ESSAY

Gustavo Pérez Firmat
Books of Intimate Knowledge

It wasn't as if there weren't any in the home where I grew up. We didn't have a library, but a small room with the only phone in the house—it was called, logically, el cuarto del teléfono—contained two sets of bookshelves. A short, free-standing bookshelf displayed a children's encyclopedia, the *Book of Knowledge*, none of whose volumes I ever opened. The other bookshelf, on the wall above the desk where the phone sat, had my mother's books, two or three dozen, mostly biographies and nineteenth-century novels. Not that I read any of those either. As a child the closest I got to books other than textbooks was comics. Occasionally, my mother read to me from an illustrated Bible and the *One Thousand and One Nights*. This happened mostly when I was sick, and I don't think it counts.

My mother's father did have a library, but only two of his books have survived time and exile: a Spanish-language New Testament and *La vida sencilla,* the translation of *La vie simple* (1895) by Charles Wagner, a French pastor whose inspirational writings enjoyed great popularity at the turn of the last century. After we left Cuba in October 1960, the books leaned against the side of a shelf in the Florida Room of our duplex in Miami. They remained there for more than thirty years.

For my forty-third birthday, my mother sent me the New Testament as a present. On the flyleaf she inscribed it in Spanish. In my English translation, she wrote: "This book belonged to my father Pedro Firmat Cabrera de Armas. Today, February 29, 1992, I pass it on to my son Gustavo Pérez Firmat with the hope that it will be for him what it was for my father and accompany him always. I brought it into exile in the year 1960. Luz María Pérez. Miami, FL." At the bottom she added: "The marks [llaves] that appear in the book were made by my father."

Two holy cards came with the book. The one in English contained an after-Communion prayer, "Jesus, Help Me!" The one in Spanish, a prayer to St. Thomas Aquinas, the "patron of Catholic students" to whom I owe one of my middle names. The card is dated March 7, 1958, the day I turned nine years old. I assume that she had placed the cards inside the pages of the New Testament right before she sent it to me.

Her gift didn't thrill me. I interpreted it as a combination of mild hectoring and wishful thinking. A year earlier I had divorced, a change of life that my mother didn't approve of. Her father had divorced her mother, and I

think that she regarded my separation much as she regarded her father's: as a cruel and selfish whim. In the Cuba of the 1930s, divorce was rare and frowned upon. The stigma of being hija de divorciados (the daughter of divorcees) haunted her throughout her adolescence and into her married life. Anytime she got into a scrape with her mother-in-law, Constantina would hurl this insult at her. It may well have been that my mother didn't want my children, in elementary school at the time, to suffer as she had. Not to mention that she was very close to my ex-wife, who is Cuban. "Rosa," she used to say, "is the only person who understands me." (Stubborn like her son, my mother didn't give up easily: a year later her birthday present was a bottle of Paco Rabanne cologne and a card from Father Edward of the Salesian Missions stating that she had pledged thirty masses for the salvation of my soul.)

Decades later, the turbulence of those years long past, I am struck by the odd impersonality of her inscription. She speaks of me in the third person, as if writing for someone else. Adopting American usage (the result of her long exile), she signs using my father's last name. (In Cuba she would have signed "Luz María Firmat de Pérez.") Only two people named Firmat appear in the inscription, her father and her son, as if she were not part of the Firmat lineage. Three times she refers to Pedro Firmat as her father, mi padre. Nowhere does she refer to him as my grandfather, tu abuelo. I may be reading too much into her words (an old professorial habit), but I sense an undercurrent of unease, perhaps of rancor, in her note.

Since Abuelo Firmat passed away when I was barely five years old, I have no firm memories of him. When I try to remember him, I don't see a face or hear a voice. I see a white, one-story house in the middle of what Cubans call "un placer," a bare lot within a city (why the word for an empty lot is "pleasure" I have no idea). In my memory I'm on the other side of the street, looking at the house from a distance. My supposition is that, not long before he passed away, I accompanied my mother to visit him, and because he was already very ill, she had me wait in the car. Thus the memory of my grandfather without my grandfather.

And yet for much of my life I've felt a special bond with Abuelo Firmat. Looking through old college notebooks recently, I found two handwritten sheets of loose-leaf paper dated August 7, 1972, where I record in Spanish what I knew at the time about him. I didn't take the same interest in my

other grandfather, Constantina's husband, a hardworking, street-smart gallego who built the Pérez family business. Growing up in Cuba, I believed that my father, who had inherited the business from his father, was my future, but I was mistaken. Abuelo Firmat was my future.

