William Alexander Morgan being applauded by Fidel Castro, in Havana in 1959. Morgan said that he had joined the Cuban Revolution.
For a moment, he was obscured by the Havanna night. It was as if he were invisible, as he had been before coming to Cuba, in the midst of revolution. Then a burst of floodlights illuminated him: William Alexander Morgan, the great Yankee *comandante.* He was standing, with his back against a bullet-pocked wall, in an empty moat surrounding La Cabaña—an eighteenth-century stone fortress, on a cliff overlooking Havanna Harbor, that had been converted into a prison. Flecks of blood were drying on the patch of ground where Morgan’s friend had been shot, moments earlier. Morgan, who was thirty-two, blinked into the lights. He faced a firing squad.

The gunmen gazed at the man they had been ordered to kill. Morgan was nearly six feet tall, and had the powerful arms and legs of someone who had survived in the wild. With a stark jaw, a pugnacious nose, and scruffy blond hair, he had the gallant look of an adventurer in a movie serial, of a throwback to an earlier age, and photographs of him had appeared in newspapers and magazines around the world. The most alluring images—taken when he was fighting in the mountains, with Fidel Castro and Che Guevara—showed Morgan, with an untamed beard, holding a Thompson submachine gun. Though he was now shaved and wearing prison garb, the executioners recognized him as the mysterious *Americano* who once had been hailed as a hero of the revolution.

It was March 11, 1961, two years after Morgan had helped to overthrow the dictator Fulgencio Batista, bringing Castro to power. The revolution had since fractured, its leaders devouring their own, like Saturn, but the sight of Morgan before a firing squad was a shock. In 1957, when Castro was still widely seen as fighting for democracy, Morgan had travelled from Florida to Cuba and headed into the jungle, joining a guerrilla force. In the words of one observer, Morgan was “like Holden Caulfield with a machine gun.” He was the only American in the rebel army and the sole foreigner, other than Guevara, an Argentine, to rise to the army’s highest rank, *comandante.*

After the revolution, Morgan’s role in Cuba aroused even greater fascination, as the island became enmeshed in the larger battle of the Cold War. An American who knew Morgan said that he had because “the most important thing for free men to do is to protect the freedom of others.”
served as Castro’s “chief cloak-and-dagger man,” and *Time* called him Castro’s “crafty, U.S.-born double agent.”

Now Morgan was charged with conspiring to overthrow Castro. The Cuban government claimed that Morgan had actually been working for U.S. intelligence—that he was, in effect, a triple agent. Morgan denied the allegations, but even some of his friends wondered who he really was, and why he had come to Cuba.

Before Morgan was led outside La Cabaña, an inmate asked him if there was anything he could do for him. Morgan replied, “If you ever get out of here alive, which I doubt you will, try to tell people my story.” Morgan grasped that more than his life was at stake: the Cuban regime would distort his role in the revolution, if not excise it from the public record, and the U.S. government would stash documents about him in classified files, or “sanitize” them by concealing passages with black ink. He would be rubbed out—first from the present, then from the past.

The head of the firing squad shouted, “Attention!” The gunmen raised their Belgian rifles. Morgan feared for his wife, Olga—whom he had met in the mountains—and for their two young daughters. He had always managed to bend the forces of history, and he had made a last-minute plea to communicate with Castro. Morgan had believed that the man he once called his “faithful friend” would never kill him. But now the executioners were cocking their guns.

**THE FIRST TRICK**

When Morgan arrived in Havana, in December, 1957, he was propelled by the thrill of a secret. He made sure that he wasn’t being followed as he moved surreptitiously through the neon-lit capital. Advertised as the “Playland of the Americas,” Havana offered one temptation after another: the Sans Souci night club, where, on outdoor stages, dancers with frank hips swayed under the stars to the cha-cha; the Hotel Capri, whose slot machines spat out American silver dollars; and the Tropicana, where guests such as Elizabeth Taylor and Marlon Brando enjoyed lavish revues featuring the Diosas de Carne, or “flesh goddesses.”

Morgan, then a pudgy twenty-nine-year-old, tried to appear as just another man of leisure. He wore a two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar white suit with a white shirt, and a new pair of shoes. “I looked like a real fat-cat tourist,” he later joked. But, according to members of Morgan’s inner circle, and to the unpublished account of a close friend, he avoided the glare of the city’s night life, making his way along a street in Old Havana, near a wharf that offered a view of La Cabaña, with its drawbridge and moss-covered walls. Morgan paused by a telephone booth, where he encountered a Cuban contact named Roger Rodríguez. A raven-haired student radical with a thick mustache, Rodríguez had once been shot by police during a political demonstration, and he was a member of a revolutionary cell.

Most tourists remained oblivious of the many iniquities of Cuba, where people often lived without electricity or running water. Graham Greene, who published “Our Man in Havana” in 1958, later recalled, “I enjoyed the louche atmosphere of Batista’s city and I never stayed long enough to become aware of the sad political background of arbitrary imprisonment and torture.” Morgan, however, had briefed himself on Batista, who had seized power in a coup, in 1952: how the dictator liked sitting in his palace, eating sumptuous meals and watching horror films, and how he tortured and killed dissidents, whose bodies were sometimes dumped in fields, with their eyes gouged out or their crushed testicles stuffed in their mouths.

Morgan and Rodríguez resumed walking through Old Havana, and began a furtive conversation. Morgan was rarely without a cigarette, and typically communicated through a haze of smoke. He didn’t know Spanish, but Rodríguez spoke broken English. They had previously met in Miami, becoming friends, and Morgan believed that he could trust him. Morgan confided that he planned to sneak into the Sierra Maestra, a mountain range on Cuba’s remote southeastern coast, where revolutionaries had taken up arms against the regime. He intended to enlist with the rebels, who were commanded by Fidel Castro.

The name of Batista’s mortal enemy carried the jolt of the forbidden. On November 25, 1956, Castro, a thirty-year-old lawyer and the illegitimate son of a prosperous landowner, had launched from Mexico an amphibious invasion of Cuba, along with eighty-one self-styled commandos, including Che Guevara. After their battered wooden ship ran aground, Castro and his men waded
through chest-deep waters, and came ashore in a swamp whose tangled vegetation tore their skin. Batista’s Army soon ambushed them, and Guevara was shot in the neck. (He later wrote, “I immediately began to wonder what would be the best way to die, now that all seemed lost.”) Only a dozen or so rebels, including the wounded Guevara and Castro’s younger brother, Raúl, escaped, and, exhausted and delirious with thirst—one drank his own urine—they fled into the steep jungles of the Sierra Maestra.

Morgan told Rodríguez that he had been tracking the progress of the uprising. After Batista mistakenly declared that Castro had died in the ambush, Castro allowed a Times correspondent, Herbert Matthews, to be escorted into the Sierra Maestra. A close friend of Ernest Hemingway, Matthews longed not merely to cover world-changing events but to make them, and he was captivated by the tall rebel leader, with his wild beard and burning cigar. “The personality of the man is overpowering,” Matthews wrote. “Here was an educated, dedicated fanatic, a man of ideals, of courage.” Matthews concluded that Castro had “strong ideas of liberty, democracy, social justice, the need to restore the Constitution.” On February 24, 1957, the story appeared on the paper’s front page, intensifying the rebellion’s romantic aura. Matthews later put it this way: “A bell tolled in the jungles of the Sierra Maestra.”

Yet why would an American be willing to die for Cuba’s revolution? When Rodríguez pressed Morgan, he indicated that he wanted to be both on the side of good and on the edge of danger, but he also wanted something else: revenge. Morgan said that he had an American buddy who had travelled to Havana and been killed by Batista’s soldiers. Later, Morgan provided more details to others in Cuba: his friend, a man named Jack Turner, had been caught smuggling weapons to the rebels, and was “tortured and tossed to the sharks by Batista.”

Morgan told Rodríguez that he had already made contact with another revolutionary, who had arranged to sneak him into the mountains. Rodríguez was taken aback: the supposed rebel was an agent of Batista’s secret police. Rodríguez warned Morgan that he’d fallen into a trap.

Rodríguez, fearing for Morgan’s life, offered to help him. He could not transport Morgan to the Sierra Maestra, but he could take him to the camp of a rebel group in the Escambray Mountains, which cut across the central part of the country. These guerrillas were opening a new front, and Castro welcomed them to the “common struggle.”

Morgan set out with Rodríguez and a driver on the two-hundred-and-seventeen mile journey. As Aran Shetterly details in his incisive biography “The American” (2007), the car soon arrived at a military roadblock. A soldier peered inside at Morgan in his gleaming suit, the only outfit that he seemed to own. Morgan knew what would happen if he were seized—as Guevara said, “in a revolution, one wins or dies”—and he had prepared a cover story, in which he was an American businessman on his way to see coffee plantations. After hearing the tale, the soldier let them pass, and Morgan and his conspirators roared up the road, up into the Escambray, where the air became cooler and thinner, and where the three-thousand-foot peaks had an eerie purple tint.

