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Lázaro rolled down the window of his '75 Chevy half-ton pickup and let the warm, salty morning air wash over him. Surprisingly, the drive had been much less of a strain than he had expected, almost pleasant. With the help of his thick black-rimmed glasses, his eyesight was better than that of many who still drove. The hearing in his left ear was decent, and his middle finger worked, which served him well while creeping through Newark and Washington, D.C., during rush-hour traffic. Truthfully, the further south he drove, the better—maybe even the *younger*—he felt. He traded his cold-weather clothes for cotton shorts and sandals at a rest area on the Florida-Georgia border, letting his old legs gratefully soak up the soothing heat. And last night, while drifting off to sleep in his motel, he realized that the dull ache in his fingers and hip that had accompanied him to bed for years was absent.

He was on his third day of driving, and had the trip come about under different circumstances he would have been thoroughly enjoying himself. If he could just sail through the drive without incident, he would be fine. Nonetheless, his son would be worried. Lázaro chuckled as he pictured what William's reaction might be when he learned his elderly pop, who hadn't held a valid driver's license in eight years, had installed a new battery in the old truck and driven damn near to Cuba. But with any luck, William would never find out. His son was anxious enough lately. All this worry about the upcoming year 2000 wreaking havoc on daily life seemed foolish to Lázaro. It was, after all, just another year. Apparently,

computer programmers like William thought the turn of the century could mean the end of the civilized world. Lázaro doubted it.

Shifting the worn gearbox into third, Lázaro looked out at what had become of Key Largo since he called this area home nearly sixty years earlier. One of the northernmost islands in the Florida Keys chain, Key Largo was now a full-blown tourist attraction. Neon signs, billboards, sports bars, restaurants, scuba shops, and a K-Mart now bordered the Overseas Highway. Visually, Key Largo was designed for tourists. With U.S. Highway 1 spanning its length, visitors could drive quickly over the island and be drawn only to those things that were familiar. Tourists think they're experiencing new things when they travel, but there's usually a comfortable familiarity with what they've come to see. Sure, the McDonald's has a Caribbean theme and palm trees surround the air-conditioned shell stores, but it's all familiar.

Jesus, Lázaro thought with a grin. *Haven't I become a cynical old bastard?*

Lázaro still saw the keys through the eyes of a local—a *conch*—and in spite of his past, he realized that he still loved it here—no matter how many glass-bottomed boat stands littered the shore.

It was when Lázaro realized he spent more time longing for the past than daydreaming about the future that he knew he had gotten old. This long-overdue realization took hold in the last week. There were, of course, the more obvious signs of aging that he had simply ignored—the arthritis in his hands and hip that ached like clockwork when the storms ripped in across Massachusetts Bay from the east, the dark blotches that had appeared a decade earlier (although the mild contrast between the blemishes and his dark Cuban skin minimized their appearance), and the bright white patches on his head and throughout his thick goatee. These signs mattered little to Lázaro. It was when the daydreaming stopped that he really knew.

He supposed that it was all a normal part of approaching the end of life. At eighty-six years old, the end might not be tomorrow, but it would be soon.

In truth, this irritating epiphany was souring his outlook on life. It was all Dominic's fault—his goddamn cancer's fault anyway. Lázaro hadn't known the first thing about a pancreas until Dominic's had become riddled with tumors. Now a couple of things were certain—the end of his friend's life was approaching more rapidly than his own, and with that would be the official end of the games. And the games, by God, were one of the few things left in life still worth daydreaming about.

He drove on, sipping coffee heavily laced with cream and sugar as he passed Mile Marker 100. With a single highway connecting the islands, the keys could be traversed like integers from east to west toward Mile Marker 0 on Key West. Most visitors assumed that the island chain ended where the road did, but that wasn't the case. In his early years, he traveled throughout the keys by boat and he knew that beyond Key West there were many more small islands, including the Marquesas Keys and the Dry Tortugas, where Ft. Jefferson could be found. The fort's history was always a topic of interest among touring anglers aboard the charter boat he'd once captained. The memorized speech he had recited to them countless times still came easily: "Built in the mid-1800s, the enormous fort served many purposes—from coastal defense to a prison after the Civil War, where the famous Dr. Samuel Mudd had been held for setting the leg of President Abraham Lincoln's assassin." For Lázaro, the history of the Tortugas had always been less important than the fishing there, which was usually good, especially for grouper and snapper.

Thoughts of fishing took him back to the 1930s, despite his struggle to forget those years. Since learning of Dominic's illness, he was remembering his entire life more clearly. The long gaps had

been slowly filling in over the last few days. The result was a single, nearly complete, linear memory of his life.

