The Parrot Who Met Papa, Ray Bradbury

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The kidnapping was reported all around the world, of course.

It took a few days for the full significance of the news to spread from Cuba to the United States, to the Left Bank in Paris, and then finally to some small good café in Pamplona where the drinks were fine and the weather, somehow, was always just right.

But once the meaning of the news really hit, people were on the phone, Madrid was calling New York, New York was shouting south at Havana to verify, please verify, this crazy thing.

And then some woman in Venice, Italy, with a blurred voice called through, saying she was at Harry's Bar that very instant and was destroyed, this thing that had happened was terrible, a cultural heritage was placed in immense and irrevocable danger…

Not an hour later. I got a call from a baseball pitcher-cum-novelist who had been a great friend of Papa's and who now lived in Madrid half the year and Nairobi the rest. He was in tears, or sounded close to it.

'Tell me,' he said, from halfway around the world, 'what happened? What are the facts?'

Well, the facts were these: Down in Havana, Cuba, about fourteen kilometers from Papa's Finca Vigía home, there is a bar in which he used to drink. It is the one where they named a special drink for him, not the fancy one where he used to meet flashy literary lights such as K-K-Kenneth Tynan and, er, Tennessee W-Williams (as Mr Tynan would say it).

No, it is not the Floridita; it is a shirt-sleeves place with plain wooden tables, sawdust on the floor, and a big mirror like a dirty cloud behind the bar. Papa went there when there were too many tourists around the Floridita who wanted to meet Mr Hemingway.

And the thing that happened there was destined to be big news, bigger than the report of what he said to Fitzgerald about the rich, even bigger than the story of his swing at Max Eastman on that long-ago day in Charlie Scribner's office. This news had to do with an ancient parrot.

That senior bird lived in a cage right atop the bar in the Cuba Libre. He had 'kept his cage' in that place for roughly twenty-nine years, which means that the old parrot had been there almost as long as Papa had lived in Cuba.

And that adds up to this monumental fact: All during the time Papa had lived in Finca Vigía, he had known the parrot and had talked to him and the parrot had talked back. As the years passed, people said that Hemingway began to talk like the parrot and others said no, the parrot learned to talk like him! Papa used to line the drinks up on the counter and sit near the cage and involve that bird in the best kind of conversation you ever heard, four nights running.

By the end of the second year, that parrot knew more about Hem and Thomas Wolfe and Sherwood Anderson than Gertrude Stein did. In fact, the parrot even knew who Gertrude Stein was. All you had to say was 'Gertrude' and the parrot said:
'Pigeons on the grass alas.'

At other times, pressed, the parrot would say. 'There was this old man and this boy and this boat and this sea and this big fish in the sea…' And then it would take time out to eat a cracker.

Well, this fabled creature, this parrot, this odd bird, vanished, cage and all, from the Cuba Libre late one Sunday afternoon.

And that's why my phone was ringing itself off the hook. And that's why one of the big magazines got a special State Department clearance and flew me down to Cuba to see if I could find so much as the cage, anything remaining of the bird or anyone resembling a kidnapper. They wanted a light and amiable article, with overtones, as they said. And,

very honestly. I was curious. I had heard rumors of the bird. In a strange kind of way, I was concerned.

I got off the jet from Mexico City and taxied straight across Havana to that strange little café-bar.

I almost failed to get in the place. As I stepped through the door, a dark little man jumped up from a chair and cried, 'No, no! Go away! We are closed!'

He ran out to jiggle the lock on the door, showing that he really meant to shut the place down. All the tables were empty and there was no one around. He had probably just been airing out the bar when I arrived.

'I've come about the parrot,' I said.
'No, no,' he cried, his eyes looking wet. 'I won't talk. It's too much. If I were not Catholic, I would kill myself. Poor Papa. Poor El Córdoba!'
'El Córdoba?' I murmured.

'That,' he said fiercely, 'was the parrot's name!'
'Yes,' I said, recovering quickly. 'El Córdoba. I've come to rescue him.'

That made him stop and blink. Shadows and then sunlight went over his face and then shadows again. 'Impossible! Could you? No, no. How could anyone! Who are you?'

'A friend to Papa and the bird.' I said quickly. 'And the more time we talk, the farther away goes the criminal. You want El Córdoba back tonight? Pour us several of Papa's good drinks and talk.'

