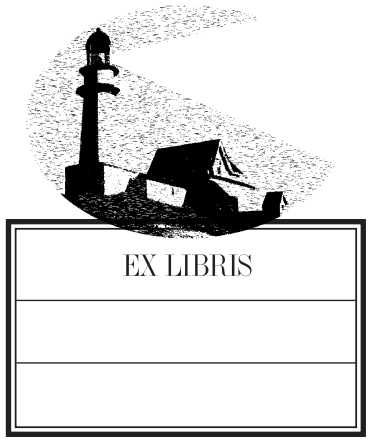
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Carlos "Calica" Ferrer

Becoming Che

Guevara's Second and Final Trip through Latin America

Translated from the Spanish by Sarah L. Smith

Prologue by Alberto Granado

CHAPTER 1

The Proposal

The true homeland of the poet and each and every one of us is childhood and youth because they are free, they are spontaneous. Life, rules and guidelines will then change the circumstances.

—Gonzalo Rojas, Cervantes Prize

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"Get ready, Calica—we're off within a year."

"Like hell in a year, Chancho. You've still got twelve exams to go."

"I'll pass them."

"Oh, right, you'll pass them—cut the crap."

"Just you wait and see."

Ernesto's proposal was like most things he did: more of a challenge than an invitation. He was fresh from his recent trip with Alberto Granado through Latin America, and like the rest of his friends and family, I couldn't get enough of the stories and anecdotes from that incredible journey. At first we had followed their escapades through their correspondence with the Guevara family, devouring those letters like an adventure novel. Thus Ernesto returned as a hero in our eyes; in admiration we listened to him recount his exploits time and time again. I recall one of our favorite stories: the trip in the Mambo-Tango raft. It was so unstable and difficult to navigate that, even though they had intended to stop in the port of Leticia, Colombia, they weren't even able to get close to shore there and ended up going all the way to Brazil. The raft was loaded with all the gifts—fruit, monkey meat, chickens and other provisions—the San Pablo leper colony interns had showered upon them in appreciation for the dedication and affection both had put into their work there. And they took special care to preserve everything because they knew that provisions would soon start to run low. At one point, a hen fell overboard and Ernesto started to undress

intending to go in after it. Alberto very calmly, without putting down the *mate*[1] he was sipping on, said, "Uh, I think you've forgotten about the alligators … " Faced with this hard logic, Ernesto had no choice but to put his clothes back on and grimly watch as his dinner drowned.

The invitation to travel came at just the right time, but I didn't take it seriously at first. Ernesto used his best arguments and charm to talk me into it. He needed a companion to take up his adventures again, because Alberto had remained behind to work as a biochemist in the Cabo Blanco leper colony in La Guaira, Venezuela. The plan was simple: First Ernesto would finish medical school, then we'd start out—by train, thumbing rides, in trucks, on donkeys, whatever was free or nearly free—all the way to Venezuela where we'd meet up with "El Petiso" Granado.

"Look, the oil thing in Venezuela makes for fantastic living; they have a really strong currency, the bolivar, at $3.35 to the dollar. The coins are all pure silver, which basically says it all," Ernesto tried to encourage me. "They've got the best *minas*[2] in the world there," he went on, aiming at what he knew was one of my weak points, "and you can get *laburo*[3] right off, because you don't have to have a professional degree—just a high school diploma is enough to get you any job you want. And the best thing is we can use it as a stepping stone; we save a little, and then we're off to Paris, all three of us, you know?"

The idea of this kind of trip rattled around in my head in the days to come. I was 23 years old and stuck between a rock and a hard place. I had dropped out of

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1 Tea-like infusion typical in Argentina.
2 Women.
3 Work.

university, my father had died and I couldn't find a job. After three years of medical school in Córdoba, I had realized that the white lab coat wasn't for me; I was more interested in the social and political climate in the Clínicas *barrio*, a real hotbed at that time. My initiation into politics came just after I'd begun university when I was chosen as first-year delegate for the School of Medicine in the University of Córdoba Student Federation in 1948. The federation was divided into two factions: the Reformist Party, of which myself and Granado (who was much older and I barely knew) were members, and another group with communist leanings. I was not a communist, but I was certainly a leftist, a socialist. What we all *did* share was our anti-Peronist, anti-Nazi and the newly emerging anti-imperialist stance. The military police couldn't just trot into Clínicas on horseback whenever they pleased; we covered the streets with marbles and broken broomsticks to keep them out. And an anti-imperialist climate had begun—I signed manifestos repudiating U.S. acts in Hiroshima and Nagasaki after the bombing of those cities. I was clearly drawn to politics, and also—I must confess—the social life in Clínicas was a constant party. My mother finally became fed up, cut me off financially and issued an ultimatum: "Since you've decided not to study, you will come to Buenos Aires and get a job."

It sounded simple, but it wasn't. With no degree and no job experience, a young man in his early twenties didn't have much of a chance of finding a good job. The only real possibility was a government job, but that would have meant affiliating myself with the Peronist party, which I was not about to do. That's how I ended up spending two years in Buenos Aires with hardly any work or school, while my mother juggled what little my father had left us in order for my brothers to continue

their studies. I had two things on my mind at that time: horseracing and girls. I'd take on a *changa*, an odd job, whenever I could. That was about the time when Ernesto showed up with his offer that would leave its mark forever. Of course I didn't realize it at the time; I could only fantasize about the easy life, the strong peso, the beautiful women and all the well-paid jobs waiting for me in Venezuela. And I certainly had no problem with Ernesto's ideas about saving our money to continue traveling the world or buying a boat and sailing down the Orinoco River. Alligators, piranhas, indigenous tribes, palm trees, the unexplored… my imagination reeled! I didn't know Granado that well, but I knew he was *macanudo*, a good guy, and that we would get along splendidly. Just based on our enthusiasm, it seemed Ernesto and I agreed on everything, although we would later learn that this was not the case; Ernesto was Ernesto and I was myself. Che was already alive inside Ernesto and pushing him toward a much greater adventure than the one I modestly entertained in my mind. After his trip with Granado, he had noted in his diary:

> The person who wrote these notes died the day he tread on Argentine land again; the one who organized and honed them is no longer, 'I' am not I anymore, or at least not the same inside. This wandering in our 'Americas' has changed me more than I imagined.[4]

The challenge he had proposed was both tempting and unsettling. My friend was pushing me towards an adventure into unknown lands with barely any funds—me, who hadn't traveled anywhere other than to the

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4 Ernesto Che Guevara, *Diarios de motocicleta. Notas de un viaje por América Latina*, Buenos Aires, Planeta, 2004, p. 52.

