PIG'S FOOT

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

No Way Home: A Cuban Dancer's Story

PIG'S FOOT

Carlos Acosta

Translated from the Spanish by Frank Wynne

BLOOMSBURY
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

A Few Important Details About Me

Bueno … okay … the first thing you need to know about me is I never knew my mother or my father and I only found out their names a couple of months ago. My memories begin on the day I came home from primary school dragging a dead cat by the scruff of the neck. I must have been about seven at the time, and I remember the cat had eaten my lunch. My grandma grounded me – obviously – and I wasn't allowed out to play for a week. She told me it was no reason to go round strangling things. I tossed the remains of the cat on the ground, then punched the front door so hard I broke my wrist. All this stuff I remember as clear as day. But, before that, is like an empty space inside my head. Sorry, maybe I'm not making much sense, what I mean is I don't have any memories of what happened before. I was a pretty normal kid, just like the other *chiquillos* in Barrio Lawton as far as I remember, though my grandparents always insisted I was different. They told me I had been born in a place called Pig's Foot – *Pata de Puerco* – in the deep south of Cuba on the far side of El Cobre. According to them, I slid down my mother's legs into the mud like a slug. Can you imagine? Like a slug. And as soon as my mother plucked me up out of the muck, I started howling like I'd been stuck with a fistful of needles. Pig's Foot sounds to me like one of the weird recipes grandma used to concoct, but from what I was told both my grandparents

and the parents I never knew were born there and one day I would have to go back.

'Mark my words,' my grandpa used to tell me that all the time, 'No man knows who his is until he knows his past, his history, the history of his country.' 'The old guy's losing his marbles,' I thought, 'the first sign of old age!' But then one day I suddenly found myself utterly alone. It's impossible to imagine the man you will become when you find yourself alone. I don't know if you understand what I'm saying. Take me, for example, years ago it would never have occurred to me to set foot in Santiago, let alone to hang on every word I ever heard my grandpa say, as though somehow his words might be the cure for my affliction. That's how I came to build a world around a tiny village called Pata del Puerco, a place I've never been, but one I inhabited through the memories of that poor old man, the same memories Commissioner Clemente wheedled out of me in the course of a long and painful interrogation, the memories I'm happy to relate to you now, no hard feelings.

Before we get started, I should point out that Clemente, the short, bald prick with the big 'tache who calls himself a doctor is actually Grand Wizard of the Cuban branch of the Ku Klux Klan. I suppose you think I'm making this stuff up, but I swear to you that even in 1995, there are evil people in Cuba. And Commissioner Clemente, with his gang of whiteshirts, is one of them – whenever I see him it's like I feel like I have a rock in my stomach. That's why when he asked, instead of telling him my real name – it's Oscar Mandinga, in case you're wondering – I answered the son of a bitch in Arabic:

بِبَهْلَوَان يَلِيقُ هذا تَصَرُّفك إن ،الأر عن أَيُّهَا يـا وَشَأْنِي دَعْنِي !تَبِّـــا. After that, what happened, happened; Commissar Clemente brought the darkness, hammering me with questions until he literally split my skull in two.

So like I said, my name's Oscar Mandinga – pleased to meet you – now, back to the hazy past that was my childhood. The only thing I knew about my grandparents was that years ago they'd moved from Santiago de Cuba to a *barrio* called Lawton in the city of Havana and opened a laundry business that brought in just enough to put food on the table. I have no problems remembering The Good Life – *'El Buen vivir'*, since I worked in the laundromat as a kid, but even back then, I never heard any stories about my grandparents, never saw any photos of them as kids. As far as I knew my grandparents had been born old, because from the day I opened my eyes the first thing I saw was a tall, black, toothless old man – my grandpa – and a little grey-haired old woman with shy, sandy eyes – my grandma. They were sweet, affectionate old things for the most part and I've got to say they brought me up well. At The Good Life they taught me the meaning of hard work and thanks to them when I was little I learned to cook, to clean, take out the trash, in short to be methodical and reliable. But that's no use to me now because that bald bastard Commissioner Clemente won't give me any work. Though what with the 'special economic period' in force these days in Cuba, no one's got any work.

For all I know you're one of those ignorant morons who thinks books are for timewasters. If so, let me tell you straight up that I don't give a rat's ass what you think because I love reading the classics – though to be honest, I'll read pretty much anything from *Sputnik Magazine* to the cartoons in *Junior Pioneer*. Art is my life, and it's such a pity that in Cuba it's gone to the dogs in the '90s. Round here, people say that when you've made enough good art you've earned the right to turn out bad art. Bullshit! You used to be able to go to the theatre in Havana, but these days there's bound to be a power cut right in the middle of the ballet or the operetta. Everyone's permanently anxious and constantly complaining

– everyone, that is, except my grandparents, who still insist the Revolution – power cuts, rationing, shortages and all – is the best thing that ever happened to this country. When I say it, I sound like a fruit loop.