My bluntness worked. Not two minutes later, we were drinking Papa's special, seated in the bar near the empty place where the cage used to sit. The little man, whose name was Antonio, kept wiping that empty place and then wiping his eyes with the bar rag. As I finished the first drink and started on the second, I said:
'This is no ordinary kidnapping.'

‘You’re telling me!’ cried Antonio. ‘People came from all over the world to see that parrot, to talk to El Córdoba, to hear him, ah, God, speak with the voice of Papa. May his abductors sink and burn in hell, yes, hell.’

‘They will,’ I said. ‘Whom do you suspect?’
‘Everyone. No one.’

‘The kidnapper,’ I said, eyes shut for a moment, savoring the drink, ‘had to be educated, a book reader, I mean, that’s obvious, isn’t it? Anyone like that around the last few days?’

‘Educated. No education. Señor, there have always been strangers the last ten, the last twenty years, always asking for Papa. When Papa was here, they met him. With Papa gone, they met El Córdoba, the great one. So it was always strangers and strangers.’

‘But think, Antonio.’ I said, touching his trembling elbow. ‘Not only educated, a reader, but someone in the last few days who was—how shall I put it?—odd. Strange. Someone so peculiar, muy ecéntrico, that you remember him above all others. Someone who—’

‘Madre de Dios!’ cried Antonio, leaping up. His eyes stared off into memory. He seized his head as if it had just exploded. ‘Thank you, señor. Sí, sí! What a creature! In the name of Christ, there was such a one yesterday! He was very small. And he spoke like this: very high—eeeee. Like a muchacha in a school play, eh? Like a canary swallowed by a witch! And he wore a blue-velvet suit with a big yellow tie.’

‘Yes, yes!’ I had leaped up now and was almost yelling. ‘Go on!’

‘And he had a small very round face, señor, and his hair was yellow and cut across the brow like this—zitt! And his mouth small, very pink, like candy, yes? He—he was like, yes, uno muñeco, of the kind one wins at carnivals.’

‘Kewpie dolls!’

‘Sí! At Coney Island, yes, when I was a child, Kewpie dolls! And he was so high, you see? To my elbow. Not a midget, no—but—and how old? Blood of Christ, who can say? No lines in his face, but—thirty, forty, fifty. And on his feet he was wearing—’

‘Green booties!’ I cried.
‘Qué?’
‘Shoes, boots!’
‘Sí.’ He blinked, stunned. ‘But how did you know?’
I exploded, ‘Shelley Capon!’

‘That is the name! And his friends with him, señor, all laughing—no, giggling. Like the nuns who play basketball in the late afternoons near the church. Oh, señor, do you think that they, that he—’

‘I don’t think, Antonio, I know. Shelley Capon, of all the writers in the world, hated Papa. Of course he would snatch El Córdoba. Why, wasn’t there a rumor once that the bird had memorized Papa’s last, greatest, and as-yet-not-put-down-on-paper novel?’

‘There was such a rumor, señor. But I do not write books, I tend bar. I bring crackers to the bird, I—’
‘You bring me the phone, Antonio, please.’
‘You know where the bird is, señor?’

‘I have the hunch beyond intuition, the big one. Gracias.’ I dialed the Havana Libre, the biggest hotel in town.
‘Shelley Capon, please.’
The phone buzzed and clicked.

Half a million miles away, a midget boy Martian lifted the receiver and played the flute and then the bell chimes with his voice: ‘Capon here.’
‘Damned if you aren’t!’ I said. And got up and ran out of the Cuba Libre bar.

Racing back to Havana by taxi, I thought of Shelley as I'd seen him before. Surrounded by a storm of friends, living out of suitcases, ladling soup from other people's plates, borrowing money from billfolds seized from your pockets right in front of you, counting the lettuce leaves with relish, leaving rabbit pellets on your rug, gone. Dear Shelley Capon.

Ten minutes later, my taxi with no brakes dropped me running and spun on to some ultimate disaster beyond town.

Still running, I made the lobby, paused for information, hurried upstairs, and stopped short before Shelley's door. It pulsed in spasms like a bad heart. I put my ear to the door. The wild calls and cries from inside might have come from a flock of birds, feather-stripped in a hurricane.

I felt the door. Now it seemed to tremble like a vast laundromat that had swallowed and was churning an acid-rock group and a lot of very dirty linen. Listening, my underwear began to crawl on my legs.

