

Interlude

THE ROAD TO MAYBERRY

Nobody's from no place.

ANDY TAYLOR, "STRANGER IN TOWN" (1.12)

THE DEBUT EPISODE OF *THE ANDY GRIFFITH SHOW* was broadcast on October 3, 1960. Two weeks later, in Havana, my family's food wholesaling business—we called it *el almacén*, the warehouse—was confiscated by the Castro regime. A few days after that, on October 24, 1960, I left Cuba with my parents, my two brothers, and my sister on an overnight ferry to Key West called, of all things, *The City of Havana*. I was eleven years old. My parents were in their late thirties. That evening CBS broadcast the fourth episode of *TAGS*, "Ellie Comes to Town." It strikes me as fitting and a little eerie that as Ellie was settling into Mayberry, I was beginning my own road to the Friendly Town. The story of how I became an undocumented Mayberrian, the town's resident alien, began on that Monday.

Like hundreds of thousands of other Cubans, we settled in Miami. Except that we didn't truly settle, since we were planning to return to Cuba to pick up where the island's turbulent history had left us off. We saw ourselves as people passing through, transients rather than settlers. Unlike immigrants, we didn't come to America looking for a better life. We had a good one in Cuba. America was a rest stop before we turned around and headed back home. The immigrant lives in the fast lane. He is in a hurry—in a hurry to get a job, learn the language, lay down roots. If he arrives as an adult, he squeezes a second lifetime into the first. If he arrives as a child, he

grows up in a hurry. Not so with the exile, whose life creeps forward one disappointment at a time. If the immigrant rushes, the exile waits. He waits to embark on a new career, to learn the new language, to start a new life. If immigration is a second birth, exile is a refusal to be born again. To the forces that push him forward, the exile says: I'm not budging. For the exile, every day is delay, every day is deferral. If his life were a painting, it would have to be a tableau. If it were a piece of music, it would have to be played *lentissimo*.

This is what it was like to grow up in Little Havana in the 1960s. We spent our days in a state of alert, waiting for the bridge across the water. Talk of Cuba was constant, and constantly hopeful. By the end of the 1960s, the rest of the country was in the throes of turbulent social changes, but for us the only thing that mattered was Cuba. This attitude, a variety of insularism, extended into the 1970s and 1980s. Many of the Cuban old-timers in Miami still feel this way today. They continue to wait. They cannot acknowledge that their homeland is no longer their home.

For myself, I came to accept, slowly and grudgingly, that our exile was irreversible, a steady state rather than a temporary condition. I was no longer an exiled Cuban, I was a Cuban exile. The noun, the substantive, was "exile." Location trumped nationality. Residence preceded essence. At the end of Andy García's movie *The Lost City*, his character, Fico Fellove, newly arrived in the United States, says to a friend: "I'm only impersonating an exile. I'm still in Cuba." I don't think Fico would say the same thing were he still in New York fifty years later. Perhaps he would say instead: "I'm only impersonating a Cuban. I've always been an exile."

Probably the first inkling that exile from Cuba was becoming chronic came with the Bay of Pigs invasion in April of 1961. When it failed, my parents no longer talked with the same optimism of our imminent return to Cuba. In the decades that followed, the cycle of booms of hope followed by busts of disappointment kept repeating itself. Year after year, on New Year's Eve, we would intone the toast: "El año que viene estamos en Cuba." "Next year in Cuba." But as the years went by, the expectation of return waned, though no one talked very much about it. The once hopeful toast had become mournful—words for a dirge rather than for a celebration.

The last time when it seemed to us that the end of exile was at hand was at the beginning of the 1990s. The collapse of the Soviet Union had made Cuban exiles, once again, hopeful of return. As a popular song of the day put it, "Nuestro día ya viene llegando." "Our

day is coming." With the disappearance of Soviet subsidies, conditions in Cuba became dire indeed, but the dictatorship continued to hang on.

When someone spends decades nourished by the anticipation of *regreso*, return, it's not easy to accept that finally the time has come to be born again. The cultural newborn greets his new world kicking and screaming. If he could, he would crawl back into the womb of memory and hope. But he also knows that memory and hope can no longer sustain him because the promise implicit in them cannot be fulfilled. I understand that this will sound bizarre, but what helped me accept the fact of chronic exile, the midwives of my second birth, were two American TV shows. One was *I Love Lucy*, a sitcom from the 1950s that centers on a ditzy redhead and her Cuban husband; and the other was *TAGS*. I'm not sure how many literature professors regard sitcoms as equipment for living, but I have to confess that, much as I love literature, *I Love Lucy* and *The Andy Griffith Show* have had a greater impact on my life than any book I've ever read or written. Without them, I might never have cut the umbilical cord to Cuba.