Anyway, back to the important stuff, to Pata de Puerco and its origins. This is the story of my ancestors exactly as I told it to Commissioner chrome-dome Clemente before his band of whiteshirts turned up and took the sun away for ever.

Oscar and José

In the 1800s, Pata de Puerco was just one small corner of a sweeping plain with a few scattered shacks between the Sierra Maestra mountains of Santiago de Cuba and the copper mines of El Cobre. My grandpa used to say that a passing stranger would have thought the tocororos in the trees had just learned to sing. The Accursed Forest and the swampland teemed with crocodiles that roamed around like tame dogs having not yet decided that mud was their favourite place to wallow. It was a lush, green place surrounded by picturesque bowers of twisted trees and jungle creepers, creating grottoes where it was possible to walk for miles without seeing a ray of sunlight. The earth was so red people said it was not soil, but the spilled blood of Indians dried by the sun. Deer and hutias scuttered through the grasslands and wild dogs had learned to live in harmony with man, whose numbers were so scant in this far-flung corner of Cuba it seemed like the last place God made.

The Santisteban family arrived here in 1850. They were looking for a place to live, an idyllic, out-of-the-way place far from the metropolis. As everyone knows, the Santistebans were a powerful slaver-trading family who, with the Aldamas and the Terrys, controlled the sugar trade the length and breadth of the island. They owned a workforce of more than 15,000 slaves, in addition to the railroads, the stores and the credit houses they possessed.

It was here in Pata de Puerco that Don Manuel Santisteban decided to live out the rest of his days. There are many stories about how he came to build his house, but the way my grandpa told it to me, one day Don Manuel stopped by the ruins of the oldest sugar plantation on the island, a mansion that had once belonged to the Conquistador Hernán Cortés back when Santiago de Cuba was the capital of the colony. 'Here shall I die,' announced the powerful slave trader and, without wasting a minute, ordered a new plantation house be built over the crumbling ruins. No crocodile was ever seen in the area again since Doña Isabel Santisteban ordered all the lush vegetation be hacked down. Cuba, she insisted, was a country of sunshine and not a single ray could pierce the shade of the towering trees. And so the parrots, the hummingbirds and the tocororos also vanished for ever from this beautiful place.

A number of small squat, rustic houses were planted like *sombreros* around a vast estate measuring some 20 *caballerías* Between these houses rose the majestic residence of Don Manuel, his señora and their two children, a mansion with tall windows and labyrinthine corridors. The slave quarters, situated 200 metres from the main house, was built of brick and tiles and had a single door and a lone, barred window on one side which allowed in scarcely enough air to breathe. A watchtower, used to keep a lookout for runaways and to keep an eye on the workers, was erected between the slave quarters and the sugar mill and from the top you could see all the way to the stables and the canebrakes.

Among the seven thousand slaves living on the plantation itself was Oscar Kortico, who came from a lineage of korticos: Negroes barely four feet tall who were shipped to Cuba in small numbers and in time vanished from the face of the earth leaving no trace that they had ever existed. A Pygmy race from East Africa, from a land as cracked and barren as the surface of the planet Mars, the korticos were expert hunters and knew the

secret ways of plants. Too late did Don Manuel realise just how strong these people were, for when he tried to order a new consignment of korticos, he was told there were none to be found on or off the island – the earth had opened up and swallowed them. He had been planning to replace the Mandingas – the tallest Negroes and those most suited to forced labour – with korticos whose appearance belied not only their strength, but the laws of physics. Though barely four foot tall, they were as strong and sturdy as Mandinga and much cheaper to keep, since they ate half as much as other Negroes. But after the shipment that brought Oscar, his mother and his father to Pata de Puerco, no kortico ever came to Cuba again.

To his dying day, my namesake, Oscar Kortico, had the same diminutive body, the same thin, slightly elongated childlike face, the same round, black eyes, the same prominent cheekbones that looked like runnels for those tears he never shed. This is how my grandpa described him to me, adding that although Oscar Kortico was a bitter man (something many people confirm) he had known happiness (something many more deny) if only as a child – this inexplicable, elusive feeling took the form of his mother, the creature he most adored and who returned his great, his boundless love.

Her name was Macuta Dos and she worked on the plantation feeding the animals, cleaning the grounds and drawing water from the well. Since she was a strong, muscular Negress, they set her to cutting cane with the menfolk and gave her so many backbreaking chores that often she worked twenty-two hours a day. The two hours she had to herself, she devoted to her son Oscar who had learned never to complain, though already in his heart he sensed that something was amiss with the world. Those two hours were enough for Oscar: shrugging off her tiredness, his mother would play with him and sometimes tell him stories

and fables, like the legend of Yusi the warrior, a God of the kortico pantheon, a creature gifted with exceptional powers who, it was said, could lift a cow with just one hand.