I knocked. No answer. I touched the door. It drifted open. I stepped in upon a scene much too dreadful for Bosch to have painted.

Around the pigpen living room were strewn various life-size dolls, eyes half-cracked open, cigarettes smoking in burned, limp fingers, empty Scotch glasses in hands, and all the while the radio belted them with concussions of music broadcast from some Stateside asylum.

The place was sheer carnage. Not ten seconds ago, I felt, a large dirty locomotive must have plunged through here. Its victims had been hurled in all directions and now lay upside down in various parts of the room, moaning for first aid.

In the midst of this hell, seated erect and proper, well dressed in velveteen jerkin, persimmon bow tie, and bottle-green booties, was, of course, Shelley Capon. Who with no surprise at all waved a drink at me and cried:

‘I knew that was you on the phone. I am absolutely telepathic! Welcome. Raimundo!’

He always called me Raimundo. Ray was plain bread and butter. Raimundo made me a don with a breeding farm full of bulls. I let it be Raimundo.
‘Raimundo, sit down! No…fling yourself into an interesting position.’

‘Sorry.’ I said in my best Dashiell Hammett manner, sharpening my chin and steeling my eyes. ‘No time.’

I began to walk around the room among his friends Fester and Soft and Ripply and Mild Innocuous and some actor I remembered who, when asked how he would do a part in a film, had said, ‘I’ll play it like a doe.’

I shut off the radio. That made a lot of people in the room stir. I yanked the radio’s roots out of the wall. Some people sat up. I raised a window. I threw the radio out. They all screamed as if I had thrown their mothers down an elevator shaft.

The radio made a satisfying sound on the cement sidewalk below. I turned, with a beatific smile on my face. A number of people were on their feet, swaying toward me with faint menace. I pulled a twenty-dollar bill out of my pocket, handed it to someone without looking at him, and said, ‘Go buy a new one.’ He ran out the door slowly. The door slammed. I heard him fall down the stairs as if he were after his morning shot in the arm.

‘All right, Shelley,’ I said, ‘where is it?’
‘Where is what, dear boy?’ he said, eyes wide with innocence.
‘You know what I mean.’ I stared at the drink in his tiny hand.

Which was a Papa drink, the Cuba Libre’s very own special blend of papaya, lime, lemon, and rum. As if to destroy evidence, he drank it down quickly.
I walked over to three doors in a wall and touched one.

‘That’s a closet, dear boy.’ I put my hand on the second door.
‘Don’t go in. You’ll be sorry what you see.’ I didn’t go in.

I put my hand on the third door. ‘Oh, dear, well, go ahead,’ said Shelley petulantly. I opened the door.
Beyond it was a small anteroom with a mere cot and a table near the window.

On the table sat a bird cage with a shawl over it. Under the shawl I could hear the rustle of feathers and the scrape of a beak on the wires. Shelley Capon came to stand small beside me, looking in at the cage, a fresh drink in his little fingers.

‘What a shame you didn’t arrive at seven tonight,’ he said.
‘Why seven?’

‘Why, then, Raimundo, we would have just finished our curried fowl stuffed with wild rice. I wonder, is there much white meat, or any at all, under a parrot’s feathers?’
‘You wouldn’t!?’ I cried.
I stared at him.

‘You would,’ I answered myself.

I stood for a moment longer at the door. Then, slowly, I walked across the small room and stopped by the cage with the shawl over it. I saw a single word embroidered across the top of the shawl: MOTHER.

I glanced at Shelley. He shrugged and looked shyly at his boot tips. I took hold of the shawl. Shelley said, ‘No. Before you lift it…ask something.’
‘Like what?’

‘DiMaggio. Ask DiMaggio.’
A small ten-watt bulb clicked on in my head. I nodded. I leaned near the hidden cage and whispered: ‘DiMaggio. 1939.’

There was a sort of animal-computer pause. Beneath the word MOTHER some feathers stirred, a beak tapped the cage bars. Then a tiny voice said:
'Home runs, thirty. Batting average, .381.'

I was stunned. But then I whispered: 'Babe Ruth. 1927.'
Again the pause, the feathers, the beak, and: 'Home runs, sixty. Batting average, .356. Awk.'

'My God,' I said.
'My God,' echoed Shelley Capon.
'That's the parrot who met Papa, all right.'
'That's who it is.'
And I lifted the shawl.