Morgan was taken to a safe house to rest, then driven to a mountainside near the town of Banao. A peasant shepherded Morgan and Rodríguez through vines and banana leaves until they reached a remote clearing, flanked by steep slopes. The peasant made a birdlike sound, which rang through the forest and was reciprocated by a distant whistle. A sentry emerged, and Morgan and Rodríguez were led to a campsite strewn with water basins and hammocks and a few antiquated rifles. Morgan could count only thirty or so men, many of whom appeared barely out of high school and had the emaciated, straggly look of shipwreck survivors.

The rebels regarded Morgan uncertainly. Max Lesnik, a Cuban journalist in charge of the organization’s propaganda, soon met up with the group, and recalls wondering if Morgan was “some kind of agent from the C.I.A.”

Since the Spanish-American War, the U.S. had often meddled in Cuban affairs, treating the island like a colony. President Dwight D. Eisenhower had blindly supported Batista—believing that he would “deal with the Commies,” as he put it to Vice-President Richard Nixon—and the C.I.A. had activated operatives throughout the island. In 1954, in a classified report, an American general advised that if the U.S. was to survive the Cold War it needed to “learn to subvert, sabotage, and destroy our enemies by more clever, more sophisticated, and more effective methods than those used against us.” The C.I.A. went so far as to hire a renowned magician, John Mulholland, to teach operatives sleight of hand and misdirection. Mulholland produced two illustrated manuals, which referred to covert operations as “tricks.”

As the C.I.A. tried to assess the threat to Batista, its operatives attempted to penetrate rebel forces in the mountains. Among other things, agents were believed to have recruited, or posed as, reporters. Mulholland advised operatives that “even more practice is needed to act like a skillfully than is required to tell one.”

The rebels also had to be sure that Morgan was not a K.G.B. operative, or a mercenary working for Batista’s military intelligence. In the Sierra Maestra, Castro had recently discovered that a peasant within his ranks was an Army informant. The peasant, after being summoned, dropped to his knees, begging that the revolution take care of his children. Then he was shot in the head.

Morgan was now brought to see the commander of the rebel group, Eloy Gutiérrez Menoyo. Twenty-three years old, soft-spoken, and bone-thin, Menoyo had a long, handsome face that was shielded by dark spectacles and a beard, giving him the look of a fugitive. The C.I.A. later noted, in its file on him, that he was an intelligent, capable young man who would not break “under normal interrogating techniques.”

As a boy, Menoyo had emigrated from Spain—a lisp was faintly present when he spoke Spanish—and he had inherited his family’s militant posture toward tyranny. His oldest brother had been killed, at the age of sixteen, fighting
the Fascists during the Spanish Civil War. His other brother, who had also come to Cuba, had been gunned down while leading a doomed assault on Batista’s palace, in 1957. Menoyo had identified the body at a Havana morgue before heading into the mountains. “I wanted to continue the fight in my brother’s name,” he recalls.

Through a translator, Morgan told Menoyo his story about wanting to avenge a buddy’s death. Morgan said that he had served in the U.S. Army and was skilled in martial arts and hand-to-hand combat, and that he could train the inexperienced rebels in guerrilla warfare. There was more to fighting than shooting a rifle, Morgan argued, as he later said, with the right tactics they could put “the fear of God” in the enemy. To demonstrate his prowess, Morgan borrowed “the fear of God” in the enemy. To demonstrate his prowess, Morgan borrowed a knife and flicked it at a tree at least twenty yards away. It hit the target so squarely that some rebels gasped.

That evening, they argued over whether Morgan could stay. Morgan seemed simpático—“like a Cuban,” as Lesnik puts it. But many rebels, fearing that he was an infiltrator, wanted to send Morgan back to Havana. The group’s chief of intelligence, Roger Redondo, recalls, “We did everything possible to make him leave.” During the next several days, they marched him endlessly up and down the mountainsides. Morgan was so fat, one rebel joked, that he had to be C.I.A.

Morgan, famished and fatigue, repeatedly hollered a few Spanish words that he had learned, “No soy mulo”—“I’m not a mule!” At one point, the rebels led him into a patch of prickly poisonous shrubs, which stung like wasps and caused his chest and face to become grievously inflamed. Morgan could no longer sleep at night. When he removed his sweaty white shirt, Redondo recalls, “We pitied him. He was so fair-skinned and had turned such an angry red.”

Morgan’s body also offered clues to a violent past. He had burn marks on his right arm, and a nearly foot-long scar ran across his chest, suggesting that someone had slashed him with a knife. There was a tiny scar under his chin, another by his left eye, and several on his left foot. It was as if he had already suffered years of hardship in the jungle.

Morgan endured whatever ordeal the rebels subjected him to, shedding thirty-five pounds along the way. He later wrote that he had become unrecognizable: “I weigh only—165 lbs and have a beard.” Redondo says, “The gringo was tough, and the armed men of the Escambray came to admire his persistence.”

Several weeks after Morgan arrived, a lookout noticed something moving amid distant cedars and tropical plants. Using binoculars, he made out six men, in khaki uniforms and wide-brimmed hats, carrying Springfield rifles. A Batista Army patrol.

Most of the rebels had never faced combat. Morgan later described them as “doctors, lawyers, farmers, chemists, boys, students, and old men banded together.” The lookout sounded the alarm, and Menoyo ordered everyone to take up positions around the camp. The rebels were not to fire, Menoyo explained, unless he said so. Morgan crouched beside Menoyo, holding one of the few semi-automatic rifles. As the soldiers crept closer, a shot rang out.

It was Morgan.

Menoyo cursed under his breath as both sides began shooting. Bullets split trees in half, and a bitter-tasting fog of smoke drifted over the mountainside. The thunderous sounds of the guns made it nearly impossible to communicate. A Batista soldier was hit in the shoulder, a scarlet stain seeping through his uniform, and he tumbled down the mountain like a boulder. The commander of the Army patrol retrieved the wounded soldier and, along with the rest of his men, retreated into the wilderness, leaving a trail of blood.

In the sudden quiet, Menoyo turned to Morgan and yelled, “Why the hell did you fire?”

Morgan, when he was told in English what Menoyo was saying, seemed baffled. “I thought you said to shoot when I saw their eyes,” he said. No one had translated Menoyo’s original command.

Morgan had made a mistake, but it had only hastened an inevitable battle. Menoyo told Morgan and the others to clear out: hundreds of Batista’s soldiers would soon be upon them.

The men stuffed their belongings into backpacks made from sugar sacks. Menoyo took with him a medallion that his mother had given him, depicting the Immaculate Conception. Morgan tucked away his own mementos: photographs of a young boy and a young girl. The rebels divided into two groups, and Morgan set out with Menoyo and twenty others, marching for more than a hundred miles through the mountains.

They usually moved during the night, then, at dawn, found a sheltered spot and ate what little food they had, taking turns sleeping while sentries kept watch. Morgan, who called one of his semi-automatic rifles his mito, always kept a weapon nearby. As darkness returned, the men resumed marching, listening to the
sounds of woodpeckers and barking dogs and their own exhausted breathing. Their bodies slackered from hunger, and beards covered their faces like jungle growth. When a nineteen-year-old rebel fell and broke his foot, Morgan supported him, making sure that he was not left behind.

One morning during the march, a rebel was scrounging for food when he spotted about two hundred Batista soldiers in a nearby valley. The rebels faced annihilation. As panic spread, Morgan helped Menoyo devise a plan. They would prepare an ambush, hiding behind a series of large stones, in a U formation. It was critical, Morgan said, to leave an escape route. The rebels crouched behind the stones, feeling the warmth of the earth against their bodies, holding their rifles steady against their cheeks. Earlier, some of the young men had professed cheerful indifference to death, but their brivo vanished as they confronted the prospect.

Morgan braced himself for the fight. He had inserted himself into a foreign conflict, and now everything was at risk. His predicament was akin to that of Robert Jordan, the American protagonist of “For Whom the Bell Tolls,” who, while aiding the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War, must blow up a bridge: “He had only one thing to do and that was what he should think about.... To worry was as bad as to be afraid. It simply made things more difficult.”