One of the first birthdays shared with Ernesto in our house in Alta Gracia. Ernesto, sporting a bandage that covered a recent wallop (bandaids didn't exist in those days); me next to him with my hair slicked back. Our siblings Jorge Ferrer and Celita Guevara (with the white bow behind me) are there with us. Among other guests, there are many who would later become our best friends: the Peñas (Clarita, Susan and Coté); the Muñoz Gonzálezes (Sarita, María Rosa and Queta); the Ayrolos (Barón and Pelado); the Moyano Gacitúas (Teresita and Cornelio); Pipina Hernández and Charo Aguina. And in white, all the ever-present nannies who patiently endured our mischief.

beaches of Punta del Este and Carrasco in Uruguay with my parents on summer vacations! In those days, distances were vast; it was terribly difficult, expensive and burdensome to travel. Travel was only for those with enough money and time to do it. But Ernesto of course had invented a new way of traveling, carrying hardly anything at all, thumbing rides, sleeping wherever and eating whatever he managed to scrape up. Today, after the hippy culture, after the youth revolutions of the 60's and 70's, this may seem very commonplace, but at the time it was an odyssey!

There was no way I could have turned him down. It wasn't the first time Ernesto had challenged me and I

had never been cowed by him before. After one of our typical fights in Alta Gracia when we were eleven, he confronted me with his whole gang, of which he was the unquestionable leader.

"Look," he said, "if you want to be in our gang again, you have to do something brave." Not wanting to be left out, of course I accepted the challenge, so they took me to this huge rock about four or five meters square in size with a tunnel underneath.

"If you go all the way through this tunnel, you can be in the gang again," he said. Without thinking twice about it, I headed into the tunnel even though I was terrified that I'd be bitten by a snake or spider, that a frog would crawl up my leg or I'd be crushed in a cave-in. It seemed like an eternity there underground, but I finally made it out the other side and was greeted with congratulations from all. I had reclaimed my title as a friend of Ernesto's.

I've often read that Ernesto demanded of his fellow travelers rigor and stoicism, that they be able to endure heat, cold, hunger and thirst, and that they possess patience when faced with no way out. He would calmly tell you, "Take it easy, we're almost there." That was how it was—you had to meet certain requirements to accompany Ernesto. For this reason, I was brimming with pride to have been chosen to go on that trip. It meant that I had what it took. Even though I enjoyed the "good life"—as I continue to do—I had no problem making temporary sacrifices. He used to tease me about being a *pituco*[5], while he was always happier walking in the mud; he adapted to any circumstances.

Ernesto and I, along with nearly everyone else in Alta Gracia, were brought together thanks to Koch's Bacillus.

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5 High-society snob.

This often repeated joke (particularly by Carlitos Figueroa, another of our friends) referred to the fact that most of the Argentine upper class suffering from lung disease, whether it be asthma, pneumonia or tuberculosis, ended up in this town in the province of Córdoba. In the 1930's, Alta Gracia was a small, lovely town surrounded by mountains and countryside, blessed with a dry, stable climate that worked miracles that medicine still couldn't offer to people with lung disease back then. In addition, in those days many people considered tuberculosis a shameful affliction, so those who had the means would buy a house in Alta Gracia and endure the matter in a dignified way, claiming to suffer from a more elegant condition that required country rest. The same phenomenon occurred in other towns in Córdoba, but Alta Gracia belonged to the crème de la crème families. Once cured, many had grown to love the town so much that they kept their houses as summer homes or to use in the event of future relapses.

I was born and raised there. My family enjoyed a position of privilege since my father, Carlos Ferrer Moratel, was one of the most important people in this town cum hospital. As a doctor specialized in lung-disease, he never lacked patients. And he attended everyone regardless of economic or social position; he treated the rich, but he also treated the poor without charging them a penny. He met my mother, Dolly, when she came to accompany her cousin who was suffering from tuberculosis.

Many biographers have pointed to the asthma that afflicted Ernesto as of age two as a determining factor in his personality and his life. This certainly was true in the case of our friendship. Ernesto and his family came to Alta Gracia in 1932 when he was four years old and suffering from such severe asthma that a drastic solution

was needed. A doctor in Buenos Aires—the prestigious pediatrician Mario O'Donnell, father of psychoanalyst and writer Pacho O'Donnell—recommended a four-month stay in the mountains of Córdoba. Those four months turned into eleven years, a long time in which I had the privilege of living very close to my friend.

I don't remember the day I met Ernesto. It surely must have been at one of the frequent birthday party events our mothers used to drag us to after bathing us, oiling our hair down and ironing and starching us as was typically done in those days. They would have said to Ernesto, "Come on, you're going to meet Dr. Ferrer's son. You two can be friends!" And I, a year younger, was probably told something similar. That was how the social part was handled; you had to be friends with the children of your parents' friends. Our parents met just after the Guevaras' arrival and got along well from the beginning. My father, an asthma specialist, treated Ernesto and, thanks to his good work or to the good climate or to both, he began to improve. This professional relationship was enhanced by a mutual appreciation that grew into friendship. They were both young couples with children the same ages, they both enjoyed a social and economic position that allowed them to take part in the society life offered by the small but distinguished town of Alta Gracia. But more than anything else, they were ideologically compatible. In the insufferably clerical and conservative atmosphere of Córdoba, both the Guevaras and the Ferrers were quite liberal-minded, defending their secularist stance and favoring classic socialism like that of Alfredo Palacios. And both families unconditionally supported the brand new Republican government established in Spain in 1931. The civil war that would soon unfold in that country would divide Alta Gracia's society, just as it would the rest of

Here we are posing for yet another birthday photo in the Peña family's house. Along with Dr. Fernando Peña and his wife are their children Clarita, Susana, Coté and Fernando. The Werner kids also appear (Susana, Marta and Enrique), as well as the Binaschis, Charo Aguina, Roberto Guevara and Carlos Ferrer. I'm in the first row looking off to the side. Ernesto, looking straight on, appears annoyed. Perhaps because he's the only one wearing a wool sweater due to his asthma that summer's day.