I don't know what I expected to find underneath the embroidery. Perhaps a miniature hunter in boots, bush jacket, and wide-brimmed hat. Perhaps a small, trim fisherman with a beard and turtleneck sweater perched there on a wooden slat. Something tiny, something literary, something human, something fantastic, but not really a parrot.

But that's all there was.

And not a very handsome parrot, either. It looked as if it had been up all night for years; one of those disreputable birds that never preens its feathers or shines its beak. It was a kind of rusty green and black with a dull-amber snout and rings under its eyes as if it were a secret drinker. You might see it half flying, half hopping out of café-bars at three in the morning. It was the burn of the parrot world.

Shelley Capon read my mind. 'The effect is better,' he said, 'with the shawl over the cage.'
I put the shawl back over the bars.

I was thinking very fast. Then I thought very slowly. I bent and whispered by the cage:
'Norman Mailer.'

‘Couldn’t remember the alphabet,’ said the voice beneath the shawl.
‘Gertrude Stein,’ I said.

‘Suffered from undescended testicles,’ said the voice.
‘My God,’ I gasped.

I stepped back. I stared at the covered cage. I blinked at Shelley Capon.
‘Do you really know what you have here, Capon?’

‘A gold mine, dear Raimundo!’ he crowed.
‘A mint!’ I corrected.
‘Endless opportunities for blackmail!’
‘Causes for murder!’ I added.

‘Think!’ Shelley snorted into his drink. ‘Think what Mailer’s publishers alone would pay to shut this bird up!’
I spoke to the cage:
‘F. Scott Fitzgerald.’
Silence.
‘Try “Scottie,”’ said Shelley.

‘Ah,’ said the voice inside the cage. ‘Good left jab but couldn’t follow through. Nice contender, but—’
‘Faulkner,’ I said.

‘Batting average fair, strictly a singles hitter.’
‘Steinbeck!’
‘Finished last at end of season.’
‘Ezra Pound!’
‘Traded off to the minor leagues in 1932.’

‘I think…I need…one of those drinks.’ Someone put a drink in my hand. I gulped it and nodded. I shut my eyes and felt the world give one turn, then opened my eyes to look at Shelley Capon, the classic son of a bitch of all time.

‘There is something even more fantastic,’ he said. ‘You’ve heard only the first half.’
‘You’re lying,’ I said. ‘What could there be?’

He dimpled at me—in all the world, only Shelley Capon can dimple at you in a completely evil way. ‘It was like this,’ he said. ‘You remember that Papa had trouble actually getting his stuff down on paper in those last years while he lived here? Well, he’d planned another novel after Islands in the Stream, but somehow it just never seemed to get written.

‘Oh, he had it in his mind, all right—the story was there and lots of people heard him mention it—but he just couldn’t seem to write it. So he would go to the Cuba Libre and drink many drinks and have long conversations with the parrot.

Raimundo, what Papa was telling El Córdoba all through those long drinking nights was the story of his last book. And, in the course of time, the bird has memorized it.’

‘His very last book!’ I said. ‘The final Hemingway novel of all time! Never written but recorded in the brain of a parrot! Holy Jesus!’
Shelley was nodding at me with the smile of a depraved cherub.

‘How much do you want for this bird?’

‘Dear, dear Raimundo,’ Shelley Capon stirred his drink with his pinkie. ‘What makes you think the creature is for sale?’

‘You sold your mother once, then stole her back and sold her again under another name. Come off it. Shelley. You’re onto something big.’ I brooded over the shawled cage. ‘How many telegrams have you sent out in the last four or five hours?’
‘Really! You horrify me!’

‘How many long-distance phone calls, reverse charges, have you made since breakfast?’

Shelley Capon mourned a great sigh and pulled a crumpled telegram duplicate from his velveteen pocket. I took it and read:
FRIENDS OF PAPA MEETING HAVANA TO REMINISCE OVER BIRD AND BOTTLE. WIRE BID OR BRING CHECKBOOKS AND OPEN MINDS. FIRST COME FIRST SERVED. ALL WHITE MEAT BUT CAVIAR PRICES. INTERNATIONAL PUBLICATION, BOOK, MAGA-ZINE, TV, FILM RIGHTS AVAILABLE. LOVE. SHELLEY YOU-KNOW-WHO.

My God again, I thought, and let the telegram fall to the floor as Shelley handed me a list of names the telegram had been sent to:
Time. Life. Newsweek. Scribner's. Simon & Schuster.