Batista’s soldiers approached the ridge. Though the rebels could hear branches snapping under the soldiers’ boots, Menoyo told his men to hold fire, making sure that Morgan understood this time. Soon, the enemy soldiers were so close that Morgan could see the barrels of their guns. “Patria o Muerte,” Castro liked to say—“Fatherland or Death.” Finally, Menoyo gave the signal to shoot. Amid the screaming, blood, and chaos, some of the rebels fell back, but, as Shetterly wrote, “they noticed Morgan out in front of everyone, moving ahead, completely focused on the fight.”

Batista’s soldiers started to flee. “They folded,” Armando Fleites, a medic with the rebels, recalls. “It was a complete victory.”

More than a dozen of Batista’s soldiers were wounded or killed. The rebels, who took the dead soldiers’ guns, had not lost a single man, and afterward they enlisted Morgan to teach them better ways to fight. One former rebel recalls, “He trained me in guerrilla warfare—how to handle different weapons, how to plant bombs.” Morgan instructed the men in judo and how to breathe underwater using a hollow reed. “There were so many things that he knew that we didn’t,” the rebel says. Morgan even knew some Japanese and German.

He learned Spanish, becoming a full member of the group, which was dubbed the Second National Front of the Escambray. Like the other rebels, Morgan took an oath to “fight and defend with my life this little piece of free territory,” to “guard all the war secrets,” and to “denounce traitors.” Morgan rose quickly, first commanding half a dozen men, then leading a larger column and, finally, presiding over several square kilometres of occupied territory.

As Morgan won more battles, the news of his curious presence began filtering out. A Cuban rebel radio station reported that rebels “led by an American” had killed forty Batista soldiers. Another broadcast hailed a “Yankee fighting for the liberty of Cuba.” The Miami newspaper Diario Las Américas stated that the American had been a “member of the ‘Rangers’ who landed in Normandy and opened the way to the Allied forces by destroying the Nazi installations on the French coast before D Day.”

U.S. and Cuban intelligence agents also began picking up chatter about a Yankee commando. In the summer of 1958, the C.I.A. reported whispers of a rebel, “identified only as ‘El Americano,’” who had played a critical role in “planning and carrying out guerrilla activities,” and who had virtually wiped out a Batista unit while leading his men in an ambush. An informant from a Cuban revolutionary group told the F.B.I. that El Americano was Morgan. Another said that Morgan had “risked his life many times” to save the rebels, and was considered “quite a hero among these forces for bravery and daring.” The reports eventually set off a scramble among U.S. government agencies—including the C.I.A., the Secret Service, the State Department, Army intelligence, and the F.B.I.—to determine who William Alexander Morgan was, and whom he was working for.

THE SECRET DOSSIER

Edgar Hoover was feeling tremors of instability. First, there was his heart: in 1958, he had suffered a minor attack, at the age of sixty-three. The head of the F.B.I., Hoover was obsessed with his privacy, and kept the incident largely to himself, but he began a relentless diet-and-exercise regimen, disciplining his body with the same force of will that...
had eradicated a childhood stutter. He instructed the bureau’s research-and-analysis section to inform him of any scientific advancement that might extend the human life span.

Compounding Hoover’s unease was that “infernal little Cuban republic,” as Theodore Roosevelt had described it. Hoover warned his agents that the growing number of Castro followers in the U.S. “may pose a threat to the internal security” of the country, and he had ordered his agents to infiltrate their organizations.

Although Hoover rarely travelled abroad, he wanted to transform the F.B.I. into an international spy apparatus, building upon the vast network that he had created within the U.S., which trafficked in raw history: wiretapped conversations, surveillance photographs, papers from garbage bins, intercepted cables, gossip from ex-lovers.

The U.S. intelligence branches had not yet turned up evidence that Castro or his followers were Communists, and, given Batista’s brutality, some American officials were developing a soft stance toward the rebels. The C.I.A. officer in charge of Caribbean operations later acknowledged, “My staff and I were all Fidelistas.”

But Hoover remained vigilant: of all the enemies that he had hunted, he considered the agents of Communism the “Masters of Deceit,” as he called his 1958 best-selling book about them. These plotters had hidden streams of information, and they mutated, like viruses, in order to slip past a host’s defenses; Hoover was determined to stop them from infiltrating an island just south of Florida. A source inside the U.S. Embassy in Havana had informed him that Batista’s hold on the country was “weakening.” Now Hoover was receiving reports of a wild gringo up in the mountains. Was Morgan a Soviet sleeper agent? A C.I.A. operative in a cover posture? Or one who had gone rogue?

After peering into so many lives, Hoover understood that virtually everyone has secrets. Scribbled in a diary. Recorded on a cassette. Buried in a safe-deposit box. A secret may be, as Don DeLillo has written, “something vitalizing.” But it can also cut you down at any moment.

By late 1958, Hoover had unleashed a team of G-men to figure out what Morgan might be hiding. One of them eventually knocked on the door of a large Colonial house in the Old West End of Toledo, Ohio. A distinguished-looking gentleman greeted him. It was Morgan’s father, Alexander, a retired budget director of a utility company and, as his son once described him, a “solid Republican.” He was married to a slim, devout woman, Loretta, who was known as Miss Cathedral, for her involvement in the Catholic church down the street. In addition to their son, they had a daughter, Carroll. Morgan’s father told the F.B.I. agent that he had not heard from his son, whom he called Bill, since he disappeared. But he provided a good deal of information about Morgan, and this, combined with F.B.I. interviews of other relatives and associates, helped Hoover and his spies piece together a startling profile of the Yankee rebel.

Morgan should have been a quintessential American, a shining product of Midwestern values and a rising middle class. He attended Catholic school and initially earned high marks. (His I.Q. test showed “superior intelligence.”) He loved the outdoors and was a dedicated Boy Scout, receiving the organization’s highest award, in 1941. Years later, he wrote to his parents, “You . . . have done all that is possible to bring up your children with love of God and country.” Wildly energetic, he always seemed to be chatting, earning the nickname Gabby. “He was so likable,” his sister told me. “He could sell you anything.”

But Morgan was also a misfit. He failed to make the football team, and his constant banter exposed a seam of insecurity. He disliked school and often slipped away to read stories of adventure, especially tales about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, filling his mind with places far more exotic than the neighborhood of cropped lawns and boxy houses outside his bedroom window. His mother once said that Morgan had a “very, very vivid imagination,” and that he had brought his fancies to life, constructing, among other things, a “diving helmet” worthy of Jules Verne. He rarely showed “fear of anything,” and once had to be stopped from jumping off the roof with a homemade parachute.

U.S. Army intelligence officials also investigated Morgan, preparing a dossier on him. (The dossier, along with hundreds of other declassified documents from the C.I.A., the F.B.I., the Army, and the State Department, was obtained through the Freedom of Information Act and through the National Archives.) In the Army’s psychological assessment, a military-intelligence analyst stated that the young Morgan “seemed to be fairly well adjusted to society.” But, by the time he was a teenager, his resistance to the strictures around him, and to those who wanted to pound him into shape, had reached a feverish state. As his mother put it, he had decided that, if he would never belong in Toledo, he would embrace exile, venturing “out in the world himself.”

In the summer of 1943, at the age of fifteen, Morgan ran away. His mother later gave a report to the Red Cross about her son, saying, “Shocked is the mild word for it...for he had never done anything like this before.” Although Morgan returned home a few days later, he soon stole his father’s car and “took off” again, as he later put it, blowing through a red light before the police caught him. He was consigned to a detention center, but he slipped out a window and vanished again. He ended up in Chicago, where he joined the Ringling Brothers circus. Ten days later, his father found him taking care of the elephants, and brought him home.

In the ninth grade, Morgan dropped out of school and began roaming the country, hopping buses and freighters; he earned money as a punch-press operator, a grocery clerk, a ranch hand, a coal loader, a movie-theatre usher, and a seaman in the Merchant Marine. His father seemed resigned to his son’s fitfulness, telling him in a letter, “Get as much adventure as you can and we will be glad to see you whenever you decide you want to come home.”

Morgan later explained that he had not been unhappy at home—his parents had given him and his sister “anything that we wanted”—and had fled only because he longed “to see new places.”
His mother believed that he had a mythic image of himself, and “always seemed to yearn to be a big shot,” but, given his “super affectionate nature,” she doubted that “he has really meant to worry or hurt us.”

Nevertheless, Morgan increasingly took up with “the wrong kind of gangs of boys,” as he later called them, and got in scrapes with the law. While still a minor, he and some friends stole a stranger’s car, temporarily tying up the driver; he was also investigated for carrying a concealed weapon.

Nobody—not his parents, not the F.B.I., not the military-intelligence analyst—could unravel the mystery of Morgan’s antisocial behavior; it remained forever encrypted, an unbreakable code. His mother wondered whether something had happened to him during her pregnancy, lamenting, “That boy hasn’t given me a moment’s peace.... That’s why my hair is gray.” His father told the F.B.I. that perhaps his son needed to see one of those head doctors. A psychiatrist, cited by Army intelligence, speculated that Morgan was “driven along a course of self-destruction in order to satisfy his neurotic need for punishment.”