My mother kept a photograph album for each of her four children. Before she passed away, she sent each of us the corresponding one. In my album Abuelo Firmat appears only once, in my crowded black-and-white baptism photo, taken at the altar. He stands at the left edge of the image, three or four rows back, under the statue of an angel. He had already turned sixty but looks youngish, certainly much younger than my grandmother, in the front row next to my father and mother. From what I can see of him, he was a slender man with regular features and graying hair. He wears metal-rimmed glasses. Unlike the others, rather than staring into the camera, he is looking down and sideways to the front of the altar, where my mother holds me in her arms. He is smiling. Before sending the album, my mother numbered and identified the twenty-two family members in the photo. The order in which she numbered them moves me: "1: Tu abuelo, Pedro Firmat."

My grandfather does not appear anywhere else in my album. After the divorce, he was all but banished from the magic kingdom of family. I'm surprised that he attended my baptism. For the last twenty years of her life, his wife (my grandmother!) lived with us in Miami. Nearly blind, she entertained herself by telling stories, but not once did she mention the name of the man with whom she'd had four children. And not once was his name mentioned in her presence. Abuelo Firmat does not even appear in my mother's wedding photos, because he was not invited. She remembered walking out of Our Lady of Carmen Church on my father's arm and seeing her father in the back next to the holy water. By the time she looked up again, he was gone. When I think of Abuelo Firmat, that's how I see him: on the outside looking in. (At times that's how I have seen myself, and for the same reason.) In Abuelo's apparent absence, my uncle Pedro, his oldest son and namesake, led my mother to the altar.

According to my mother, *La vida sencilla* was her father's favorite book. Unlike the New Testament, she didn't gift it to me. I purloined it. When my father passed away, she decided to move in with my sister, who lived in Memphis. By then I had been married to Mary Anne, who is American, for

more than ten years, but my relations with my mother remained complicated (life is not always sencilla). I was concerned that the book would be lost in the shuffle but afraid that if I asked her for it, she wouldn't give it to me. So during a visit to Miami, I discreetly took it off the shelf where it had spent the first half of its life in exile.

Along with the New Testament, *La vida sencilla* has been sitting in my study, unread, for thirty years. As a freshman at a community college in Miami, I wrote a story about it for a creative writing class. I've lost the story, but I recall what the instructor, Mr. Genaro, wrote on the last page: "I want to know more about that book." The reason I didn't say more is that I hadn't read it. Until recently, I hadn't even opened it.

I've been incurious because of my worry that once I read it, *La vida sencilla* would lose its hold on me. Worse, I might not like it. But the fundamental reason, I think, is that for books, as for other things, there is a season, and the season for *La vida sencilla* had not arrived yet. The Spanish poet Juan Ramón Jiménez wrote: "Vivimos de lo que salvamos." The obvious translation: we live on what we save. A better one: we live on what we salvage. An exile himself, Juan Ramón was well acquainted with the demon of discontinuity, which takes many forms: familial, linguistic, cultural, occupational. When he refers to what we save or salvage, he's not thinking of bank accounts but of the kinds of assets that allow us to exorcise, or at least muzzle, the demon.

I have tended to regard my academic career as a freak of exile, a deviation from the path I would have followed were it not for the trauma of displacement. Fifty years in the academy have not convinced me otherwise, but when I think of Abuelo Firmat, my choice of profession does not seem quite so bizarre. He had a library; I have a library. He was a writer of sorts; I'm a writer of sorts. I realize why I didn't seek him out until I was in college, long after his passing. Only then did he become meaningful to me. As a child and adolescent, I thought of him only as the man who had abandoned my longsuffering grandmother, whom my siblings and I always called by her maiden name: Abuela Martínez. But he is much more than the shadowy figure we seldom heard about. He's helped me to embrace my career as something other than a symptom of dislocation. Had I stayed in Cuba, I may not have ended up at my family's almacén after all. I may have followed in his

footsteps and taken up an alternative vocational inheritance. I find comfort in the possibility.

Abuelo Firmat sutures discontinuities in another way. Alone among my grandparents and parents, he was born and died in Cuba. (The others came from Spain or passed away in the States.) Or, viewed from a different generational angle: all his grandchildren were born in Cuba, but none of us live there or intend to return. Unlike the rest of the family of which he was barely a part, his life ended where it began. Even as he sets a precedent for decisions I've made, he offers the example, or habilitates the fantasy, of a life untouched by exile. This, too, is comforting.