The New York Times. The Christian Science Monitor. The Times of London. Le Monde. Paris-Match. One of the Rockefellers. Some of the Kennedys. CBS. NBC. MGM. Warner Bros. 20th Century-Fox. And on and on and on. The list was as long as my deepening melancholy.

Shelley Capon tossed an armful of answering telegrams onto the table near the cage. I leafed through them quickly.

Everyone, but everyone, was in the air, right now. Jets were streaming in from all over the world. In another two hours, four, six at the most, Cuba would be swarming with agents, publishers, fools, and plain damn fools, plus counter-espionage kidnappers and blonde starlets who hoped to be in front-page photographs with the bird on their shoulders.

I figured I had maybe a good half hour left in which to do something, I didn't know what.

Shelley nudged my arm. 'Who sent you, dear boy? You are the very first, you know. Make a fine bid and you're in free, maybe. I must consider other offers, of course. But it might get thick and nasty here. I begin to panic at what I've done. I may wish to sell cheap and flee. Because, well, think, there's the problem of getting this bird out of the country, yes? And, simultaneously, Castro might declare the parrot a national monument or work of art, or, oh, hell, Raimundo, who did send you?'

‘Someone, but now no one,’ I said, brooding. ‘I came on behalf of someone else. I’ll go away on my own. From now on, anyway, it’s just me and the bird. I’ve read Papa all my life. Now I know I came just because I had to.’

‘My God, an altruist!’
‘Sorry to offend you, Shelley.’

The phone rang. Shelley got it. He chatted happily for a moment, told someone to wait downstairs, hung up, and cocked an eyebrow at me: ‘NBC is in the lobby. They want an hour’s taped interview with El Córdoba there. They’re talking six figures.’

My shoulders slumped. The phone rang. This time I picked it up, to my own surprise. Shelley cried out. But I said, ‘Hello. Yes?’

‘Señor,’ said a man’s voice. ‘There is a Señor Hobwell here from Time, he says, magazine.’ I could see the parrot’s face on next week’s cover, with six follow-up pages of text.

‘Tell him to wait.’ I hung up.
‘Newsweek?’ guessed Shelley.
‘The other one,’ I said.

‘The snow was fine up in the shadow of the hills,’ said the voice inside the cage under the shawl.
‘Shut up,’ I said quietly, wearily. ‘Oh, shut up, damn you.’

Shadows appeared in the doorway behind us. Shelley Capon’s friends were beginning to assemble and wander into the room. They gathered and I began to tremble and sweat.

For some reason. I began to rise to my feet. My body was going to do something, I didn’t know what. I watched my hands. Suddenly, the right hand reached out. It knocked the cage over, snapped the wire-frame door wide, and darted in to seize the parrot.

‘No!’
There was a great gasping roar, as if a single thunderous wave had come in on a shore. Everyone in the room seemed knocked in the stomach by my action. Everyone exhaled, took a step, began to yell, but by then I had the parrot out. I had it by the throat.

‘No! No!’ Shelley jumped at me. I kicked him in the shins. He sat down, screaming.

‘Don’t anyone move!’ I said and almost laughed, hearing myself use the old cliché. ‘You ever see a chicken killed? This parrot has a thin neck. One twist, the head comes off. Nobody move a hair.’ Nobody moved.

‘You son of a bitch,’ said Shelley Capon, on the floor.

For a moment, I thought they were all going to rush me. I saw myself beaten and chased along the beach, yelling, the cannibals ringing me in and eating me, Tennessee Williams style, shoes and all. I felt sorry for my skeleton, which would be found in the main Havana plaza at dawn tomorrow.

But they did not hit, pummel, or kill. As long as I had my fingers around the neck of the parrot who met Papa, I knew I could stand there forever.

I wanted with all my heart, soul, and guts to wring the bird’s neck and throw its disconnected carcass into those pale and gritty faces. I wanted to stop up the past and destroy Papa’s preserved memory forever, if it was going to be played with by feeble-minded children like these.

But I could not, for two reasons. One dead parrot would mean one dead duck: me. And I was weeping inside for Papa. I simply could not shut off his voice transcribed here, held in my hands, still alive, like an old Edison record. I could not kill.

If these ancient children had known that, they would have swarmed over me like locusts. But they didn't know. And, I guess, it didn't show in my face.
'Stand back!' I cried.