Yet it was possible to see Morgan, with his brooding blue eyes and cigarette perpetually clamped between his teeth, as heralding a new social type: a beatnik, a rolling stone. A friend of Morgan’s once told a reporter, “Jack Kerouac was still imagining life on the road while Morgan was out there living it.”

Morgan’s personality—“nomadic, egocentric, impulsive, and utterly irresponsible,” as Hoover’s agents put it—also had some similarities with that of a middle-class teen-ager thousands of miles away. In 1960, a conservative American journalist observed, “Like Fidel Castro, though on a lesser scale, Morgan was a superannuated juvenile delinquent.”

Hoover and the F.B.I. discovered that, contrary to press accounts, Morgan had not served during the Second World War. Envisaging himself as a modern Sinbad—his other nickname—he had tried to enlist but was turned away, because he was too young. It was not until August, 1946, when the war was over and he was finally eighteen, that he joined the Army. After receiving orders that he would be deployed to Japan, in December, he cried in front of his mother for the first time in years, betraying that, despite his toughness, he was still just a teen-ager. He boarded a train for California, where he had a layover at a base, and on the way he sent his parents a telegram:

Have surprise—married yesterday 12:30 am to Darlene Edgerton. Am happy—will write or call soon as possible. Don’t worry or get excited.

He had sat beside her on the train, in his starched uniform. “He was tall and handsome and so magnetic,” Edgerton, who is now eighty-seven and blind, recalls. “Truthfully, I was coming home to marry someone else, and we just hit it off and so we stopped off in Reno and got married.” They had known each other for only twenty-four hours and spent two days in a hotel before getting back on a train. When they reached California, Morgan reported to the base and left for Japan. “What young people will do,” Edgerton says.

With Morgan stationed in Japan, the marriage dissolved after a year and a half, and Edgerton received an annulment—though even after she married another man she kept a letter from Morgan stashed away, which she occasionally unfolded, flattening the edges with her fingers, and read again, stirred by the memory of the comet-like figure who had briefly blazed into her life.

Morgan was crestfallen by the end of the relationship, but his mother told the Red Cross, “Knowing Bill, I am sure if he had an opportunity to date other girls he would soon forget this present love.”

Indeed, Morgan took up with Setsuko Takeda, a German-Japanese night-club hostess in Kyoto, and got her pregnant. When Takeda was about to give birth to their son, in the fall of 1947, he could not get a leave, and so he did what he had always done: he ran off. He was arrested for being AWOL, and, while in custody, he claimed that he needed to see Takeda—she was suicidally distraught after being harassed by another soldier. With the aid of a Chinese national who was also locked up, Morgan overpowered a military-police officer and stole his .45. “Morgan told me not to move,” the officer later testified. “He told me to take off my clothes. Then he told the Chiman to tie me up.” Wearing the guard’s uniform and carrying his gun, Morgan escaped in the middle of the night.

A military search party located Takeda, and she led authorities to a house where Morgan had said he would wait for her. When she saw Morgan in the rear of the building, she threw her arms around him. One of the officers, seeing the gun in his hand, screamed, “How come I never see that smile?”

“How come I never see that smile?”
“Drop it!” Morgan hesitated, then, like a character in a dime novel, spun the pistol on his finger, so that the butt faced the officer, and handed it over. “It didn’t take you long to get here,” Morgan said, and asked for a cigarette.

On January 15, 1948, at the age of nineteen, Morgan was sentenced by a court-martial to five years in prison. “I guess I got what was coming to me,” he said.

His mother, in her statement to the Red Cross, pleaded for help: “I sincerely want him to be a boy that I can justly be proud of, not one to hang my head in shame for having given him birth.”

Morgan was eventually transferred to a federal prison in Michigan. He enrolled in a class on American history; studied Japanese and German, the languages Takeda spoke; attended “religious instruction classes”; and sang in the church choir. In a progress report, a prison official wrote, “The Chaplain has noticed that inmate Morgan has developed a sense of social responsibility” and “is doing everything possible to improve himself and be an asset to society.”

Morgan was released early, on April 11, 1950. Though he had once hoped to reunite with Takeda and their son, the relationship had been severed. Morgan eventually moved to Florida, where he took a job in a carnival, as a fire swallow, and mastered the use of knives. He began a romance with the carnival’s snake charmer, Ellen May Bethel. A small, tempestuous woman with black hair and green eyes, she was “gorgeous,” a relative says. In the spring of 1955, Morgan and Bethel had a child, Anne. They were married several months later, and in 1957 they had a son, Bill.

Morgan struggled to be an “asset to society,” but he seemed trapped by his past. He was an ex-con and a dishonorably discharged soldier—a stain that he tried, futilely, to expunge from his record. Morgan later told a friend that, during this period, “he was nothing.”

According to an F.B.I. informant, Morgan went to work for the Mafia, running errands for Meyer Lansky, the diminutive Jewish gangster known as Little Man. In addition to overseeing rackets in the United States, Lansky had become the kingpin of Havana, controlling many of its biggest casinos and night clubs. A Mob associate once described how Lansky “took Batista straight back to our hotel, opened the suitcases and pointed at the cash. Batista just stared at the money without saying a word. Then he and Meyer shook hands.”

Morgan drifted back to the streets of Ohio, where he became associated with a local crime boss named Dominick Bartone. A gangster whose Mafia ties reputedly went back to the days of Al Capone, Bartone was a hulking man with thick black hair and dark eyes—a “typical hoodlum appearance,” according to his F.B.I. file. He classified people as either “solid” or “suckers.” His rap sheet eventually included convictions for bribery, gunrunning, tax evasion, and bank fraud, and he was closely allied with the head of the Teamsters, Jimmy Hoffa, whom he called “the greatest fella in the world.”

One of Morgan’s friends from Ohio described him to me as “solid.” He said, “Do you know what ‘connection’ means? Well, Morgan was connected.” The friend, who said that he had been indicted for racketeering, suddenly grew quiet, then added, “I don’t know if you’re with the F.B.I. or the C.I.A.”

Some members of the Mafia, including Bartone, prepared for shifting alliances in Cuba, shipping guns to the rebels. Morgan’s father thought that his son first got caught up in the whole Cuba business in 1955, in Florida, when he apparently met Castro, who had travelled there to garner support from the exile community for his upcoming invasion. Two years later, with Castro ensconced in the Sierra Maestra, Morgan left his wife and children in Toledo and began acquiring weapons across the U.S. and arranging for them to be smuggled to the rebels. Perhaps he was motivated by sympathy with the revolution, or by a desire to make money, or simply by an urge to flee domestic responsibilities. Morgan’s father told the F.B.I. that his son had run away “from his problems since he was a youngster,” and that his Cuban escapade was just another example. Morgan, who before heading to Havana had told another gunrunner that he would see him again in Florida “when this damn revolution is over,” later gave his own explanation: “I have lived always looking for something.”

To this day, some scholars, and even some who knew Morgan, speculate that he was sent to the Escambray by the C.I.A. But, as declassified documents reveal, Hoover and his agents had discov-
erected something more unsettling. Morgan was not working for the agency or a foreign intelligence outfit or the Mob. He was out there on his own.

WHY AM I HERE

“Calling Comandante William Morgan! Comandante William Morgan!”

It was one of his men in the Escambray, speaking on shortwave radio.

“Hear me!” came Morgan’s reply. “Send us reinforcements. We need help—ammunition! If we stay here, they will wipe us out.”

By the summer of 1958, Morgan had endured countless skirmishes. “We were always outnumbered at least thirty to one,” Morgan recalled. “We were a small outfit, but we were mobile and hard-hitting. We became known as the phantoms of the mountains.”

Morgan had witnessed, up close, the cruelties of the Cuban regime: villages ransacked and burned by Batista’s Army, friends shot in the head, a senile man’s tongue cut out. “I know and have seen what these people have been doing,” Morgan said of Batista’s henchmen. “They killed. They tortured. They beat people…and done things that don’t have a name.”

On one of his uniform sleeves, Morgan had sewn a U.S. flag. “I was born an American,” he liked to say.

At night, he often sat by the campfire, where scattered sparks created fleeting constellations, and listened to the rebels where scattered sparks created fleeting constellations, and listened to the rebels anddone things that don’t have a name.”

The accounts were comparable to the American Rockies. A boy of nineteen could march 12 hours with a broken foot over country where men do water so that others may drink. Noting that U.S. policies had propped up Batista, he concluded, “I ask myself why do we support those who would destroy in other lands the ideals which we hold so dear?”