The two shows could not be more different. The Ricardos live in a one-bedroom apartment in midtown Manhattan; the Taylors in a two-story bungalow in a small town in the Piedmont. *I Love Lucy* centers on a couple, Lucy and Ricky; *TAGS* on a single father and his son, Andy and Opie. Ricky's accent is no less noticeable than Andy's drawl, but that's where the resemblance ends. Music is also prominent in both, but in *TAGS* it's hymns and bluegrass, while at Ricky's Club Babalú all roads lead to rumba. *I Love Lucy's* theme song is a Latin-tinged big-band number. Andy and Opie stroll to the fishing hole while a simple, whistled melody plays in the background.

Growing up in Little Havana, I didn't watch either of these shows because they didn't seem relevant to my life. Had I watched *TAGS*, I probably would have been baffled by Andy's drawl, not to mention Gomer's and Goober's. Had I watched *I Love Lucy*, Ricky would have seemed like a caricature of the Cuban men around me. For American baby boomers, classic TV shows like *TAGS* and *I Love Lucy* make up the sound track of their childhood, as Robert Thompson has remarked.¹ The sound track of my childhood was Cuban-exile talk radio as exemplified in a station that called itself "La Cubanísima," a station more Cuban than which none could be conceived.

It was not until thirty years later, as I was coming finally to the realization that we were here to stay, that *I Love Lucy* became rele-

vant to my life. Return to Cuba seemed more remote than ever. To make matters worse, my family had entered one of those periods of contraction that bedevil all families. In the early decades of exile, my parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles were all alive, and those of us who had arrived as children were growing up and starting families of our own. It seemed to me then that nobody ever died in Miami. By the 1990s, however, the first generation — those for whom return to Cuba would have been most meaningful — had begun to pass away, taking with them the memories of life before exile. With each death, Cuba grew a little more distant. It was clear that we were reaching the point of no return, an expression that, for a family of exiles, acquires a unique depth of meaning.

At the time I was going through changes of my own. I had recently married an American (second marriages sometimes accompany second births). As we were getting to know each other, Mary Anne told me that before meeting me the only Cuban she knew well was Ricky Ricardo. As she phrased it, I was Ricky Ricardo with a Ph.D. Since Mary Anne was the first American I had gotten to know well, in spite of having lived in the United States for three decades, we were curious to see how a Cuban man and an American woman made a life together. *I Love Lucy* reruns came on every afternoon on TBS. I would tape the episodes onto our now-obsolete VCR and we would watch them together in the evening. *I Love Lucy* became our version of foreplay.

It also provided the inspiration for my book called *Life on the Hyphen*. Much of what I say there about the pleasures, perils, and possibilities of a bicultural life, of a life on the hyphen, I learned by watching Ricky love Lucy. In one memorable episode, Lucy decides that Ricky misses Cuba and decides to dress up like his mother. Or like her idea of Ricky's mother. When Ricky returns from a long day of rehearsals at the Babalú Club, he walks into the apartment and utters those immortal and problematic words, "Lucy, I'm home." She emerges from the bedroom dressed like Carmen Miranda singing a song in Portuguese. Befuddled, Ricky wants to know what's going on. Sounding every bit like the American he isn't, he says, "Lucy, have you gone off your rocker?" She explains that she wanted to remind him of his happy childhood in Cuba. Ricky's reply turned into the mantra of my cultural rebirth: "Lucy, honey, if I wanted things Cuban, I would have stayed in Havana. That's the reason I married you, cause you're so different from everyone I'd known before."

Fast-forward a decade. After teaching at Duke University for

many years, I had taken a position at Columbia University. As I mention in the introduction, once I became a part-time northerner, an unexpected thing happened. Instead of looking forward to next year in Cuba or to the next vacation in Miami, as I had done for all of my life, I now looked forward to Christmases and summers in the Tarheel State, where we had kept our house. To mitigate my Carolina blues, I began to watch reruns of *TAGS*, as we had done years earlier with *I Love Lucy*. Each episode was like an anti-exile pill. For as long as it lasted, I was no longer a Cuban exile; I was a Mayberrian. Like Ed Sawyer, "the stranger in town," I found in the townspeople a warmth, a *philia*, absent from my everyday life. Identifying with those anonymous passersby that we see strolling down Main Street, I felt at home in Mayberry.