Argentina, teeming with Spanish immigrants and their descendents, into Republicans, anti-Fascists and Falangists. The Guevara and Ferrer families were on the same side: that of the Republic.

This political position, even though it contrasted with that of many others in Alta Gracia's upper-class society, did not cause their peers to reject them. The Guevaras, because of their indisputable social status, and the Ferrers, because of my father's professional work, were respected despite their ideological differences. If they were criticized, it was done out of earshot. As far as society was concerned, a heavy-weight family

name was no small matter and both Guevara Lynch and De la Serna, Ernesto's mother Celia's maiden name, were well-known and respected by all.

Celia, moreover, was different on her own merit and stood out in every way. I remember her with her string of pearls, smoking black cigarettes with the arrogance of a femme fatale while playing bridge in the Sierras Hotel. She was strikingly beautiful, tall, thin, temperamental and vivacious, always ready to welcome all her children's friends over, always with a book in her lap and she spoke perfect French. She was cultured, elegant and refined and never kept quiet, always had something to say. Celia was not just the "lady of the house", she was quite a character. She had a great sense of humor, always joking, doling out irony and sarcastic comments as well as taking them well. She adored her children, but her favorite was Ernesto, perhaps because he was her first or perhaps because of the asthma that led her to protect and spend more time with him, or maybe it was just that they shared similar personalities and intelligence. Ernesto reciprocated everything; he adored her and always kept her in his thoughts even when he was far away. This was evident just in reading the letters he sent her from the remotest of places. I think he was eternally grateful to her for not having raised him behind glass walls, for treating him like a normal child in spite of the asthma. And she always stood her ground on this issue, even though her husband thought differently—he was much more fearful. Some biographers sustain that Ernesto senior blamed his wife for his son's illness due to an episode when little Ernesto was just two, which his father claims triggered the affliction. They say that Celia took Ernesto for a swim in the Río de la Plata and didn't wrap him properly when they got out, exposing him to a brisk breeze that had blown in. I personally am not

aware of Ernesto's father having made this accusation, but I did witness a confrontation over this issue many years later in the Guevara house that summed up the tension between the couple. It was one of the numerous times I had gone to their house for news of Ernesto—who was then already becoming Che, forging his first battles—and found them in an argument. Ernesto senior, perhaps taking advantage of my presence as a potential ally, confronted Celia:

"Look at all this nonsense the boy is up to, we don't know where he is, what he's doing—it's all because of the way you raised him."

"And what would you have preferred? On eggshells? 'Be careful, don't go out, don't do this or that'… No; I decided he would have a life just like any other boy."

I don't think she was wrong—the proof is obvious. Ernesto never felt limited by his asthma; he got what he wanted and achieved all the important things he set out to do in his life. He was always like that, even as a child; never hid behind his asthma to avoid taking on any sport, adventure or game that came up. And whenever he had an asthma attack, he, his family and all his friends took it in stride. We all knew that Ernesto had this disease and that every so often he'd have an episode. We helped him when he needed it, we visited him when he had to stay at home and we were used to seeing him smoke those special cigarettes that were supposed to open his lungs up. (Our friend Enrique Martín said they must have been made out of manure because of the stench!) And we were used to the inhaler, a little device that he had to breathe adrenaline out of when he had an attack. But for us he was always the same Ernesto; we knew that soon he'd be back out riding horses, swimming, playing soccer or golf. His strength, his skill at sports, and later on with the girls, but mostly his intelligence,

all combined to make him a natural leader that we all followed. The asthma never got the better of his personality.

Ernesto senior was also an impressive figure—quite tall, thick-lipped and incredibly strong. He came across as always angry, but it was only on the surface, because deep down he was the sensitive type and clearly good-hearted with authentic passion for his children. If anyone did anything to compromise them, he was capable of just about anything. This caged-lion demeanor came in part from the sacrifice of having to live in a place like Alta Gracia with no professional horizons. He would have had much better work opportunities in Buenos Aires with all his family and social connections. Nevertheless, his love for his son and the desperate need to see him get better were stronger; come hell or high water, the Guevaras stayed in Alta Gracia. It was clearly a sacrifice for them. In those days, distance was a nearly insurmountable barrier. Today the 750 kilometers separating Alta Gracia from Buenos Aires may seem like nothing, but back then communications and transportation were precarious at best. Most of the roads were still unpaved and living there meant being practically cut off from what was going on in Buenos Aires. He therefore had to look for work in Alta Gracia where, while it may have been a pretty place, there was no industry. The small town was nearly completely at the service of treating tuberculosis, and then there was the incipient tourist industry. Other than that, there was not much else. For a couple of years, he worked on the remodeling of the Hotel Sierras golf course. But the rest of the time he weathered the storms by leasing some mate-leaf fields in Misiones province inherited from Celia's family. During the years they spent in Alta Gracia, the Guevara family never lacked anything, but they never

had much left over either. They lived on quite a short string and were at the mercy of the erratic earnings they brought in depending on the year. This caused them to move often, always to rented houses. And sometimes they fell behind in paying their housekeeper's wages or the rent, but as soon as the long-awaited envelope arrived in the mail, they always made immediate amends. Rosarito, their housekeeper/cook/nanny/sometimes "mother" to Ernesto often told me this, always adding that Ernesto senior's generosity made her forgive him the lapses in pay. Whenever the money finally arrived, Guevara paid her what was owed with an extra month's salary as a gift. He even took in stride the nickname he'd been given, "Urquiza, the Caseros terror[6]", for his tardiness in paying the rent. And he laughed himself silly one afternoon recalling the time when this little guy, Beto Losada, the nephew of the Guevaras' landlord, came around to collect the rent. They were then living in the famous Villa Nydia, which they rented at several different times and was later turned into a museum honoring the memory of Che. Mr. Guevara greeted the young man genially, "Hi, Beto, how's it going?"