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Abuelo Firmat was born in the Camagüey province of Cuba in 1889, the son of a Catalan couple who had immigrated to Cuba a few years earlier. After a brief stay in a seminary, he studied economics at the University of Havana and left before graduating to take a job with the Commission on Military Affairs of the Cuban Senate. When he was twenty-five, he entered the Foreign Service. Thanks to the *Diario de sesiones*, the Cuban congressional record, I can track his diplomatic career. In 1915 he was appointed vice-consul and sent to Pforzheim, Germany. The following year, right after Cuba joined the Allied war effort, he was transferred to Birmingham, England, and from there to Newport News, Virginia, where my mother was born in 1920. In 1925 he was stationed in Tampico, Mexico; in 1926, in Tampa, Florida. He was a delegate to the Second International Conference on Emigration and Immigration (little did he know!), held in Havana in 1928. A year later he was appointed to the Department of Statistics of the Ministry of State. He then returned to Virginia, this time to the Norfolk consulate, and stayed there until October 1933, when the *Gaceta oficial,* the official government bulletin, notes that his services as consul have ended.

The reason for his termination, I surmise, was that a month earlier a revolution had ousted the Cuban ruler, General Gerardo Machado. Elected president in 1925, Machado had the Cuban constitution amended so that he could perpetuate himself in power. His mutation from president to dictator generated widespread unrest and culminated in his removal. My grandfather

and his older brother Ricardo were casualties of the coup. Ricardo, a major in the army, was Machado's longtime personal assistant; my grandfather wrote for the machadista daily, *Heraldo de Cuba*, whose premises were burned to the ground during the revolt. After spending time in jail at the Isle of Pines, Ricardo was released and lived quietly on a government pension. My grandfather worked at Merrill Lynch and, in the 1940s, for the Ministry of Education; he also edited a statistical journal called *Números*, wrote occasionally for Havana newspapers, and published a couple of booklets on the Cuban economy, one of them a compilation of his newspaper columns.

In his spare time he read, practiced yoga, and bred carnations on the azotea of the building where he lived. I'm not sure when he and my grandmother divorced. The definitive separation could have taken place as early as 1929, when my grandmother and their children moved back to Cuba, but in any case well before my mother's marriage in 1942. At the divorce trial he contested my grandmother's claim of abandonment and lost the case when she produced letters in his hand documenting his absences. In my notes from 1972, I quote my mother: "Your grandfather had the habit of writing everything down. He would leave notes saying: 'I'm fed up with the family. I'm taking off for San Miguel de los Baños' (a health spa known for its medicinal waters). Or: 'This month I can't send you anything. Tough [jerínguense].' Of course he said this in more elegant language." One of the bones of contention in the marriage, though surely not the determining one, was my grandmother's indifference to flowers. My mother also recalled her father screaming: "What can I expect from a woman who doesn't like flowers!"

During the last years of his life, my mother and grandfather met periodically for lunch at a restaurant on Obispo Street in Old Havana. As soon as he sat down, he'd wipe the silverware with a napkin and make sure that he was served mineral water, and he always ordered white rice with two fried eggs, plantains, and picadillo. The recurring topic of conversation was his frustration with how his life had turned out. When he was dying from prostate cancer, she brought him a priest. Abuelo said to her: "Nena, how could you do this to me? I thought you knew me better." His anticlericalism, possibly a result of his stint as a seminarian, did not prevent him from having by his bedside the copy of the New Testament now in my study.

In my mother's eyes her father was a difficult, solitary man soured by the

belief that he had not received the rewards, material and reputational, that he deserved. It was obvious that she was very fond of him, whatever his failings as husband and father. Of his four children, she seems to have been the only one who made a point of staying in touch with him. His oldest son, my Tío Pedro, had a less forgiving take on his father. On more than one occasion he said to me, with bitterness in his voice, that his father was un acomplejado, a man full of hang-ups.

Theirs may be an accurate characterization of Abuelo Firmat in his declining years, but it's only part of the picture. Among my mother's belongings when she died in Memphis was a sheet of onion-skin paper with a festive poem about her father by a man named José Carballeira. The poem describes him as an "economist of positive merit" possessed of an "Attic" culture and an "equanimous" temperament, but also—and this is intriguing—as someone "terrified of feminine hysteria." I haven't been able to reconstruct the occasion, but to judge from the poem, it seems that at some point my grandfather began to appear on a radio program. This event celebrated the new outlet for his "eloquent words."

Scouring Havana newspapers from the second and third decades of the last century, I came across a couple of items where he is mentioned. It turns out that before joining the diplomatic service, he was one of the stars of the Cuban Senate's baseball team. And upon his appointment as vice-consul, the president of the association of Havana sportswriters gave a well-attended lunch in his honor, where his incorporation into the Foreign Service was described as a just reward for his intelligence and probity. The impression that emerges from these partial portraits is that the young Pedro Firmat was anything but a resentful loner.