Morgan sent the statement to someone he was sure would sympathize with it: Herbert Matthews. The Times reporter considered Morgan to be the most interesting figure in the Sierra de Escambray.” Soon after receiving the statement, Matthews published an article about the Second Front and its “tough, uneducated young American” leader, citing a cleaned-up passage from Morgan’s letter.

Other U.S. newspapers began chronicling the exploits of the “adventurous American,” the “swashbuckling Morgan.” The Washington Post reported that he had become a “daring fellow” by the age of three. The accounts were enough to “make schoolboys drool,” as one newspaper put it. A retired businessman from Ohio later told the Toledo Blade, “He was like a cowboy in an Ernest Hemingway adventure.” Morgan had finally willed his interior fictions into reality.

One day in the spring of 1958, while Morgan was visiting a guerrilla camp for a meeting of the Second Front’s chiefs of staff, he encountered a rebel he had never seen before: small and slender, with a face shielded by a cap. Only up close was it evident that the rebel was a
woman. She was in her early twenties, with dark eyes and tawny skin, and, to conceal her identity, she had cut her curly light-brown hair short and dyed it black. Though she had a delicate beauty, she locked and loaded a gun with the ease of a bank robber. Morgan later said of a pistol that she carried, “She knows how to use it.”

Her name was Olga Rodríguez. She came from a peasant family, in the central province of Santa Clara, that often went without food. “We were so poor,” Rodríguez recalls. She studied diligently, and was elected class president. Her goal was to become a teacher. She was bright, stubborn, and questioning—as Rodríguez puts it, “always a little different.” Increasingly angered by the Batista regime’s repressiveness, she joined the underground resistance, organizing protests and assembling bombs until, one day, agents from Batista’s secret police appeared in her neighborhood, showing people her photograph. “They were coming to kill me,” Rodríguez recalls.

When the secret police could not find her, they beat up her brother, heaving rocks at his window and ransacking his bedroom. “But inside, I could tell, he had a huge heart—one that he had opened not just to me but to my country.”

Morgan recognized the risk of surrendering to a flight of emotion in the midst of war. The Batista regime had placed a twenty-thousand-dollar bounty on him—“dead or alive,” as Morgan put it. Once, when Morgan and Rodríguez were together, a military plane shut down its engines, so that they could not hear its approach until bombs were falling upon them. “We simply had to dive for cover,” Rodríguez recalls. They barely escaped unharmed. During other bombing raids, they would hold each other, whispering, “Our fates are intertwined.”

When Robert Jordan is overcome with love for a woman during the Spanish Civil War, he fears that they will never experience what ordinary people do: “Not time, not happiness, not fun, not children, not a house, not a bathroom, not a clean pair of pajamas, not the morning paper, not to wake up together, not to wake and know she’s there and that you’re not alone. No. None of that.”

As long as Morgan was fighting in the Escambray, there could be no past or future—only the present. “We could never have peace,” Rodríguez says. “From the beginning, I had this terrible feeling that things would not end well.” Yet the impossibility of their romance only deepened their ardor. Not long after they met, a boy from a nearby village approached Rodríguez in camp, carrying a bunch of purple wildflowers. “Look what the Americanos has sent you,” the boy told her. A few days later, the boy appeared again, holding a new bouquet. “From the Americanos,” he said.

As Morgan later told her, they had to “steal time.” In one such moment, a photographer caught them standing in a mountain clearing. In the image, both are wearing fatigue green; a rifle is slung over his right shoulder, and she leans on one, as if it were a cane. With their free hands, they are clutching each other. “When I found you, I found everything I can wish for in the world,” he later wrote her. “Only death can separate us.”

Morgan was killed the previous night in the course of a fight with the Cuban Army.” So read an urgent cable sent from the U.S. Embassy in Havana to Hoover, at F.B.I. headquarters, on September 19, 1958. The Batista regime, which had already leaked the news to the Cuban press, mailed the F.B.I. two photographs of a fractured corpse, shirtless and smeared with blood.

Morgan’s mother was devastated when she heard of the reports. Several weeks later, she received a letter from Cuba, in Morgan’s hand. It said, “The Cuban press last month sent out word that I was dead but as you can tell I am not.”

Just as Batista’s regime had falsely declared Castro’s death, it had made the mistake of believing its own propaganda about Morgan, becoming trapped in the closed circuit of information that isolates tyrants not only from their countrymen but from reality. Meanwhile, Morgan’s seeming emergence from the dead, like one of Mulholland’s magical feats, created a potent counter-illusion: that he was indestructible.

In October, Che Guevara arrived in the Escambray, with a hundred or so ghostly-looking soldiers. They had completed a six-week westward trek from the Sierra Maestra, withstanding cyclones and enemy fire and sleeping in swamps. Guevara described his men as “morally broken, starving… their feet bloodied and so swollen they won’t fit into what’s left of their boots.” Guevara—who another rebel once depicted as “half athletic and half asthmatic,” and prone to shifting in conversation “between Stalin and Baudelaire”—had dark hair near to his shoulders. During the march, he had worn the cap of a dead comrade, but, to his distress, he had lost it, and so he began wearing a black beret.

The ranks of the Second Front had grown to more than a thousand men. Morgan wrote to his mother, “We are much stronger now,” and said that his men were “getting ready to come down from the hills and take the cities.”

Guevara had been sent to the Escambray to take control of the Second Front,
as Castro was eager to eliminate any threat to his dominance and to accelerate the assault on Batista. But many rebels there resisted having their authority usurped, and submerged tensions between the groups rose to the surface. When Guevara and his men tried to enter a stretch of territory, they were confronted by a particularly combative leader of the Second Front, Jesús Carreras. After demanding a password from Guevara, Carreras refused to let him or his men pass.

Morgan and Guevara, the two foreign comandantes, bitterly distrusted each other. The boisterous, fun-loving, anti-Communist American had little in common with the ascetic, erudite, Marxist-Leninist Argentine doctor. Morgan complained to Guevara that he had misappropriated weapons belonging to the Second Front, while Guevara dismissed Morgan and his defiant guerrillas as comevacas—“cow-eaters”—meaning that they sat around and lived off the largesse of peasants. Although Guevara and the Second Front reached an “operational pact,” friction remained.

In November, 1958, before a climactic push against Batista’s Army, Morgan slipped away with Rodríguez to a farmhouse in the mountains, where they arranged to get married. They wore their rebel uniforms, which they had washed in the river. They didn’t have rings, so Morgan took a leaf from a tree, rolled it into a circle, and placed it on her finger, vowing, “I will love you and honor you all the days of my life.” Rodríguez said, “Hasta que la muerte nos separe”—“Till death do us part.”

After the ceremony, Morgan picked up his gun and returned to battle. “We barely had time to kiss,” Rodríguez recalls. As the fighting intensified, she had a growing sense of unease. To keep her company, he had given her a parrot that cried “We-liam” and “I love you!” But one day it flew off, and never returned.

In late December, Guevara and his party launched a ferocious assault in the Santa Clara province, winning a decisive victory. That month, Morgan and the Second Front seized the tobacco town of Manicaragua, then pressed onward, capturing Cumanayagua, El Hoyo, La Moza, and San Juan de los Yeras, before reaching Topes de Collantes, a hundred and sixty miles southeast of Havana. One of Batista’s colonels warned, “Headquarters can’t resist anymore. The Army doesn’t want to fight.” The Second Front had earlier issued a statement declaring that “the dictatorship is nearly crushed,” and the U.S. government tried to push out Batista, in a futile attempt to install an acquiescent “third force.” Batista resisted the Americans’ pressure, but his hold on power was nearly gone.

At 4 A.M. on New Year’s Day, David Atlee Phillips, a C.I.A. agent stationed in Havana, was standing outside his home there, drinking champagne, when he looked up and saw a speck of light—an airplane—receding into the sky. Realizing that there were no departing flights at that hour, he telephoned his case officer, and offered a gem of information: “Batista just flew into exile.”

“Are you drunk?” the case officer replied.

But Phillips was right—Batista was escaping, with his entourage, to the Dominican Republic—and word rapidly spread throughout Cuba: “Se fue! Se fue!” He’s gone!

Meyer Lansky was in Havana at the time, and was among the first people there to be tipped off. “Get the money,” he commanded an associate. “All of it. Even the cash and checks in reserve.”