After much insistence from Oscar – an insistence than involved howls and wails but never tears – Macuta Dos explained to him that his grandparents had died of old age; that one of his uncles had been shot as a runaway slave and the other carried off by a terrible disease – some curse, some horrifying thing that had caused first his ears and then his testicles to swell. She told him that his father had escaped into the mountains at dawn one morning only to be dragged back that same afternoon dead, the skin flayed from his body, his face unrecognizable. Her only legacy, she told him, was an ancient amulet, a leather necklet strung with a shrivelled pig's foot. Oscar and this amulet were her only fortune.

Oscar Kortico immediately rushed to tell this story to his best friend José Mandinga, who clapped his hand to his mouth in horror. José tried to cheer him, saying that what had happened was destined to happen and that surely now his luck would change for the better. But one night the overseer came to the slave quarters to take Oscar's mother to a small dark room where she was to be bred with one of the tall, brawny Negro bucks because, by Don Manuel's reckoning, such a pairing would produce a good litter of whelps. The boy clung to his mother like a tick to a dog. Macuta Dos pressed the pig's foot amulet into his hand and told him she would never forget him. Oscar begged to know why she was being taken from him.

'Because such is the lot of a slave.'

'What is a slave?'

'An animal, my son, an animal.'

With a vicious tug, two men wrenched the pair apart and took Macuta Dos from Oscar's side for ever.

This moment was the source of Oscar Kortico's bitterness. For a whole month, he murmured the story of Yusi the warrior to himself and refused to play with his friend José. He looked for his mother only in the darkness, expecting that she would suddenly appear through a wall or that at least the men might come and take him to be with her in that small dark cell. Every day he pressed the amulet to his chest, trying to lose himself in the scent of pig's foot that reminded him of his mother. He could not imagine he would never see her again. Six months later, he was sold to an Italian merchant named Giacomo Benvenuto, who lived some seven kilometres from El Cobre. There, Oscar was given the surname Benvenuto and set to work as a houseboy, working in the kitchen and doing chores around the residence.

Though they dressed him in finery, the other children still called him 'the black flea' because of his diminutive stature and they treated him like a circus freak. It was here that Oscar truly learned what it meant to be a slave. Little by little there blossomed within him a hatred of the world and most especially of children; a hatred he would never overcome, one he would carry with him to his grave. He felt as though there was no one he could trust; that he had been forsaken by love, by friendship, by peace. By everything, in fact, and the bitterness burned like an eternal flame in his chest, reminding him of his miserable existence. He brooded about the meaning of the world slave. 'You are an animal.' This was how he felt, like a brute beast, something that was confirmed one day when, while he was fixing some kitchen shelves that had been eaten away by termites, he found himself surrounded by a gang of children led by the plantation owner's son. Striking the pose of a lion tamer, the Italian boy informed his entourage that Oscar was living proof of simian intelligence.

'As you can see,' said Giacomo, 'a monkey can fix shelves. He doesn't feel anything inside because he's an animal, but he can talk, he can

even read if you teach him. And see – he's proved he knows how to use a hammer. Let's give this magnificent creature a round of applause.'

'Oscar, Oscar, Oscar the orang-utan,' chanted the other children.

Suddenly, Oscar saw black. His teeth drew blood from the Italian boy. Not enough blood to warrant the death sentence, but enough to have him put in the stocks and given several lashes, then locked up in a dark cell for a week.

On his release, he was removed from domestic chores and set to work in the fields; it was here that he spent his adolescence and grew to become a man. In all that time he never met a woman who made him happy. He believed that no woman would ever be able to love his diminutive stature, or the bleak pessimism that had become his distinguishing trait. And so he had no choice but to lose his virginity to a sow. It happened one day when Benevenuto's overseer ordered Oscar to work in the barnyard. After the sow came a boss-eyed nanny goat that wouldn't stop bleating. Before long, Oscar Kortico's fame had spread to nanny goats, sows and mares for miles around.

Then came the war of independence, which, as I'm sure you know, began in 1868 – 10 October, if I'm not mistaken … By now, Oscar had turned eighteen. Giacomo Bevenuto and his family had fled back to the country they'd come from. It was Oscar who brandished the torch that set the sugar mill ablaze. The following day, he set off for the Santisteban plantation in search of his mother. He found only a heap of ashes and charred bricks. It was then that he joined forces with the Mambí Liberation Army under the command of General Maceo at their camp east of Baracoa.