It was that beautiful last scene from The Phantom of the Opera where Lon Chaney, pursued through midnight Paris, turns on the mob, lifts his clenched fist as if it contained an explosive, and holds the mob at bay for one terrific instant. He laughs, opens his hand to show it empty, and then is driven to his death in the river…Only I had no intention of letting them see an empty hand. I kept it close around El Córdoba's scrawny neck.
'Clear a path to the door!' They cleared a path.

'Not a move, not a breath. If anyone so much as swoons, this bird is dead forever and no rights, no movies, no photos. Shelley, bring me the cage and the shawl.'
Shelley Capon edged over and brought me the cage and its cover.
'Stand off!' I yelled.
Everyone jumped back another foot.

'Now, hear this,' I said. 'After I've got away and have hidden out, one by one each of you will be called to have his chance to meet Papa's friend here again and cash in on the headlines.'
I was lying. I could hear the lie. I hoped they couldn't. I spoke more quickly now, to cover the lie: 'I'm going to start walking now. Look. See? I have the parrot by the neck.

He'll stay alive as long as you play "Simon says" my way. Here we go, now. One, two. One, two. Halfway to the door.' I walked among them and they did not breathe. 'One, two.' I said, my heart beating in my mouth. 'At the door. Steady. No sudden moves. Cage in one hand. Bird in the other—'

'The lions ran along the beach on the yellow sand,' said the parrot, his throat moving under my fingers.

‘Oh, my God,’ said Shelley, crouched there by the table. Tears began to pour down his face. Maybe it wasn’t all money. Maybe some of it was Papa for him, too. He put his hands out in a beckoning, come-back gesture to me, the parrot, the cage. ‘Oh. God, oh. God.’ He wept.

‘There was only the carcass of the great fish lying by the pier, its bones picked clean in the morning light,’ said the parrot.
‘Oh,’ said everyone softly.

I didn’t wait to see if any more of them were weeping. I stepped out. I shut the door. I ran for the elevator. By a miracle, it was there, the operator half asleep inside. No one tried to follow. I guess they knew it was no use.

On the way down, I put the parrot inside the cage and put the shawl marked MOTHER over the cage. And the elevator moved slowly down through the years.

I thought of those years ahead and where I might hide the parrot and keep him warm against any weather and feed him properly and once a day go in and talk through the shawl, and nobody ever to see him, no papers, no magazines, no cameramen, no Shelley Capon, not even Antonio from the Cuba Libre.

Days might go by or weeks and sudden fears might come over me that the parrot had gone dumb.

Then, in the middle of the night I might wake and shuffle in and stand by his cage and say:
‘Italy, 1918…?’

And beneath the word MOTHER, an old voice would say: ‘The snow drifted off the edges of the mountain in a fine white dust that winter…’
‘Africa, 1932.’

‘We got the rifles out and oiled the rifles and they were blue and fine and lay in our hands and we waited in the tall grass and smiled—’

‘Cuba. The Gulf Stream.’

‘That fish came out of the water and jumped as high as the sun. Everything I had ever thought about a fish was in that fish. Everything I had ever thought about a single leap was in that leap. All of my life was there. It was a day of sun and water and being alive. I wanted to hold it all still in my hands. I didn’t want it to go away, ever. Yet there, as the fish fell and the waters moved over it white and then green, there it went…’

By that time, we were at the lobby level and the elevator doors opened and I stepped out with the cage labeled MOTHER and walked quickly across the lobby and out to a taxicab.

The trickiest business—and my greatest danger—remained. I knew that by the time I got to the airport, the guards and the Castro militia would have been alerted, I wouldn’t put it past Shelley Capon to tell them that a national treasure was getting away.

He might even cut Castro in on some of the Book-of-the-Month Club revenue and the movie rights. I had to improvise a plan to get through customs.

I am a literary man, however, and the answer came to me quickly. I had the taxi stop long enough for me to buy some shoe polish. I began to apply the disguise to El Córdoba. I painted him black all over.

‘Listen,’ I said, bending down to whisper into the cage as we drove across Havana. ‘Nevermore.’

I repeated it several times to give him the idea. The sound would be new to him, because, I guessed, Papa would never have quoted a middleweight contender he had knocked out years ago. There was silence under the shawl while the word was recorded.

Then, at last, it came back to me. ‘Nevermore,’ in Papa’s old, familiar, tenor voice, ‘nevermore,’ it said.

The end