"Just fine, Don Ernesto…"

"You look like a guy who's come to collect the rent."

"And you, sir, look like someone who's not going to pay it," retorted Losada, who was quick with his tongue and already well-versed in the difficult task of collecting rent payments.

I personally was a party to Mr. Guevara's matter-of-fact attitude toward money once. I had been invited to go to with my friend Ernesto and his family to spend a few days in Buenos Aires. At one point, Mr. Guevara

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6 Play on the word "caseros" which is the name of an important battle (fought by General Urquiza), but can also mean "landlords".

discovered that he hadn't brought enough cash for the trip and, without thinking twice, asked me to lend him the few pesos my parents had given me for spending money. Noblesse oblige, that money was dutifully reimbursed to me the following day "with interest". There's also one other event that stands out in my memory from that trip that really captures his character. We were on the train to Buenos Aires and Celia was carrying Ernesto's younger brother, Juan Martín, who was a baby at the time. After lunch, she asked the waiter if he could warm up a bottle for the baby. The waiter rudely replied that 'no, he couldn't—he was working'. He had no idea who he was dealing with. Guevara jumped up, grabbed the waiter by his lapels and started shaking him like a feather pillow. He yelled, "Who do you think you are, damn it, to talk to my wife like that!" They had to pull him off of the guy because he was about to kill him. We kids just watched calmly; we knew no one could outdo him in a hand-to-hand fight because he was phenomenally strong. And despite his easygoing way with everyone, he never forgot he was a Guevara Lynch.

The relationship between the Ferrer and Guevara families grew closer over the years thanks to the friendship among their children. On our side, I was followed by my brother Jorge, who we all called El Gordo and then the youngest, Horacio (Chacho to his close friends and family), who are both doctors today. In the Guevara family, Ernesto was the eldest, followed by Celia, Roberto, Ana María and Juan Martín, who came along much later—nearly a grandchild—who we all called Patatín. Ernesto and I were practically attached at the hip; my brother Jorge, closer in age to Roberto, became his friend; and Chacho and Ana María were about the same age.

The Peñas were another family who were quite close

Another birthday photo on the stairs in our house, where I'd later be photographed with Camilo, Ernesto's son. Here, I'm the one who appears annoyed, maybe because I was dressed the same—as was customary then—as my younger brother, Jorge; we're both in dark shirts. Ernesto (above to the right) was with his siblings Celita (the one looking down) and Ana María (the baby of the family) in the front row. Other guests included Martita and Pipina Hernández, the Ayrolo brothers and the Moyano Gacitúas.

to the Guevaras and influenced their decision to stay. Fernando Peña, a judge in the city of Córdoba, was also liberal-minded and progressive in his ideas. They lived in the Alto, the part of town where the Guevaras always rented; the children—Clarita, Susana, Fernando and Coté—also became fast friends with the Guevara kids.

Life in Alta Gracia was very small-town and quiet. The days turned into weeks, months and years that passed without many changes. What might have been a

tedious or suffocating environment for an adult for us meant extraordinary freedom. The absence of danger and urgency allowed our parents to adopt an "outdoor" approach to child-rearing from a very early age. Ernesto was born to live this way—except for the times when he had to stay indoors because of his bouts of asthma, he was as free as a bird just like the rest of us, perhaps even more so from periodically being forced to stay inside; maybe this made him cherish freedom even more, the outdoor life, the small challenges offered by the sierras, the creeks. We children were lucky enough to live in an enchanting town where not only could we just show up for lunch or afternoon tea at anyone's house, but were also surrounded by a spectacular landscape that inspired us to feel adventurous in our excursions to the hills, our plunges into the creeks, our improvised soccer matches or battles in the open lots. Our freedom was only barely tainted by the occasional recriminations of some poor neighbor who had suffered one of our *macanas*[7], dragging us by the ear to our houses: "Look, Don Guevara or Don Ferrer, this little brat has just ...!" Then we'd be punished and have to stay inside. The one daily rule we had to abide by was coming home in time for lunch and being sure not to bother the adults' sacred siesta time. At least this was the case in our house, since my father had to return to his office, so lunch couldn't be held up or else he wouldn't have time for his nap. And as told by a Cordoban patriarch, "At siesta time, only the *porteños*[8] and the iguanas come out." But at the Guevara house, mealtime was another story entirely, just like all the other things that they did their own way—very rare in those days when social norms were much

7 Naughty tricks.
8 People from the port city of Buenos Aires.

more rigid than they are today. In their house, you could eat up until three o'clock and you could show up without an invitation. I loved going to their house and did so frequently. One summer day, I was playing in the Hotel Sierras pool with a friend I had invited home for lunch when I realized that it was already one o'clock. I was late again, just like so many other days then; my father had threatened me, "The next time you show up late for lunch ... "

So I said to my friend we should go to the Guevaras' to eat. Celia greeted me with a smile like always, the one that made you feel like part of the family, "Hi, Calica, how are you? What's up?"

"Well … I had invited my friend here to lunch, but it got late on me and if I go home now my dad will kill me. Do you mind if we stay to eat?" She laughed in conspiracy, kindheartedly inviting us in, the party-crasher along with his guest! There was always enough food to go around in their house—if more people came by, they just fried more eggs or potatoes or they sliced the meat a little thinner so there was enough for everyone.