As a young man, life had spread out endlessly before him, too vast and with too many possibilities to grasp. Now, at the other end of it, life seemed finite—a small package to be examined but not changed. Every year had brought with it fewer possibilities, so that life became simple. Youthful challenges of marriage, home buying, starting a family, and planning a career had long past.

His journey to the keys struck Lázaro as oddly similar. The beginning of the trip, just three days and nearly 1,600 miles ago, had started on a frigid morning along Interstate 95 in Massachusetts. The web of possible highways seemed countless. Once to New York, he could have taken Interstate 80 west to Chicago, where dozens of other route possibilities awaited. By North Carolina, he could have veered left onto Highway 70 and headed toward the endless dunes bordering Cape Sound, or headed west to Atlanta, where a simple bypass would have landed him on Interstate 20 and taken him all the way to west Texas near the Mexican border. As his trip progressed toward the southern tip of Florida, however, his choices became fewer and fewer. He passed Interstate 4 toward Tampa just yesterday and Alligator Alley early this morning. Now, cruising along U.S. Highway 1 toward the tropics, it seemed that his options had funneled down to exactly two: he could continue west through the keys or turn around and leave. The lack of options was comforting to Lázaro. He would drive west toward Mile Marker 0, toward his friend. He pushed a tape of an old Ruben Gonzalez album into the truck's deck and turned up the volume. As the hypnotic rhythm of old Cuba filled the cab, he breathed deeply, letting the tinny sound of the horns and the rich smells of the ocean lubricate his memory.



Lázaro first met Dominic at Sloppy Joe's Saloon in 1934, the year after Prohibition ended and the year before the Labor Day hurricane. Lázaro worked at the fishing camp all day and often visited the saloon on his way home. One night, there was a new face at the end of the bar. He was tall, more than six feet, with sun-bleached sandy hair and a deep tan. He had the look of a local but spoke with a thick, nasal accent that had no roots in this part of the country. He was drinking beer and talking excitedly to Big Skinner, the 300-pound bartender. The man's slender fingers eagerly smoothed over a beautiful chessboard sitting on the bar in front of him. He was describing the pieces to the massive barkeep while he drank. Skinner nodded and offered an occasional glance, but he had liquor to serve and clearly wasn't interested.

Lázaro took a stool next to him and ordered a drink. The man introduced himself as Dominic, with a warm smile and a handshake. An engineer with the Overseas Railroad and Toll Commission, he had been working in the middle keys for quite some time, inspecting the bridges that shouldered the trains coming down from Miami. Dominic smiled when he talked and nodded intently when he listened. Lázaro liked him instantly. Dominic had just purchased the board and was looking for a challenger. Lázaro, who often enjoyed the game with his father, offered to play.

Dominic ordered two more beers from Skinner and they moved to a table. Within an hour, they were intensely absorbed in what would, for the rest of their lives, be spoken of as Game One. It was during that first game that two strangers became friends. While they slid pieces across the board in the smoky saloon, Dominic spoke of his life in the Midwest and Lázaro told stories of his childhood and his path to the lower keys.

Originally from Havana, Lázaro left the island with his father shortly after his mother died from the same fever that cost Lázaro the hearing in his right ear. Like a tidal wave, the economic downfall of Cuba's powerful neighbor to the north washed over their homeland, causing the price of sugarcane to plummet and leaving Lázaro's father without a job. They left for the keys with little money, desperately in search of a new life. Luckily, Lázaro's father found work quickly at a fishing camp in Boca Chica, just east of Key West. Although hired to clean and perform minor maintenance duties at the camp, he soon proved to be a masterful mechanic, fixing pumps, boilers, and boat engines. Although he wasn't much of a fisherman, his ability to keep boats running made him a valuable asset to the camp owner.

With no mother to watch after him, Lázaro spent much time on his own while his father worked. He learned to pilot a boat through the islands and explore the smaller keys until he could navigate through them, even at night. Finding his way by water came easily to Lázaro, and he taught himself how to read charts, currents, and the subtle celestial benchmarks that can be found in the night sky. With the advantage of youth, he quickly absorbed the language. Although he had been exposed to English in Cuba, he was now immersed in it. Conversing in English soon came as effortlessly as speaking his native dialect. His swift acclimation to the keys made his father very proud.

When they found time to go out in their small boat together, young Lázaro was in charge—due to his father's admiration and to practicality. Even as a boy, Lázaro's skill on the water exceeded his father's. His father would call him "*El Capitán*," on the water and off, an endearing nickname that lasted for years. Lázaro always appreciated his father, but it would be another thirty years before he truly understood the man's strength despite the burden of losing a wife and raising a son on his own.