After a while, the y'all's and drawls of the characters became music to my ears, sounds as sweet as sourwood honey. We speak of people being comfortable in their own skins; but we should also speak of people being comfortable in their own mouths. That's how Mayberrians sounded to me. Exiles have uncomfortable mouths. My Cuban accent is a symptom of unease, a disturbance caused by the clash between my two languages. But the Southern accent of Mayberrians testifies to the harmony of word and mouth. Whether it's Andy's soft drawl or Gomer's comical twang, words flow from their tongues without a hint of difficulty or unease. Even the Darling sons, who never speak a word, have comfortable mouths, as becomes evident when they start to sing. Just as there are no travel agencies, there are no mumblers in Mayberry. The marriage of person and place is matched by the fit of tongue and mouth.

At the same time, I realized that the Mayberry of *TAGS* was not so different from the Little Havana where I grew up. Both were tight-knit, self-sufficient communities of like-minded people. When Mayberrians get together in Floyd's barbershop or at the church social, every sentence they utter to one another, whatever its specific meaning and context, also says: we are alike. If Andy and Barney spend quiet moments on the porch or in the courthouse without speaking, the reason is that among intimates, people with a shared history and outlook, almost everything goes without saying. To be understood without explanation is the sure indication that you are among kin or kith. That's the way things are in Mayberry, and the way they used to be in Little Havana in the 1960s. Everyone didn't know everyone, but everyone knew about everyone, as in *TAGS* when Barney and Andy share recollections of a high school teacher, or when Floyd recalls

some bit of Mayberrian lore. The Little Havana of those years also seemed to be full of Aunt Bees and uncle Floyds (he's not literally an uncle, but he behaves like one). My own uncle Floyd was Tío Mike, who used to take us to the side and entertain us with wild stories about the time when dinosaurs roamed Cuba. My Aunt Bee was his wife, Tía Mary, restless and never at a loss for words. Barney's also abounded. When they weren't working for \$35 a week as security guards or janitors, they were hatching grandiose schemes for toppling Fidel Castro. And like Mayberrians, we had our own southern dialect, Cuban Spanish, much faster than a drawl but just as unintelligible to outsiders.

The other thing that Little Havana had in common with Mayberry was the conviction of loss, a conviction seldom verbalized but firmly embedded in the psyche of the group. Few communities are more tightly knit than a community of losers. Growing up in Miami, I belonged to such a community. I was surrounded by apostles of a Lost Cause, a romantic legend whose site was not the Old South but Old Cuba, the *Cuba de ayer* of my parents and grandparents. I was an apostle myself. The historical circumstances are quite different, of course, but the sentiments were similar. Indulging our nostalgia, we engaged in some of the same embellishments as did Southerners for decades after the Civil War. Like the advocates of the Lost Cause, we never tired of evoking a place that no longer existed, that perhaps had never existed. The Franco-American novelist Julien Green, who grew up in France as the descendant of Confederates, recalls that his mother looked upon him and his siblings as "the children of a nation which no longer existed but lived on in her heart." He adds: "We were eternally the conquered but unreconciled—rebels, to employ a word dear to her."² Cuban exiles felt the same way, conquered but unreconciled. Some of us still do.

Right now I am doing what Mayberrians do. I am "settin' and starin'." Throughout the couple of years that I have been thinking and writing about Mayberry, it has often appeared to me that there is something Mayberrian about the birds that patronize the birdfeeders at our home in Chapel Hill. When I first watched the 249 episodes in sequence, I would look up from my computer screen, and there they would be, an avian Mayberry: the woodpeckers (Barn and Floyd), the blue jays (Goober and Gomer), the melodious finches (the Darlings), the tufted titmice (Ellie, Helen, Thelma Lou), the chickadees (Opie, Leon, and Johnny Paul), the cardinals (Aunt Bee and Clara), the wrens (the Fun Girls), the nuthatches (Ernest T. Bass), the

scrawny robin (Judd), the occasional grackles (Mayors Stoner and Pike), the even rarer bluebird (Sharon DeSpain). There is a timelessness to birds in a birdfeeder, as there is to Mayberry. They always look like the same birds, though obviously they aren't. A month, two months, go by and you look up from your work and there it is, that cardinal, that nuthatch, that you were looking at months ago, or last year . . . Nobody's from no place, as Andy says, and some people are lucky enough to stay in their place.