
El navegante dormido

Report by: Christina MacSweeney

As a hurricane approaches the island of Cuba in October 1977, the Godínez family secure the windows of their isolated house on the beach. And this house, built from imported hardwood to survive any storm and inherited from its previous owner, the North American, Dr Samuel O. Reefy (the Mister), is as much the centre of this narrative as its inhabitants.

The various generations of this extended family live among the slowly decaying remains of a past which no longer exists. Coronel Jardinero (Colonel Gardener), the patriarch of the family, burns charcoal to sell, works the land and milks the illegal cow they have to hide from the occasional passing soldier; his wife, Andrea, helps him as best she can but has been subsumed in melancholy since the death of her son, Esteban, assumed drowned while trying to escape the island; Mamina, the oldest character in this tale, daughter of former slaves, narrowly escaped being burnt alive in her parent's house when the war broke out in 1912. The story is narrated by Valeria who, thirty years after the hurricane, is living in a beautiful apartment in the Upper West side of Manhattan. As she recalls, imagines, invents the events of those few days she also builds up a vivid picture of the family. Another 'character' in the story is the North, an almost mythical place in which the members of the family spend part of their lives, through their memories or the physical artefacts left by Dr Reefy.

As the hurricane approaches and tension mounts, Jafet, Valeria's cousin, decides it is the moment to challenge the sea, perhaps more his natural environment than the island itself. Although Valeria sees him leave in Reefy's old boat, the Mayflower, the same one in which Esteban disappeared, she tells no one. With Jafet's disappearance, the tension in the house builds further and finally explodes when Elisa, Andrea's actress daughter, attempts to defend Cuba's system of 'social justice' to her father. The ensuing argument and reconciliation mirrors the sense of impending danger and the possibility of the following lull.

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