And of course Ernesto also came to my house whenever he wanted, either to play or to share a meal; but it was always more fun at the Guevaras'. There were always lots of people and an undeniably jovial atmosphere. I believe this contradicts the common assumption about their marriage; at that time at least, their home felt like a place full of warmth. Of course they were both very intense in their way of talking—they debated with each other and all their guests. When I first saw this as a child, it really surprised me, but then I got used to it and took their arguments in stride, just like the rest of the family. Besides, this passionate style of speaking was the general tone in their house and part of its charm. In the Guevara household, you could throw the

most trivial subject in the world on the table and end up with a fabulous discussion. They celebrated knowledge, diction and eloquence and the most mundane chats would end up escalating into heated debates. When it was over, everyone would take their leave as if nothing had happened, ready to take up the topic at the next get-together. The Guevara children began to take part as they grew older; we, the guests or stragglers, also managed to get a word in whenever we were brave enough. But you couldn't just say anything—you were cut off the minute you uttered anything stupid. I was quite timid, although as an adolescent I did venture to make the occasional comment; however, I usually kept my ideas to myself.

When the conversation ended, I'd pull Ernesto aside and say, "Well, I think such and such ... "

And he'd come back with, "Well, say so if you're so sure."

"But … I just didn't have the nerve, so I'm telling you," I'd confess.

And the Guevaras' door was open to all of their children's friends, regardless of who they were—it didn't matter if you were rich or poor, if you had an important family name like theirs or not. Ernesto shared this quality—he could rub elbows with the upper crust of Alta Gracia, but he also had friends who could barely read or write from very humble families, the golf course caddies, the children of caretakers who looked after the houses that were empty in the off-season. With them our excursions to the hills were a bit more daring than what we, the "well-to-do" kids, were allowed by our parents. We hiked to remote places such as some nearby quarries. We'd take bread and mate and not come back until nightfall. And if anyone wanted to accept a kindly offer from a passing truck-driver to give us a lift home,

Ernesto always declined, so the rest of us could only go along with him for fear of seeming like sissies. Ernesto was pure curiosity, absolutely attracted to the unknown. He did his best to get involved in everything, to explore new places, to know more. And what he learned, what he had, what he knew, he shared with everyone—he was generous by nature. Celia often complained that, because Ernesto was always giving away his *guardapolvos*[9] to poor schoolmates, she would often find that he didn't have one to wear himself. If he had any money in his pocket—which wasn't often—he immediately treated all his friends to the 15-cent bologna and cheese sandwiches they sold in the shop close to his house. He also taught them how to ride a horse, which at that time was the utmost aspiration of any boy and was beyond reach for kids from poor families. The Lone Ranger was all the rage at the local cinema then. The hero was always a cowboy on his horse, so if you had a horse and a wide-brim hat, you could impress just about anyone. Even the Guevaras only had horses while Ernesto's father worked on the golf-course remodeling. We, on the other hand, thanks to my father's good financial position, always had horses with good saddles for showing off and impressing the girls. This of course caused a good deal of envy, scuffles and insults. When I'd pass by on my horse, Ernesto and his country friends would ambush me from a makeshift trench that they used for playing war games. So I'd then go off and round up other friends who also had horses and we'd counter-attack by running them down on horseback. Ernesto and I would stay angry at each other and go for days without speaking until we finally got over it and went back to being friends like always. The

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9 Long jacket worn over clothes to school.

friendship between our parents helped to smooth out the clashes between us owed to our strong personalities. Nevertheless, we never came to blows, I think because we respected each other; maybe due in part to dignity and in part to diplomacy, we never let things get out of hand. There was certainly an element of prudence as well, because neither of us liked to lose. And Ernesto, even though he was capable of meeting a train head-on, also knew just how far he could go. He never fought with any of the other good friends with whom he shared different moments of his life either—Alberto Granado, the Figueroa brothers or my brother, Jorge.

Summer was when our small town awoke from its long winter sleep that had only been briefly interrupted by Golf Week and the school winter break. The "good" families arrived along with the good temperatures to take up residence in their summer homes or in the Hotel Sierras. We kids would go to the station to see who was arriving, find friends from previous summers, see a girl we had our eye on, dodging between the trunks and luggage brought by families who came to spend the summer, while the porters went about lifting them onto the horse carts awaiting the visitors. They were full-fledged moves the vacations of these families, spanning the entire period from early December until the day before classes began in March. The Rayo del Sol train, on the Mitre line from Retiro Station in Buenos to Alta Gracia, was very *bacán*[10]—it had sleeping cars, a dining car, all of the best quality. It ran at night and arrived in Alta Gracia in the morning. Ernesto and I made this trip together many times, both with our families as children and alone when we were older. I remember the plate of vegetable consommé followed by two courses and

10 Luxurious.

In Alta Gracia, the Ferrer and Guevara families moved in progressive and intellectual circles which included notable Spaniards in exile during the Spanish Civil War. In the top photo, from right to left: Paco Aguilar (distinguished Spanish musician), the poet Rafael Alberti, the famous composer Manuel de Falla, Juan Aguilar (former Republican official) and, between two people I don't recognize, is my father in profile, Dr. Carlos Ferrer Moratel.
The lower photo also shows my father surrounded by all these celebrities. The house where Manuel de Falla lived in Alta Gracia has since been converted into a museum that houses photos and many other memorabilia of the great composer and a way of life long vanished.

dessert. And then the adults had their glass of whisky. By the time we got to Rosario, the waiters would get fed up with our antics and throw us out of the dining car, "Out of here, you little brats!" And then we'd go to the sleepers and talk until we fell asleep. The next day, we'd wake up in Alta Gracia to celebrate our return home and re-connect with all our friends.