After dawn, Morgan was preparing to battle for the city of Cienfuegos when the cry reached him and Rodríguez: “Se fue! Se fue!” Morgan ordered his men to take the city immediately. Everyone, including Rodríguez, jumped into cars and trucks, racing into a city where they had expected an intense battle but where Batista’s Army, once impregnable, dissolved before them as thousands of jubilant residents poured into the streets, honking horns and banging on makeshift drums. The crowds greeted Morgan, who wrapped a rebel flag around his shoulders...
like a cape, to shouts of “Americano!” Morgan, who told reporters, “I’m forgetting my English,” cried at the crowds grasping at him, “Victoria! Libertad!”

In an interview with Look, Morgan said, “When we came down from the mountains, it was a shock to all of us… to find how much faith the Cuban people had in this revolution. You felt you simply couldn’t betray their hopes.”

Morgan was put in charge of Cienfuegos. He had finally become somebody, he told a friend. On January 6, 1959, at one in the morning, Castro paused in Cienfuegos during his triumphant march to Havana. It was the first time that Morgan had met with Castro in Cuba, and the two former delinquents shook hands and congratulated each other.

In interviews, Castro repeated his opposition to Communism and promised to hold elections within eighteen months. Before a gathering of thousands in Havana, he vowed, “We cannot become dictators.” Whatever doubts Morgan had about Guevara, he seemed to harbor none about Castro, who once declared, “History will absolve me.”

“I have a tremendous admiration—a tremendous respect—for the man,” Morgan later told the American television broadcaster Clete Roberts. “I respect his moral courage, and I respect his honesty.” Morgan cast the revolution in his own distinctive terms: “It’s about time the little guy got a break.”

Roberts observed that Morgan’s life, including his romance with Rodríguez, sounded “like all of the movie scripts that were ever dreamt about in Hollywood.” Morgan insisted that he had no interest in selling his story: “I don’t believe that you should cash in on your ideals. I don’t believe I was an idealist when I went up into the mountains, but I feel that I’m an idealist now.”

Morgan had not slept for two days after Batista fled, and he welcomed the chance to shave and wash the jungle grime off his body. Rodríguez soon changed out of her uniform, confident that “the war was over and that we would raise a family and live in a democracy.” In Cienfuegos, they exchanged proper wedding rings. Rodríguez says, “I cannot describe the happiness I felt—we felt.”

Rodríguez had become pregnant. For Morgan, it suddenly seemed that he and Rodríguez could have everything: a house, children, the morning paper. As Morgan put it, “All I’m interested in is settling down to a nice, peaceful existence.”

THE CONSPIRACY

In March, 1959, a mysterious American suddenly appeared at the Hotel Capri, where Morgan and Rodríguez were staying temporarily. The man, who was in his late forties, had stiff black hair and thick glasses, and looked like he could be an employee of NASA, the new space agency. In the lobby, he called Morgan and said that he needed to see him. His name was Leo Cherne. “I’m sure he never heard of me before,” Cherne recalled, in an unpublished oral history.

Imposing, learned, and discreet, Cherne was a wealthy businessman and a power broker who had advised several U.S. Presidents, including Franklin Roosevelt and Eisenhower. In 1951, he became chairman of the International Rescue Committee. Over the years, there was speculation that, under Cherne, the I.R.C. had sometimes served as a front for C.I.A. activities—a charge that Cherne publicly denied. In any case, he was enmeshed with people in intelligence circles, a man who relished being privy to a cloak-and-dagger world.

In his oral history, Cherne said that he had once been “deeply attracted” to Castro, rivaling Herbert Matthews in his “blind enthusiasm.” But Cherne had grown apprehensive after the revolution. With disturbing coolness, Castro had dispatched several hundred members of Batista’s regime “to the wall,” and his indeterminate ideology, his instinctive defiance, and his gargantuan ambition posed serious risks.

And so the C.I.A. sought to put more eyes and ears around Castro, eventually assigning him the cryptonym AMTHUG. Morgan must have seemed like a tantalizing target for recruitment. He had a built-in cover and access, spoke Spanish, and, as a U.S. citizen, seemed easier to turn: he would not have to become a traitor to his country. Morgan’s support for Castro and the revolution presented an impediment, but, as any seasoned case officer knew, virtually everyone had a “soft spot”: greed, jealousy, sexual temptation. One simply needed to find the spot and inflame it, until the target breached a system of beliefs for a system of information, for silent calls and dead drops.

It seemed that Morgan had a spark of resentment that could catch fire. Castro, wary of rivals, had denied prominent government positions to many members of the Second National Front of the Escambray, including Menoyo. Adam Clayton Powell, a congressman from New York, had just returned from a fact-finding mission in Cuba, where he had overheard Morgan—who he described as “a sweet guy, but very tough”—criticizing the new regime.

At the Hotel Capri, Cherne was sur-

“I still say we pull it and deal with the consequences of its being a false alarm when they come.”
prised to find that Morgan occupied a small, sparsely furnished room. Rodríguez had gone out, but armed barbudos—bearded guerrillas—kept entering and exiting, as if the cramped room were a makeshift headquarters. Morgan wore his rebel uniform, the star of a comandante emblazoned on each epaulet. His revolver rested on a dresser.

Cherne told Morgan that he had sought him out to promote the I.R.C.'s work in Cuba and to obtain an audience with Castro, but Morgan was wary. He knew that Havana had become a city of spooks, and Cherne had shown him an I.R.C. brochure featuring William Joseph (Wild Bill) Donovan—the famous spymaster of the Second World War, who was an honorary chairman of the committee's board. Morgan suspected that Cherne was an American intelligence officer representing “very substantial and powerful forces.”

As they conferred, Morgan, perhaps believing that his secrets would be safe with a professional keeper of them, confessed something that he had not revealed even to his closest friends, including Menoyo. Morgan admitted that the story he had told about an American friend being killed by Batista was a fabrication—a sleight of hand that had allowed him to sneak himself into the narrative of history. “Morgan told the truth, trusting that I would not take it public,” Cherne recalled. Morgan touched on his troubled past, and Cherne believed that Morgan was “courageous, tough, able, resourceful but a bad boy. . . . And it was this bad boy who found in the developing events in Cuba something exciting.”

Cherne observed how well Morgan spoke Spanish, how he commanded respect from the rebels passing through the room, and how bright he seemed, despite having only an eighth-grade education. “I’ve rarely met a person as genuinely articulate, as clever, in some ways brilliant, as I found him to be, all by instinct,” Cherne noted.

He soon returned to the Capri for another meeting. This time, a barbudo lay sprawled on the bed, apparently dozing. Morgan, even then the loose-lipped Gabby, said that he wanted to disclose something “very important.”

Cherne looked around anxiously, and asked, “How do you know the room is secure?”

Morgan assured him that it was, but Cherne pointed to an air-conditioning vent, where a bug might be installed. “I must apologize,” Morgan said. “You are absolutely right.” He picked up a transistor radio, placed it in front of the vent, and cranked up the music.

Cherne was still concerned about the Cuban on the bed. Morgan’s “blithe willingness to take risks was not altogether to my taste,” Cherne recalled. But, sensing that Morgan had “irresistible” information, he let him proceed and, with his permission, even used a miniature recording device that he had brought with him. Morgan confided that Guevara and Raúl Castro were Marxist-Leninists who threatened the revolution. Guevara had enlisted someone to kill him, but Morgan had captured the agent and, before letting him go, obtained a written confession, which he had stashed away. “That is the insurance policy which will keep me alive,” Morgan claimed.

Cherne asked Morgan if he thought that Fidel Castro was a Communist. Morgan said no and emphasized that many Cubans were committed to democracy. Cherne found Morgan’s tale of intrigue “filled with perceptive fact.”

Cherne expressed the hope that Cherne could use his influence to secure foreign economic aid for some three thousand families in the Escambray who had been “bombed out” during the war. And he said he was worried that the U.S. government would revoke his citizenship, as some anti-Castro elements were clamoring for. Cherne suspected that he had pinpointed Morgan’s soft spot: the Yankee comandante wanted to make sure that, if things grew too dangerous, he could return to America with his family; he feared being left out in the cold.

Cherne believed that Morgan was not seeking personal advantage. Rather, Morgan was hoping to “even the score” with his beloved country, where he had fallen short as a citizen and a soldier. “This was his act of expiation,” Cherne concluded.

Morgan handed Cherne a 1946 five-centavo coin. Its edge had a small notch. If
Cherne wanted to send someone to see him in the future, he should give that person the coin for presentation to Morgan—a sign of trustworthiness.

After Cherne left the hotel, with the coin and the recording of their conversation tucked away, he grew anxious that he had been spied upon. Why had he taken such a foolish risk? Cherne scribbled on paper what he had learned, put it in an envelope, and slipped it to a trusted friend in Havana. “Just in case I didn’t get out,” he recalled.