When he entered the diplomatic corps, he was in his mid-twenties and married and would soon have his first child. Ten years later, after postings in Europe and the States, he had been promoted to consul. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, he published dozens of articles on economic issues in *Heraldo de Cuba* and other Havana newspapers. Their upbeat tone suggests that during this period, he was not an unhappy man. He comes off as cocky, opinionated, ambitious. When an association of industrialists complained about his campaign against protectionist tariffs, he replied in print that he answered only to the Secretary of State (at the time Orestes Ferrara), who believed in

freedom of speech. In another piece he labels the famous American economist Edwin Seligman a "metaphysician" whose *Report on the Revenue System of Cuba* (1932) does not have "a single original idea." More than once he calls for the reins of the government's tax policy to be in the hands of knowledgeable people, among whom he presumably counted himself.

The 1933 Revolution, which saw Fulgencio Batista's initial rise to power, dashed his ambitions. He was no longer a rising figure in the diplomatic corps or a regular presence in Havana newspapers. Discontinuity also bedeviled him. Predictably, his writings from the mid-1930s strike a somber note. In one column he laments: "We live in a perpetual revolution, but a revolution without an objective." Somewhere else he speaks of "the little we have left of Cuba." In the prologue to *Bocetos* (1936), the collection of newspaper articles, he notes that the inclusion of a few recent articles from the journal *Finanzas* demonstrates that he hasn't overcome his "old habit of wasting time." Still in the prime of life, he saw himself as superfluous, but he had not always felt that way.

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Lacking the original cover and the title page, my grandfather's copy of *La vida sencilla* presented something of a puzzle. I had to resort to WorldCat (another old professorial habit) to piece together the missing information. The only Spanish translation that matched the number of pages in his book was published in 1924 by Daniel Jorro, a Madrid publishing house, as part of its *Enciclopedia científica*. The translator was Hermenegildo Giner de los Ríos, the brother of Francisco Giner de los Ríos, a controversial educational reformer. A douodecimo volume of two hundred fifty-nine pages, the book was bound in leather by Librería Cervantes, a Havana bookstore whose name appears on the spine. On the flyleaf, "1.30" is written in pencil. This must be what he paid for it and indicates that he bought the book in Cuba, since in pesetas, the Spanish currency at the time, the figure would have been different. Other books in the same series were priced by the publisher at seven or eleven pesetas.

That Wagner's book caught my grandfather's eye is not surprising. It was widely read on both sides of the Atlantic. Other translations into Spanish were published in Spain (1904), Cuba (1904), Buenos Aires (1907), Santo Domingo (1905), and Lima (1916). The Dominican translation, issued at the

behest of the then president, Carlos Felipe Morales, consisted of five thousand copies, a large run given the time and place. Morales intended the book to be distributed in schools and in "all the far corners" of his country.

The Dominican president was not the only head of state impressed by *La vida sencilla*. Appearing in English in 1901, the book was also admired by Theodore Roosevelt, who found no incompatibility between the strenuous and the simple life. He wrote to Wagner in June 1904 that he was "greatly struck" by *The Simple Life*, adding: "All our ideals are those which you set forth in these two books." The other book he mentions is *By the Fireside*, also by Wagner, who replied to Roosevelt's warm letter with a warmer one of his own. During Wagner's visit to America later that year, the two men had a cordial meeting at the White House. The American translation was reprinted several times. In the original French, *La vie simple* went through multiple editions and reprints in the decade following its publication.

With chapter titles like "Simple Duty," "Simple Needs," and "Simple Pleasures," the thesis of the book is a familiar one: simplify, simplify, simplify! But unlike Thoreau half a century earlier, Wagner does not advocate living in a cabin by a pond. Since in his view simplicity is a "state of mind," it does not require the renunciation of material goods and comforts, a message surely welcomed by his primary audience, the French bourgeoisie. What is necessary, he says, in a phrase that evokes political upheavals in France, is that we control "the inner anarchy of desire." Nor does Wagner believe in introspection, for "man is not made to spend his life in a self-centered trance." His interest is in man's conduct in society: "The great desideratum of our time is the cultivation of the social element in individuals. . . . Neglecting it, we expose ourselves to lose the benefits of progress." Less a seer than a life coach, Wagner is optimistic, practical and soothing: "The spirit of simplicity is a great magician. It smooths rough spots, lays bridges over ditches and abysses, brings hands and hearts closer."