Everything changed in summer—the activities, the games, our schedules and our friends. Something else that changed, even though it weighed upon us because we loved our year-round friends, were the lines drawn between social classes. These were the times when domestic servants were deferential even to children, calling us "Master" Ernesto and "Master" Calica. The summer-time center of life in the town was the Hotel Sierras with its pool, golf course and tennis courts; its orchestra, balconies and drawing rooms; its famous bar, dances and social life. It was what one would call a 5-star hotel today. Built by the English at the time the railways were being laid in Argentina, it was modeled on another British hotel in Calcutta with the same purpose in mind: a comfortable place for relaxation and sports that replicated the luxurious European lifestyle in the underdeveloped places in which they did business. And not just anyone could go there. There was a marked division, an enormous "sieve", whereby only those who met with the hotel manager's approval were allowed in. The manager was a short Italian, Don Roque Celentano, whom we gave not a few gray hairs. The kids who had the green light at the hotel were the Guevaras, the Ferrers, the Figueroas, the Peñas, the Ayrolos, the Achával Cafferatas, the Marcó del Ponts, the Lahittes, the Werners, the Sánchez Chopiteas, the Fauvetys, the Palacios, the Hernández and many others. However, if we got out of line, Celentano would grab us—Ernesto,

Carlitos Figueroa or me—and send us home packing. Then he'd have a talk with our parents, who scolded us or punished us in some way, but the next day we'd be back. He was a little more forgiving with me since my father was doctor to the lung patients (in other words, nearly all the guests) at the Sierras, so I enjoyed a bit more indulgence. Nevertheless, if I behaved badly, he would throw me out as well.

During the summer season, life began in the morning at the hotel pool. It was a fantastic 25-meter Olympic pool with lanes and a 2-meter diving board, used by Ernesto from a very young age, partly because he liked it, but also to show—something he did at every opportunity—that he wasn't afraid of anything, as well as to impress the girls. We'd dare each other and act like bigshots to see who could swim underwater longest, sometimes swimming nearly two lengths—that's 50 meters! One time, Roberto, who was younger, decided to copy us, but at about half-way he ended up floating; Ernesto's father raced into the pool to rescue him. I remember the scolding we got later that day when Roberto was already at home recovering with an icepack on his head.

Ernesto went to the Sierras with both his parents, while I was always accompanied by just my mother since my father was attending his patients. There were swimming classes where we first learned and then perfected our strokes with Argentine sports stand-outs the likes of the Espejo Pérez brothers and El Gringo Giordano. Ernesto and I were good swimmers, both winners in butterfly and breaststroke. When we were teenagers, his father trained us for an important swim meet with his eyes on beating the Argentine record for the under-15 age-group in the 100-meter breaststroke. We spent the entire summer training—Mr. Guevara

taught us how to take the laps without losing valuable seconds. Ernesto was actually a more likely candidate to win than I was based on how he was looking in training. Finally the day of the meet arrived, we took our marks and were off, but at about 50 meters, out of the corner of my eye I saw Ernesto stop; I didn't know what had happened, but they were all yelling at me to keep swimming. I finished the last lap and broke the record, but it was a bittersweet victory. Ernesto had had an asthma attack in the water and that was why he couldn't finish the race. Good sportsman and as proud as he was, he came to congratulate me.

At siesta time, we weren't allowed to go near the Sierras—Celentano wouldn't allow us in because he said we bothered the highbrow guests while they either slept or played cards, dice or chess in the different lounge areas in the hotel. Only when the sun began to go down were we allowed back in to listen to a small orchestra that played waltzes, boleros and fox-trots on the patio where there was also dancing. As children, we only spied and laughed at the older boys who were already courting girls. And we went to the game rooms. Ernesto was a great chess player and could beat all of us except Negro Figueroa, Carlitos' older brother—there were some memorable matches between the two!

It was another story altogether once we began to wear long pants—as long as you were in short pants, you didn't have much right to anything. So this was when we began to go to the dances, decking ourselves out as best we could; if you were lucky enough to have a white jacket, you were a hit. But Ernesto never cared a thing about clothes and we teased him for wearing whatever he could lay his hands on. In those days, it was common for most of our clothes to be handed down from one relative to another. Ernesto inherited clothes from an uncle of

Ernesto with his gang of "scruffy" friends. From the very start, he frequented all types of social settings. Just as he enjoyed friendships with high-class friends, he lived endless adventures with the children of poor families. In this photo, Ernesto (as always, in the wool vest and long sleeves) poses with the Martín brothers (Enrique and José), the Ávalos (Manolo and el Negro), Fernando Romero, Juan Míguez, Cacho, and his brother and sister, Roberto (to the right) and Ana María.

his that were always too big and that he never went to the trouble to have altered. He'd put something on and ask, "You like what uncle so-and-so sent me?"

"You look like crap," I'd say.

"Who cares—I'm wearing it anyway."

Despite this "who cares" look of his along with his lousy dance skills, Ernesto had a way with the girls even in early adolescence when our romances were more imaginary than real—it was all 'I think so-and-so likes you' or 'don't look now, she's looking at you.' We liked them all, we asked them all to dance, but that was it—just *festejos,* our word for flirting in those days. Ernesto was so sure of himself, he didn't need fancy clothes or

skill on the dance floor—he had incredible self-confidence. We gave him a hard time about the dancing, because he just had no ear for music whatsoever, but he ended up using it to his advantage. The girls thought it was cute and they'd say, "Oh, Ernestito, you poor thing, you don't know how to dance. Why don't you come over to my house and I'll teach you how." So off he went for afternoon tea, having a great time, eating everything they put on the table and, of course, never learning a thing because he had ears full of cotton.

The afternoon teas, the *guitarreadas*[11], playing *truco*[12], ping-pong, the barbecues, hikes in the hills, swimming in the creeks, riding horses—these were our summertime days in Alta Gracia, both for the "permanent cast" and the summer visitors. Many of the get-togethers were held in the houses of the girls in our group, because it was a way for the mothers to feel they had more control. One thing that Ernesto and I hated were the sing-alongs, since we both had an awful ear for music; whoever knew how to play the guitar and sing was instantly popular with the girls.

