. The city which had woken slowly, was coming alive. People



waited in long lines for buses and mothers in groups walked their children to school. He recognized a monument rising above two-story buildings. Later, panting, he stood in the shadow of the statue located in Lenin Park, on the outskirts of the city limits. He breathed in the freshness of the morning air and held it. When his thoughts returned to his father, he pushed them away. Mendo withdrew his small journal and flipped to the back, where his brother's girlfriend's address was scrolled. He'd been instructed to contact her in case of an emergency.

On the crowded street people stopped to gaze at him. When he passed a store front window he observed his own reflection. His muddied face, bleeding arms, legs and torn t-shirt explained their reaction. Ignoring people on the street, he raced to the address. He brushed past a young man, spinning him around.

*"Estúpido imbécil"*

"Lo siento, señor ." Such an altercation would have normally resulted in more than words, but he didn't look back to see if the man pursued him. Instead, he ran faster. A store front window display caught his eye. Mannequins dressed in white Guayabera shirts, like those worn by his father, caused him to slow down. His eyes welled with tears. What had he done? If his father was dead what would become of his mother? If only he had rushed back into the swamp when boats came to shore. Tarna, and his father, would now be safe.

Mendo ran down a deserted side street lined with two-story buildings. Worn laundry hung from balcony guard rails. Careful to avoid missing stones, he turned to race up the steps of a narrow building tightly squeezed between two others. He opened a green wood door and flew down the hallway. At Apartment 104, he banged until a woman asked, "Who is it at this hour of the morning? What do you want?"

"Camila, it's me, Mendo, Luis' brother. Open up!"

The door opened part way. A young attractive woman with long black hair and thin figure dressed in a blue silk bathrobe peered out through the narrow opening. A security chain dropped, and the door swung open. "*Chico!*" She wrapped her arms around Mendo and tugged him inside. She peered up and down the hallway. Satisfied, she slammed the door shut and replaced the chain.

"Mendo, stupid boy. What's wrong with you?"

"I'm not a stupid boy and there's nothing wrong with me, but I don't have anywhere to go. I don't know what to do."

Her eyes softened. "Sit down and I'll get something to drink."

Mendo sat on the sofa, gazing at the pictures of Camila and his brother on the wall. Their smiling faces stared back at him.

Camila returned carrying a bottle of beer. "You're almost seventeen. Here, take this. It's all I have."

Thirsty, he gulped down the cerveza.

"Your brother called me to warn me you might come here. He said the army was looking for you. Something about you deserting them at the beachhead when they needed you to guide them back through the swamp. He said they lost men because of you and that's why they're searching." Her chest heaved as she struggled to regain her breath.

Mendo's stomach lurched. He squeezed his eyes shut to prevent tears.

"Luis said I should keep you right here. He said he'll come as soon as he can. Will you do that, Mendo? Will you do as your brother says?"

Mendo nodded. The faces of his father and Tarna tumbled inside his brain like loose gravel.

Camila walked to the couch and wrapped her arms around him and patted his back.

His head leaned against her shoulder, eyes closed.

The door security chain snapped.

"Camila, it's me, Luis. Let me in."

She opened the door and embraced Luis.

Mendo jumped up. His brother's eyes appeared like an owl fixed on its prey. He wore the insignia of a sub-lieutenant on his shirt epaulettes, but to Mendo he was a general.

Luis pointed his finger. "What's wrong with you?"

Speechless, Mendo stared at the floor.

"Why did you run away, and leave those men without any way of finding their way back through the swamp? Do you have any idea what you've done?"

Fighting back tears, Mendo's lips quivered. "Our father is dead because of me. I killed him. It's all my fault."

Luis went to the sofa and pulled Mendo down next to him. His voice softened. "What! Father isn't dead. I talked with him this morning. He's home worried sick about you."

Mendo's mouth opened, his head fell back on the sofa.

"The army searched house to house looking for the kid that brought them to the beachhead. Lucky for you, you weren't there. That's how I learned what happened, and called Camila. I figured you might show up here, that's why I came. Their commander was the only one who knew your name, and he died at the beach. Look, Mendo, I can get you out of this, but you must do as you're told. You understand me?"

"Tarna, is she okay?"

"I don't know about Tarna, but do you understand me?" Shaking his head, he patiently waited. "Have you heard anything I've said to you?"

Fearful there was more to come, Mendo could only nod.

"If you return to the village you risk being identified, so you can't go back. *Nunca! Entender?*"

"But Maria, I have to see Maria."

"Stop! I'm putting myself at risk helping you. If you're not going to cooperate then turn yourself in and get the punishment you deserve." He paused while the anger in his voice subsided. "Look, Camila will let you stay here in her apartment, at least for now. Once this passes over, word can

be gotten to Maria, and she can come to see you here in Havana.”

Mendo nodded. He'd never heard his brother talk with such authority.

“I've already talked to friends working at an English-edition Havana newspaper. Good friends. As a favor to me, they're willing to hire you as a messenger. I told them you're seventeen years old, so lie. You understand?”

Mendo jumped to his feet. “But Father, he needs help fishing. He can't go out alone because of his arm. They won't be able to eat.”

“Never mind that. Now sit down. “He waited while is brother obeyed. “Our brother and I will take care of everything. All you have to do is what you're told. Just keep your mouth shut. Don't say anything about your taking those men through the swamp and do what you're told at work. If there are any problems tell Camila, she knows how to contact me. Is there anything I haven't made clear?”

Mendo shook his head.

“All right then, lie down here on the sofa and in the morning, Camila will get you some clean clothes so you look like a messenger.” Luis patted his brother on the shoulder. “And remember, you're not going there to be a journalist. It's an opportunity for you to learn English. For now, you need to lay low, and out of sight. Just do what they tell you to do, and everything will be okay.”

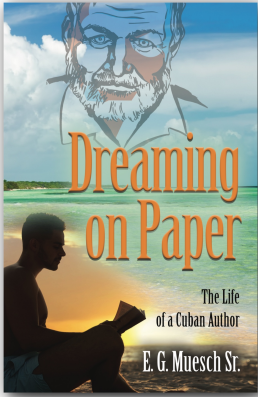
“I need to know why Father got so angry when he discovered me writing?”

Luis sat on the sofa next to him. “The truth is Father can't read or write. Above all else, he was a good fisherman. Everyone in our village for generations were fisherman. Children grew up to follow in their parents' footsteps or enter the army. I taught myself to read and write. That's how I got ahead in the military.” He tapped the stripes on his epilates. “Look, Mendo, you aren't a disappointment to Father, it has to do with the only way he knows his children can support a

*Dreaming on Paper*

family. That's all there is to it. Besides, I'd encourage you to keep writing. From what I've seen you would have made the worst fisherman in the village." He smiled, stood and left the room.

Camila covered him with a sheet and the couple retired to the bedroom. The latch snapped and the light from beneath the door went out. Mendo reached into his pocket and withdrew his journal. Each page reminded him of Tarna, and how she'd sacrificed, maybe died to save him. He wiped a tear away with the palm of his hand. She would be proud knowing he worked for a newspaper.



Dreaming on Paper chronicles the life of a Cuban author mentored by Hemingway and later jailed as a dissident. He struggles to find his missing manuscript while his family faces a criminal underworld intent on acquiring the valuable pages reported to be stashed in one of Hemingway's homes. Will his family lose everything including their lives?

## **Dreaming on Paper: The Life of a Cuban Author**

by E. G. Muesch Sr.

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