Meanwhile, José Mandinga, Oscar's best friend, was skulking through the streets and the taverns of El Cobre. Unlike Oscar, who never had much luck with women, and seemed to have inherited from his

mother the curse of enduring a life without love, José was always lucky with the opposite sex. At thirteen, he lost his virginity to Mamaíta, a Negress who worked in the infirmary and could easily have been his grandmother. In secret, he learned from Mamaíta the mysteries of how women should be kissed and caressed in what she called 'touchy-touchy lessons' held every Sunday when the other slaves went out, some to have fun in the local taverns, others to go swimming in the river. On the pretext of curing his cold or scolding him for some misdeed, Mamaíta would take José to the infirmary. He would arrive back in the slave quarters late at night, tired and sore. 'A pig fell on me,' was his invariable excuse. His mother peered at him with her eagle eyes, secretly thinking that the more pigs fell on her son, the better equipped he would be for life.

José was a Mandinga like his father Evaristo and his mother Rosario, who worked in the sugar mill, turning the wheel, sowing, cutting and harvesting cane. Sometimes Evaristo would send José to have a horse shod or Rosario would give him chores around the infirmary, where the slaves used as wet nurses were housed. By the time he turned eighteen, José was a six-foot, broad-shouldered, muscular Negro. He had had sex with almost all the unmarried female slaves on the plantation. His blood brothers admired him, and longed to be like him since José had a charm that led others to treat him with affection and respect.

José often asked his parents what had become of Oscar and when finally they told him his friend had been sold, the boy spent a long time fretting about their answer. For months afterwards, he kept a close watch on the white overseer; he would peer through a chink in the door of the slave quarters at night before he went to sleep and every time he saw overseer coming he would run and hide, terrified the man was coming to

take him and sell him. But neither he nor his brothers nor his parents were ever sold. His was a different fate.

Some months before war broke out, the slaves led an uprising that would go down in history as the 'Slaughter of the Santistebans'. Beginning with the dogs and ending with the family, not a soul on the property was left alive. The bodies of Don Manuel and Isabel Santisteban and their children were strung up from the watchtower. After the slaves had burned everything, they went their separate ways, fleeing for the caves or the hills. José, his parents and his brothers hid out in the Accursed Forest where they quickly contracted yellow fever. Within a week all but José had died. This is how the young Mandinga boy, like so many who had lost everything, came to be roaming the streets of Santiago.

Oscar discovered that José, whom he thought of as his only surviving family, was now a vagrant and set out in search of him, scouring the streets, the taverns and the dive bars. Finally, among the ruins of the sugar plantation where both boys had been born, he stumbled upon a foul-smelling bundle of rags.

Oscar asked what had happened and José told him about the Slaughter of the Santistebans. Most of the slaves, he told Oscar, had been caught and hanged. He told his friend how his own family had died of a strange sickness that had turned their bodies into human furnaces. The kortico shook his friend by the shoulder and said, 'You should join the *mambí* army. Killing those bastards is the only way we will ever be free.' José spat on the red earth and turned back to sleep.

'Damn it, José, these white men are the ones who brought sickness to Cuba.'

Hearing this, José suddenly sat up and stared hard into Oscar's eyes. His friend explained that many times he had seen the Spanish spreading

disease through the swamplands, that this was why runaway slaves were always found stiff-legged long before they reached the shelter of the caves.

'I'm telling you, they are the ones who brought the sickness.' Oscar said, 'Now is the time to avenge your family for everything they suffered.'

The Mandinga spat on the ground again, but this time to let the kortico know that he was prepared to fight. José extricated himself from the pile of putrid rags and climbed up behind Oscar on his horse and together they rode back to the *mambí* camp.

During the ambush on the Palma Sopriano convoy in Victoria, José slew fifteen Spaniards with a machete and returned to camp with two horses and eight rifles. In the Battle of Juan Mulato, Oscar and José killed forty-two Spaniards. When, during the fighting at Tibisí, Oscar and José each slew thirty enemy soldiers, the *mambí* soldiers christened them 'The Duo of Death', and General Maceo personally decided to take them with him to the rally at Mangos de Baraguá[1] in March of 1878. Lounging in their hammocks after the battle, Oscar confessed to his friend that he loved war, because 'you get to go to so many different places, places you've never been.'

'I know,' said José, looking at him askance, 'but right now, just get some rest, and don't go dozing off. You might dream I'm a Spaniard and hack me to pieces with that machete.'

[1] It was from Mangos de Baraguá (where there had been a protest in front of Martínez-Campos), that Maceo launched the invasion of western Cuba, heading up a column of mambís riding or walking more than 1,000 miles in 96 days.

First published in Great Britain 2013

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square

London

WC1B 3DP

www.bloomsbury.com

Bloomsbury Publishing, London, New Delhi, New York and Sydney

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4088 3370 4