

CROSSING LE JEUNE

Even though she's mean to me sometimes, Maritza is my best friend. Abuela says I should be nice to Maritza 'cause Fidel put her papi in prison for writing something he didn't like, and she'll probably never see him again. Los communistas have been in power for twenty-one years now and they have put many people in prison for how they think, she says, and us Cubans have to stick together en este exilio.

Does sticking together mean breaking the rules? Maritza says that there is a santera named Yeya who works miracles and can cast a spell to bring her papi to Miami. All we have to do is get to the botanica on Le Jeune Road. The only problem is I am not allowed to cross Le Jeune or go inside the botanica. Abuela is real strict about her rules.

I feel sorry for Maritza. She's my best friend, and I have to go with her, but if abuela finds out, I'll be in big trouble. I think she should write President Carter or maybe even Fidel, but I know if I tell her this, she'll just call me a stupid ten-year-old like she always does. She thinks she's smarter than I am 'cause she's twelve and goes to Catholic school!

It seems that sometimes the whole world is on Le Jeune. If any of the nosy neighbors see us, they'll tell abuela for sure. We have to be very careful. Chismosos!

I can't believe her! I'm praying that no one will notice us, and here she is wearing her bright red outfit! Maritza must want us to get caught! She says red is so that Chango will protect us, don't you know anything?

Estupida!

The traffic sounds like lions roaring. The airplanes scream above the roar. Fumes from trucks, buses and cars. Sirens. Old men selling mamoncillos and churros. Dust and leaves swirl in the air as a dump truck speeds up to run the red light. The corner of Le Jeune, the moment of truth.

Maritza takes my hand as we cross. Cars zoom by us as they make the left turn. A man in the back of a pickup truck yells, "oye niña!" I trip and almost fall. Finally, the other side. Maybe the santera can cast a spell so I won't get in trouble.

The smell of incense, cigar smoke and rum greets us in front of the botanica. Blue and red paint flakes off the wall. In the window a faded picture of Santa Barbara who smiles as if she knows what we are up to.

Inside an old woman is burning incense and mumbling in a strange language. Over the door a picture of an eye watches over us. Dios todo lo ve! Statues of saints surround us like a small army. The air smells like burnt beans and green perfume. On the radio President Carter is giving a speech. I feel scared and guilty for breaking abuela's rule. Maritza asks to see Yeya the santera. She starts crying when she talks about her papi and how much she misses him.

I can hear
the sound
of cars
honk-

ing their horns. It sounds like something is happening outside. Suddenly a tall woman in a green dress comes in. She says El Mariel has been opened and people are leaving Cuba! Prisoners are being freed! Hundreds of boats are leaving the island! Some men come out of a back room shouting and crying. Outside people are running and yelling Viva Cuba! The sound of car horns grows louder.

The old woman tells us to go home. She says she knew 1980 would be the end of Fidel and soon Cuba will be free. Maritza starts running back as if her papi will be home when she gets there. I just hope abuela doesn't find out what I've been up to. Sometimes it's not easy being Cuban!