Cherne returned to his hotel and remained in his room. The phone rang, but he did not answer it. “I heard footsteps outside my door, and I sweated freely,” he recalled. Finally, he rushed to the airport, waited an “interminable period,” and “wasn’t relieved until the plane took off.”

On March 20th, Cherne went to C.I.A. headquarters—then a complex of shabby buildings on E Street, in Northwest Washington, D.C. A sign saying “U.S. Government Printing Office” had once hung out front, but, after President Eisenhower and his driver struggled to find the entrance, it was replaced with the C.I.A.’s emblem.

Cherne was ushered through security and into the French Room, a conference space used by senior C.I.A. officials, where he met with the acting chief of the Western Hemisphere Division. Cherne debriefed him about his encounter with Morgan, which he considered one of the “most incredible and fascinating accidental exposures to political reality in my entire life.” The C.I.A. cultivates its own private language, and Cherne, who was identified in a classified document about Morgan simply as “HQS contact,” was serving as a spotter—someone who identifies a potential asset for recruitment. Cherne told the C.I.A. that Morgan could be very valuable, as he was on excellent terms with Castro. And Cherne passed on Morgan’s coin—the kind of object that the magician Mulholland called a “recognition signal.”

A C.I.A. report concluded that Morgan had “KUCAGE possibilities.” In his 1975 book, “Inside the Company,” Philip Agee, a former C.I.A. officer who turned against the agency and allegedly assisted Castro’s regime, revealed that KUCAGE stood for highly sensitive psychological and paramilitary operations. “They are action rather than collection activities,” Agee wrote. “Collection operations should be invisible so that the target will be unaware of them. Action operations, on the other hand, always produce a visible effect. This, however, should never be attributable to the C.I.A. or to the U.S. government.”

Not long after Castro took power, the C.I.A. began to seek out action operators who could press the “magic button”: assassination. In addition to commissioning Mulholland’s manuals, the C.I.A. had created a document titled “A Study of Assassination.” After noting that the “morally squeamish should not attempt it,” the study laid out various techniques:

The most efficient accident . . . is a fall of 75 feet or more onto a hard surface. Elevator shafts, stair wells, unscreened windows and bridges will serve. . . . The act may be executed by sudden, vigorous lifting of the ankles, tipping the subject over the edge. If the subject is deliberately run down, very exact timing is necessary and investigation is likely to be thorough. . . . The subject may be stunned or drugged and then placed in the car, but this is only reliable when the car can be run off a high cliff or into deep water without observation.

The study laid out many more options. The C.I.A. agents needed more “biographical data” before trying to recruit Morgan. On March 30th, the agency’s Central Cover Division requested that it be advised immediately when Morgan had been “activated.”

Two weeks later, Castro arrived in Washington, D.C., on what he billed as a “good will” tour. President Eisenhower declined to meet with him, but, when Castro appeared in public, wearing his rumpled green fatigues and empty pistol holster, he was cheered by Americans who saw him as a folk hero. “Viva Castro!” they shouted.

Around this time, as Aran Shetterly, the biographer, recounts, another curious guest appeared at the Hotel Capri. He was a reputed bagman for the Mob named Frank Nelson. The Mob feared, correctly, that Castro planned to shutter its casinos and night clubs. (“We are not correctly, that Castro planned to shutter its casinos and night clubs. (“We are not only disposed to deport the gangsters, but to shoot them,” Castro later proclaimed.)

Nelson said that a friend in Miami was interested in Morgan’s “services.”

“In my services?” Morgan asked, confused.

It was Nelson’s turn to look around
dollars."

"Besides, a million dollars is always a million dollars."

To the rest of the world, Morgan might have become the Yankee comandante. But the plotters were confident that, deep down, he was still good of Billy Morgan.

"We’ll give you everything you ask for," Batista’s former police chief said.

Morgan soon got back to them. He let them know that he had consulted with Menoyo, and that they had given careful thought to what had happened in Cuba since the revolution. And Morgan said that he, along with members of the Second Front, was ready to join the conspiracy.

H.

ooover sensed that something was afoot. There were reports from informants that, in recent months, Morgan had received tens of thousands of dollars from the Dominican consul, the cash often stuffed in "common paper bags."

There were whispers that Morgan, who had moved with Rodríguez into a house in Havana, was being ferried messages from a priest acting in the interest not of God but of Rafael Trujillo. And there were rumors that, in Florida, Morgan had met with Johnny Abbes García, the head of Trujillo’s secret police, who was a master at extracting information (he had studied Chinese methods of torture) and at concealing it (he reputedly had an affair with Trujillo’s half brother). "JOHNNY went to Miami to make contact with Morgan," an F.B.I. report said, adding that Abbes García and his bodyguard had "a good time in a calypso nightclub."

Hoover and his men tried to detect a hidden design in the data they were collecting. They were witnessing history without the clarity of hindsight or narrative, and it was like peering through a windshield lashed with rain. As Hoover confronted the gaps in his knowledge, he became more and more obsessed with Morgan. A former fire-eater at the circus! "A good time in a calypso nightclub."

Hoover hounded his evidence men to "expedite" their inquiries, homing in on Morgan’s ties to Dominick Bartone. The
mобster, whom the bureau classified as “armed and dangerous,” had recently been arrested with his associates at Miami International Airport, where they had been caught loading a plane with thousands of pounds of weapons—a shipment apparently destined for mercenaries and Cuban exiles being trained in the Dominican Republic.

The incident had not only intensified Hoover’s scrutiny of Morgan and the plotters; it also aroused the interest of the Senate Rackets Committee and its chief counsel, Robert F. Kennedy, who was investigating links between Hoffa’s Teamsters and organized crime. At a hearing in June, 1959, Kennedy demanded, “Do we have any background on Mr. Morgan?”

When a Teamster official was questioned by the committee about the weapons scheme, he said, more than once, “I decline to answer because I honestly believe my answer may tend to incriminate me.” Another witness, however, acknowledged that Morgan had “worked for Bar- tone in years past.”

While the F.B.I. tracked Morgan’s movements, he made repeated forays to Miami, where he met with his conspirators. That summer, he also travelled to Toledo for a visit with his mother and father, whom he had not seen since leaving for Cuba, a year and a half earlier. His parents savored the brief reunion, but they could tell that Morgan was feeling “heat and pressure,” as he later put it. When his mother looked at his clothing and belongings, she noticed that there wasn’t any identification on him—he’d become a man from nowhere.

She asked him what kind of trouble he was getting into now.

Nothing, he assured her.

But she sensed that he was planning to pull off, as she later put it, yet another “trick.”

The hand is not “quicker than the eye,” Mulholland warned in his spy manuals. The key to an illusion is to make the audience explain away the fact that it has been deceived in plain sight.

On July 27, 1959, Morgan flew again to Miami, this time with Rodriguez. Eight months pregnant, she provided some cover. Still, Morgan was stopped by authorities at the airport in Miami and taken to a holding room, where he was confronted by two men with closecropped hair, dark suits, and dark ties: Hoover’s agents.

After apprising Morgan of his rights, the agents pressed him about why he had come to Miami. He insisted that he was there to have fun with his wife for a few days, but, under further questioning, he admitted that a representative of a foreign government had contacted him about leading a counter-revolution in Cuba. “Subject refused to identify the individu- als with whom he was in contact,” the agents wrote in a report.

Morgan said that he was in a “precari- ous position.” The agents eventually let him go, but Hoover ordered his men to monitor Morgan’s movements by “em- ploying physical surveillances and utilizing other confidential techniques.” The F.B.I. reported that “subject’s pregnant wife was seen being driven from the Montmarte Hotel in a 1959 blue Cadil- lac.” The agents traced the car: it be- longed to Dominick Bartone.

On July 31st, Morgan phoned the F.B.I., letting its agents know that Rodriguez had returned to Cuba. He said that he planned to go back himself, on a Pan American flight, in two days. Within hours of the call, though, he took off, leaving his belongings in his hotel room. The agents tried to pick up his trail, but he had vanished.

On the night of August 6th, the F.B.I. subsequently learned, Morgan boarded a small fishing vessel, in a “clandestine manner,” and rendezvoused off the coast of Miami with a fifty-four-foot yacht manned by two mercenaries. The vessel was stripped of any name or registration number, and was loaded with machine guns, explosives, and other armaments. With Morgan aboard, the yacht set off for Cuba and, after eluding the U.S. Coast Guard and nearly running out of fuel, slipped into Havana Harbor, on Au- gust 8th.

Hoover believed that he was worming his way inside the conspiracy. One F.B.I. source reported that Morgan was plan- ning to “assassinate Castro.” Another said that the plot was to take out Fidel and Raúl Castro. According to multiple sources, a strike force of nearly a thousand Cuban exiles and mercenaries would be transported, by plane, from a base in the Dominican Republic to Trinidad, a colo- nial town at the foot of the Escambray Mountains. Once these forces landed, it was believed, they would be led by Mor- gan, whom a cable from the U.S. Embassy described as “an enigma.”