As he did in the New Testament, in *La vida sencilla* Abuelo Firmat underlined phrases or sentences, drew vertical lines on the margins of some passages, and highlighted others with a brace-like symbol that resembles a treble clef, which in Spanish is called a llave. These marks were made with different pencils, which suggests that he read the book more than once. Since he was not a promiscuous highlighter—there are fewer than two dozen

markings in the book—it's possible to infer something about his state of mind when he read or reread Wagner.

The first mark in the book runs alongside a paragraph in defense of "honest poverty": "Honest poverty runs the great risk of being considered shameful, while it's not difficult for money, even dirty money, to be considered meritorious." A few pages later he highlights a passage where Wagner exhorts those of his readers who are well-off to live half a week without money so that they begin to understand poverty. Not a wealthy man, my grandfather may well have seen himself as one of the benighted poor, someone who, in Wagner's words, "is nothing because he has nothing." But the most telling mark occurs a few lines later in the same paragraph. In a world ruled by money, Wagner says, a man without material possessions becomes "a pariah, a leper whom everyone shuns." Such a man sheds "tears of bitterness, tears of blood." Next to this phrase is my grandfather's llave.

The other topic that prompts several of his underscores is demagogy, a subject addressed in some of his columns. He highlights a passage where Wagner attacks "acrobats of the pen and the word" who distort language to snare the gullible. These people are "the false moneychangers." They seed distrust and make the value of what is said or written similar to that of false bank notes. A talented painter, Wagner adds in another underlined passage, needs only a piece of charcoal to draw an immortal sketch. The same shortcomings afflict contemporary art and literature, with their "excess of adornment, stilted flourishes, and obscure fantasies." (My grandfather's prose, precise and direct, avoided the embellishments that he condemns.)

The highlighted passages lead me to believe that he read or reread *La vida sencilla* later in life, once his star had faded. These are not the emphases of a happy man. Another underlined phrase, "the misfortune of having lived in vain," recalls the prologue of *Bocetos*. Equally telling is the absence of marks in two chapters: "Worldly Life and Home Life," about the sanctity of the home, and "Education for Simplicity," about the rearing of children. In his New Testament he underscored Jesus's harsh injunction that to become his disciple one must spurn mother and father and wife and children (Luke 14:26). He also marked the passage earlier in the same gospel where Jesus says that he has not come to bring peace but dissension and turn members of a household against one another (Luke 12:49–53). These highlights may allude to his

days as a seminarian, but they could also have been prompted by his troubled family life. The New Testament doesn't have a publication year, but it was printed in the United States by the United Bible Societies. It may well date from his time as consul in Virginia.

The picture of Abuelo Firmat that emerges from *La vida sencilla* is not flattering. But even if he was as much of an acomplejado as my uncle claims, it doesn't matter. I have my own bundle of complejos. That Wagner's nostrums don't do much for me is also beside the point. What matters is that Abuelo Firmat accompanies me. When we're young, the society of our meaningful others grows larger as the years go by. When we enter what Spanish calls "la tercera edad" (the third age), the opposite sometimes happens. Our circle of meaningful others, and even of plain acquaintances, begins to contract. That's where I'm at now, in my eighth decade. I live on what I salvage.

The Spanish language has a curious synonym for the verb *recordar,* "to remember." One can also say "hacer memoria"—literally, "make memory." Not "make memories," mind you, for the expression applies not to memorable incidents but to the activity of recalling them, as if remembrance were itself creative, a kind of making. Writing about my grandfather, I'm making memory, compacting what I know with what I surmise, to ensure that he is present to me. Now that I have read *La vida sencilla* and tried to understand his complicated life, I feel closer to him than I ever have. And since I acquired the book by stealth, I have the feeling that he and I are secret sharers. Somehow he knew that his book would end up with me. That's why he's smiling in the baptism photo. I don't have the same intimacy with his New Testament, probably because of the circumstances in which I acquired it. That book speaks to me of my mother rather than of her father.

Holding *La vida sencilla*, I know that in a different time and place, my grandfather held the same book. When I open it—gingerly, slowly turning the yellowed, brittle pages—Abuelo Firmat is reading along with me. His eyes are my eyes. His hands, my hands. Through him, I learn who I am. I come upon a sentence underlined with a blunt red pencil and, as I pause at each word, our minds meet. As there is ghostwriting, there is ghost reading. Abuelo Firmat is the ghost who reads along with me, or perhaps, since age and exile are forms of ghosting, we are both ghosts. No matter. *La vida sencilla* is the place where he and I get together, our restaurant on Obispo Street.