"Look at how that guy has them all eating out of his hand just because he can play, and he's just a midget … ," we'd whisper to each other as we watched in envy how all the girls had their eyes glued on some little guy playing boleros.

We preferred horseback riding, because it allowed us to stand out compared to the porteños who didn't have the experience we did on horseback. For us, porteño was an insult synonymous with snob. Ernesto, Carlitos Figueroa and I could show off doing tricks like rearing the horse up on its hind legs, and out in the hills it was

11 Guitar sing-alongs.
12 Popular card game.

easier to find secluded places, away from the parents' watchful eyes, to steal a kiss from a girl you liked.

The adults also had their own "elegant" versions of fun, most of British influence like fox-runs, golf and tennis. But the frosting on our summers was the three famous carnival celebrations: one in Villa Allende, one in La Cumbre and the third in Alta Gracia. As teenagers, we went to all three and the festivities could end up in brawls, depending on how things went with the other groups of revelers. The parties were organized by the big hotels in each town and, in order to not spend much, we'd go early and hide our bottles of gin in the bushes. We'd take a drink when no one was looking, so nobody could figure out how we ended up so smashed without money for drinks! Many of us were thrown out feet first, but not Ernesto; he was always more tempered with his drinking, although he did like to drink.

With the summer's end, the vacationers took the Rayo de Sol back to Buenos Aires and Alta Gracia went back to its small-town pace, its empty houses and wide-open spaces. For weeks our summer adventures still echoed in the hills and those of us who stayed struggled with the feeling of having been left behind in a place that suddenly seemed too large, constantly retelling anecdotes, real or imaginary romances, pranks—everything that had happened that summer. In the fall, we returned to school. There were three primary schools in Alta Gracia, all of them public. Ernesto did not attend the first years of school due to his asthma; Celia took on the task of giving him the education he was not able to get by regularly attending classes like other kids. I suppose this must have been an important factor in his upbringing, allowing him more freedom with no set schedule, schoolmates, teachers, recesses or homework. He was only limited by the stubborn asthma that sometimes took

days to subside. I often stopped by alone or with friends and Celia would nod in the direction of his room to let us know that he was having another bout. There he was, nearly always reading lying on his stomach, a position that helped him to breathe better; or playing chess with his father or one of his siblings. However, when he was well, his free daily routine allowed him to interact with other children in Alta Gracia who didn't attend school for different reasons. They were from the poor families that worked the land or were caddies or porters. They weren't permitted inside the Sierras Hotel nor were they invited to tea or any of the summertime celebrations, but Ernesto spent the rest of the year with them and considered them just as much his friends as the children from wealthier families. He also learned things from them, such as the value of work. Ernesto's family always got a laugh recalling the time he went with his friends to harvest wild grapes in the country—they were paid 40 cents for eight hours of work, the equivalent of a couple of sandwiches. But they worked because they had to; Ernesto worked for fun. The thing was, ever faithful to his habit of devouring any kind of food, he ate more grapes than he harvested and ended up with a colossal case of diarrhea!

Another of our friends, Zacarías, who was four or five years older, was quite a character in Alta Gracia. Since no one knew his last name, we had christened him Tajamar in name of the town's famous reservoir. Zacarías went around with a basket selling *alfajores*[13] made by the woman who had adopted him.

"Hey, Zacarías, give me an alfajor on my tab," Ernesto or I would always chide him.

"No way," he'd say, "you owe me such-and-such and you don't have a tab!"

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13 Argentine cookies.

The grade sheet from our fifth-grade class in the Manuel Solares school, 1940. With an average of 5.15, Ernesto did not stand out as a good student; however, the laxness was general—I barely scraped by with a 5.84 and we all got bad marks in conduct. With the exception of two, everyone else got "Needs Work". Ernesto, whose name was misspelled as Guevara Linch, received his best grades in Reading, History and Geography, interests he would maintain throughout his life. His asthma is also clearly evident in the grade sheet with a total of 68 excused absences.

Then one of us would distract his attention and the other would come from behind and grab a cookie or two and we'd take off running, splitting our sides with laughter and eating our booty while Zacarías cursed us up and down. Then, when he showed up to complain to our parents of the crime, our parents would wearily pay what was owed. We gave him a hard time, but he was still our friend. Whenever we organized an impromptu game, if he happened to pass by with this basket, we always called him to play and he'd drop what he was doing to join in. A few years later, he got a job grooming the tennis courts at the Sierras and became so full of himself, "Watch out, yous," he would say, "now I'm the boss around here!"

When Ernesto finally began to attend school regularly, we were classmates in fifth grade in Manuel Solares, a public school for boys. Ernesto was in the spotlight from the start. He arrived in the "the clunker" —the name we had given the Guevaras' old convertible Dodge—which always had clusters of children hanging like grapes from the bumpers. Celia, so easygoing, gave a ride to all the kids who wanted one. Another notable difference about the Guevara children was that they were exempt from the religion class. In those times, religion was still taught as an elective in public schools, but the truth is everyone attended with the exception of the occasional Jew. But the Guevaras had their own ideas. Ernesto's father was strictly atheist, having been raised that way, while Celia had attended an exclusive Catholic school and had her religious side. Every so often, she would experience a moment of religious fervor and her husband would give her a hard time. But the truth is she had a really awful relationship with the church priests. The Alta Gracia sacristan once brought to her attention the fact that she had come to church wearing a skirt

without stockings, a sacrilege in those days. The sacristan, fat as a neutered cat, reprimanded her in front of everyone; Celia, as proud and arrogant as she was, reached under her skirt and stretched her transparent nylons with a triumphant smile. She swore she'd never go back.

Their children lived and breathed all that anticlericalism, interpreting it in their own way. When they were older, they organized football matches between atheists and Catholics—quite a feat in a province as Catholic as Córdoba! Nevertheless, I believe the Guevara household was defined by clearly Christian principles. The children were always taught respect and solidarity with the needy, highlighting the terrible poverty in Alta Gracia at that time. Those lessons forged a sensitivity to suffering in Ernesto.