With his wages from the camp, Lázaro's father rented a small house on Key West from a wealthy local named Ramon. A terribly scarred man, Ramon had made his fortune salvaging cargo from ships that had wrecked upon the treacherous reefs surrounding the lower keys before warning lights had been installed. Their house was furnished with high-quality rugs, furniture, and china, all slightly damaged leftovers from Ramon's lucrative wrecking business. Ramon had made a good living, but at a cost. His stories of diving into a sinking ship's cargo hold or getting tangled in its rigging and narrowly escaping death came only after drinking rum. And the stories were told with a vacant look, not with a boastful air.

Lázaro learned that beneath Ramon's twisted face was a gentle man. Ramon would become like a second father to Lázaro, protecting, disciplining, and even teaching him how to read. The boy, his father, and Ramon spent many evenings out on their small porch. Lázaro swung lazily in the hammock looking at the stars, while the men played chess, talked, and smoked strong Habanos. His father had worked in the Vuelto Abajo tobacco fields as a young man and appreciated the almost ceremonial care that Cubans put into producing their cigars.

"*Capitán*," his father would say over his shoulder with his thick accent, "tell us what stars you are looking at." Lázaro would describe a constellation and explain how his new discovery could guide him a great distance across the sea. The men would listen intently, nodding through the thick clouds of tobacco smoke. Each time, Lázaro would fall asleep and his father would carry him to bed.

Father and son became a legendary team at the camp in the following years. With Lázaro's ability to navigate boats and his father's ability to fix them, the two were steadily employed during a time when the rest of the nation was struggling to find work. They were happy on Key West and continued to work on Boca Chica. Lázaro

took groups out on the camp's boats and his father kept everything working.

Lázaro loved the island chain and spent as much time as he could on the water. He found peace there. Although he devoured literature on navigation, he discovered that much of it confirmed what he had already learned on his own. He did not use terms such as a "running fix" or a "beam bearing," but he was blessed with extraordinary instincts and could always find his way back. When he was seventeen years old, Lázaro had the opportunity to help crew a boat across the Gulf Stream to Bimini. When he returned ten days later, he excitedly told his father and Ramon about plotting courses with protractors and parallel rulers, and navigating with instruments such as the sextant, even when there was no land in sight. Lázaro still sat on the porch with the two in the evenings, but now he too smoked the fine Cuban tobacco, told his own stories of adventure, and played chess.

Dominic listened closely as Lázaro spoke of his past, often joking that a fisherman's life was far more exciting than the privileged one he had led along Chicago's north shore. The conversation flowed easily until the game was finally over. By the end of the evening, on a board surrounded by a wall of empty beer bottles, Game One ended in a stalemate. Neither man could declare victory or concede defeat. Dominic had been delighted by the intensity and insisted on a rematch. The following week, in a game that revitalized him after an unsuccessful day of fishing, Lázaro finished with a win. Dominic flipped over his new board and with a small pocketknife carved the letters "D," "L," and "SM" at the top. Under the "SM" he cut a single mark for the previous week's stalemate, and under the "L" he placed a mark for Lázaro's win that evening. Dominic looked back at Lázaro with a grin.

“Seems that we have more games to play,” Dominic said, rubbing his hands across the yet-unscratched surface.



More than a half-century later, Lázaro pulled into a gas station on Plantation Key to fill his battered Stanley thermos with more coffee. The thermos sat on the old truck’s roomy bench seat next to the weathered wooden chessboard. The board, loosely wrapped in a piece of felt, was truly beautiful. Made from a strange, polished hardwood, the board reminded Lázaro of a hand-rubbed boat deck. The lacquer coating deeply penetrated the wood and had not worn through after the many games that had slid across its surface. A small palm tree was etched subtly in each corner square, unnoticeable during a game until the rooks went on the attack or the occasional castling was performed. The pieces were magnificently simple. Hand carved with the same care, each piece had a small hole drilled in its base that had been filled with lead. The result was a delightfully heavy set that made a man feel powerful when he played. There was but a single king that accompanied the set, and it had been drilled with an additional hole through which a thin piece of line was securely tied. The other king, similarly drilled, was still with his friend, now just one hundred miles away.

A few nights ago, after speaking on the phone with Dominic’s nurse, Sarah, Lázaro got the set down from the shelf in the cellar. He knew the old board would accompany him on his trip. He sat down and studied it for the first time in decades. And what he found on the back of the board stunned him.

He put the full thermos of coffee back in his truck and pulled out onto U.S. Highway 1 toward Dominic’s beach house on Sugarloaf Key. He rubbed the board, smooth from over a thousand games. It seemed warm, as if mysteriously producing its own heat.

Driving west, deeper into the Florida Keys toward his dying friend, he shook his head and sighed, thinking of his strange discovery just the other night. After counting the notches for the first time, he had sat in his cellar in shock. They were tied at 548 wins each—a stalemate, like the game that started it all.