Ernesto's asthma kept him out of school often—his fifth grade attendance shows 68 excused absences. He was not a particularly good student and got even worse marks in conduct for all his showing off and antics aimed at making us laugh, like drinking ink or eating chalk. To be sure, he was just one more in a school full of boys who all wanted to stand out for being the naughtiest and most brazen. It's funny to look at the grade sheet—only two students received a "Good" in conduct, all the rest got "Needs Work". We were terrible, but it was all just childish pranks and boasting to make us feel more important than we were and to pass the time in a town where there was not much to do. Don Pancho Gutiérrez, who had a horse and mule cart he used for carrying small loads, had a much repeated saying. Whenever he would see a gang of us approaching to ask if we could borrow a horse or try one of his stews (that were fantastic), he would say, "One little boy, good little boy / two little boys, that's okay / three little boys, oh no,

I don't think so / three little boys, get the hell away!" Because he knew that when we were in a pack, you could be sure we were always up to no good—we even made bets on who could pull off the biggest hoax. It was a way to show bravery and Ernesto couldn't be beaten in this; he was more than brave—he was fearless. He was famous for his dives from "the wall". The wall was part of an old well that the Jesuits had expanded and used as a cistern. It was about three meters deep and was surrounded by rocks and trees. There were always idiots jumping from the tree branches into the well.

One day as we were walking by it, Ernesto announced, "I'm diving in."

"Don't be a jackass—you'll kill yourself," I told him.

"If so-and-so can do it, why not me?"

So the lunatic went and climbed to the highest branch of a tree and stood on the end of it. The branch swayed while we all waited to see what would happen. It was dangerous—he was up really high, the well wasn't large and it was full of rocks. I worried that if anything happened to him, Ernesto's father would kill us. But he jumped and came up breathing, so after that, he took every opportunity to show off by diving in. Then Zacarías Tajamar decided that he could do it as well, but the difference was he didn't know how to swim, so once he hit the water, we had to go in after him to save him before he drowned.

Another way we passed the time was making fun of the tourists—the snobby porteños, as we referred to anyone who wasn't Cordoban. For a laugh, we'd find out whoever had rented horses and tell them, "Take the bit out so the horse can spit." And when the poor bastards removed it, the horses would take off for the stables, taking the corners at break speed with the tourists holding on to the saddle for dear life!

A birthday party, possibly in the Guevara house. Here Ernesto and I appear again side by side. I, quite the little "man" already, am posing with my hand in my pocket. Ernesto continues to be the only one dressed in long sleeves. And debuting her shiny, new car (surely a birthday gift) is Ana María Guevara.

A page of doodles done by Ernesto that was given to me by the Office of Historical Matters during my last trip to Cuba. His typical irony was already apparent here; he writes: "Dear sirs: Having finally finished my studies this year, I plan to fully dedicate myself to drawing. Therefore, you may expect to receive samples of my work regularly from now on. Without further ado, Ernesto Guevara Serna." Below he adds: "Very highly esteemed student Serna."

This was life in Alta Gracia, the monotony of it broken only by international political events at the time. The Spanish Civil War affected us in significant ways, partly because of both our families' strident support of the Republic, but also due to the arrival in Alta Gracia of certain notable figures in exile from Spain. One of the most famous was the great composer Manuel de Falla, suffering from tuberculosis and under the care of my father, who quickly became part of the town's social life. He often repeated that he would not return to Spain as long as those who had killed his son-in-spirit, the poet Federico García Lorca, remained in power. Another family that quickly became friends of ours was that of Dr. Juan González Aguilar, a doctor who had had an important position in the Ministry of Health under the Republican government. His children, Carmen, Paco, Juan and Pepe, soon became part of our gang. Their house was a constant source of stories and facts related to the civil war that we soaked up like water. Both the González Alguilar and De Falla households often received visitors in exile, such as the poet Rafael Alberti.

Ernesto was only nine or ten at the time, but he was amazed by the stories of that war so far away yet seemingly so close. He had gotten his hands on a map of Spain and, through the news he got from the radio and from the Republicans in exile, he went about marking Republican advances on the map with little flags. Ernesto, even as a child, had a sort of passion for the military, not in the sense of order and obedience, but in terms of strategy and ability to command. He came up with the idea of a game that was to become one of our favorites; it consisted of making war trenches with dirt, rocks or whatever else we could find. We would form two teams and fire on each other with our "ammo" made

of the fruit from a nearby tree—small, hard balls with a milky liquid inside. Then once, already a teenager, he showed his skill by a throwing a whizzing firecracker under the table at a Christmas dinner celebration in the house of a very important Alta Gracia family. There was a tremendous hullabaloo and Ernestito got a historic comeuppance. Who knows if he might not have recalled that episode after he became Che in the Sierra Maestra when he invented a homegrown system for setting off grenades with a fuse.

The Second World War also played a role in Alta Gracia and our lives. By then we were already teenagers and we lived this period in more awareness and participated more actively. Just like our parents, we were completely on the side of the Allies and any protest, appeal, petition or committee that was organized, we were right there in front. In contrast to the divisions that occurred during the Spanish Civil War in which there were supporters of Franco as well as Republicans, in WWII it was shameful to openly admit being a Nazi, so our position was right in line with most everyone's in Alta Gracia.

Toward the end of the war, a new movement was on the rise—this time in Argentina—that would shake the foundations of the country and divide it in two: Peronism. We, however, were already twenty-something by that time and had left the golden years in Alta Gracia far behind us. We now lived in Buenos Aires, 750 kilometers away from the town of our childhood.

That was when Ernesto dropped by my house one day nearly a year after that first unabashed proposal and, shaking his university grade report in my face, said, "Here it is, man. So I wasn't going to pass, was I? Start packing, Calica—we're going for real now."

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