Morgan had received from Trujillo a shortwave radio—a bulky contraption with dozens of thick black dials. Morgan set it up on a wooden desk in his house, and after turning the dials he heard the scratchy sound of a voice: Trujillo’s killer spy, Abbes García, in the Dominican Republic.

An informant later told the F.B.I. that Abbes García operated his radio every evening after midnight, and often identi- fied himself by saying, “This is the Red Cow.”

Morgan was given the code name Henry—a reference to Henry Morgan, the seventeenth-century Welsh privateer, who had been commissioned by the En- glish crown to plunder gold from Cuba, then a Spanish colony. Once, when Henry Morgan found himself trapped by a Spanish armada, he floated toward the enemy a ship, rigged with incendiary ma- terials and wooden dummies, which then exploded, allowing him to escape, in one of the greatest ruses in seafaring history.

William Morgan flicked on the shortwave radio late one August night. “Henry speaking,” he said. “Come in… Come in….”

The Red Cow picked up his signal, and Morgan told him that the plot had begun. “Our troops are advancing,” he said.

Abbes García could hear bombs and gunfire in the background.

“Forward, Henry!” came the jubilant reply.

Hoover and other high-level officials at the F.B.I., the C.I.A., the Navy, the Army, the Air Force, and the State De- partment circulated intelligence about Morgan and his plot. Urgent wire reports were issued: “Fidel’s home in Cojimar shot… Reliable sources state small group attacked Raúl’s home… Whereabouts Morgan not known… Telephone communications to Las Villas and Camagüey provinces cut… Rumors of fighting… Armed services on full alert… Expecting something further, probably inva- sion… Havana Harbor will be bombed at 4:00 a.m.… It is expected that Castro will be finished.”

Hoover and his colleagues picked up intelligence that Morgan and other
members of the Second Front, including Menoyo and Jesús Carreras, had gathered in Trinidad, where they had secured a muddy airstrip, effectively cutting the island in two. Trujillo was heard broadcasting a message to the Cuban people, saying, “Fire, fire, fire to that demon Fidel Castro and his brother Raúl!” Trujillo began to air-drop dozens of crates of .50-calibre ammunition to Morgan and his followers, the billowing white parachutes sawing down from the clouds. When another supply plane returned, its crew reported seeing lit bombs tracing paths across the night sky, as if there were an electrical storm. On August 12th, Morgan, who had brought the shortwave radio with him, spoke to Trujillo, and told him that his forces had captured the town. “Trinidad is ours!” Morgan said. “Don’t let us down.”

The following evening—Castro’s thirty-third birthday—Trujillo dispatched to Cuba a plane carrying the first members of the strike force. As the soldiers disembarked at the airstrip in Trinidad, which had been marked with lights, they could hear Morgan and his men shouting denunciations of Castro, and, as they joined in, the cries grew louder and more intense, converging, like voices at a stadium, in a deafening incantation: “DEATH TO CASTRO!”

Then a towering, bearded figure, who had also been chanting, emerged from where he was hiding, under a mango tree. It was Fidel Castro.

Morgan had pulled off a trick within a trick. He was not a counter-revolutionary—he was a double agent. He and the Second Front had been colluding with Castro; the radio messages, the cutting of communications, and the exploding bombs had all been part of the stagecraft of what Morgan described as a “fictitious war.”

Morgan and those loyal to Castro pointed machine guns at the stunned fighters from the strike force. One of Trujillo’s men later said, “I should not be judged as a conspirator, but as an imbecile.” Soldiers from the strike force drew their guns, and for a moment the plotters and the counter-plotters peered at one another, as if still puzzling over who had crossed whom. Then a few of Trujillo’s men opened fire, and everyone began shooting. One of Morgan’s friends ran toward the plane and was killed. By the time the fusillade ended, two members of the strike force had died, and the rest had been apprehended.

Morgan had helped break the first major counter-revolutionary plot against the Castro regime. Later, during a five-hour televised address that lasted until three in the morning, Castro explained what had happened. Morgan, smiling and wearing his crisp rebel uniform, appeared beside him. During the previous few months, he and Castro had spent hours scheming. Castro was seen draping his long arm around Morgan, his prized double agent. He hailed Morgan as a “Cuban,” and Morgan referred to Castro as his “faithful friend.” Menoyo recalls, “They had complete trust in one another.”

The Yankee comandante revealed to the public that, after being approached to lead the counter-revolution, he and Menoyo had alerted Castro, who directed them to draw out their enemies. Castro said in his televised address, “Everyone played his assigned parts. It was better than a movie.” Herbert Matthews, in a letter to Hemingway, described the events as “stranger than fiction but real.”

Morgan and Menoyo had been so convincing in their roles as counter-revolutionaries that Leo Cherne, and others, suspected that they had originally been part of the conspiracy, switching sides only when they were about to be discovered. But, according to Menoyo and others involved in the scheme, they had not turned against Castro—who remained revered in Cuba, and who had reaffirmed his support of democratic principles during his April visit to Washington. Despite Morgan’s concerns about the Castro regime, he stated emphatically that he and members of the Second Front would “never unite” with brutes like Trujillo or Batista.

On August 20th, Morgan called the F.B.I. agents who had pursued him in Miami, and apologized for not having been more forthcoming. He explained that he had not wanted to “sell out Cuba,” where he had many friends. He added that he didn’t think that he had broken any American laws, though he might have “bent” them slightly.

The Secret Service launched an investigation of Morgan and recommended that no action be taken against this man of “unquestioned courage,” given that he posed no threat to “the safety and welfare of our President.” But Hoover fumed over the deception, and in September the State Department stripped Morgan of his citizenship.

The C.I.A. made no effort to interfere on Morgan’s behalf. That May, according to declassified documents, the agency had cancelled its effort to recruit him, after a background check turned up evidence of his criminal youth and his scandalous military record. An internal memorandum had noted, “Station strongly feels any covert arrangement with Morgan undesirable from security
with his growing family, and was eager to help build a new Cuban society. “I’m a Cuban now,” he said. “And I believe in the revolution.” Or, as he later put it, “I am betting my life that the revolution succeeds.”

**THEY’RE GONNA GET YOU!**

Morgan did not take a post in the Castro government, saying, “I’ve never been a politician—I’m a soldier.” But he remained an adventurer, and in the fall of 1959 he set up a bold experiment in Cuba’s swamps, under the auspices of the National Institute of Agrarian Reform. Earning a small monthly salary, he built several nurseries, including one in the Escambray, that bred bullfrogs for their tender meat and valuable skins, which could be used to make wallets and belts and purses.

Morgan began with a few frogs, but they quickly multiplied, the tadpoles becoming stout creatures that, with their legs extended, were as long as a foot. The nurseries were soon filled with a mass of croaking creatures devouring, whole, virtually anything they could swallow—bugs, fish, mice, even other frogs—the wild proliferation continuing until Morgan presided over a kingdom of more than half a million frogs. It was like the story of Exodus that he had read as a child: “And the magicians did so with their enchantments, and brought up frogs upon the land of Egypt.”

Morgan often worked eighteen-hour days, digging a network of shaded trenches to accommodate his ever-growing stock. The Cuban press hailed Morgan’s project as a “miracle,” and when a reporter asked him if he had used architectural diagrams to lay out the farms he replied, “Blueprints, your ass. I dug those fucking ditches.”

He hired hundreds of peasants to operate the farms, delivering the kind of economic opportunity that he and the rebels had promised during the revolution. Viola June Cobb, an American who had worked as a secretary for Fidel Castro, later testified secretly before a Senate subcommittee, and said that Morgan was “a boy with ideals” who had a “tremendous desire to be helpful,” and that through his farms he had improved the lives of some two thousand peasants. “The ones I had seen in rags and barefoot
now were wearing shoes and stockings, looking decent,” she said.

Dignitaries and reporters travelled to the swamps to see the famed Yankee comandante and double agent. An article in *Time* called him the “Improbable Frogman.” Morgan projected his usual buoyant self. “Cuban frogs’ legs are tops,” he’d say. Or “Cuba shipped a million dollars’ worth of frogs’ legs to the U.S. last year. I’m going to double that.”

On July 31, 1960, Rodriguez gave birth to a second girl, Olguita. Before Morgan came to Cuba, he had been a neglectful father, and he regretted it. He had sent a letter to Anne, his daughter from his second marriage, who was now five:

> When I saw you last you were just a little tyke. … You use to sit in the window and when you saw my car drive in you would say—Daddy Daddy…. And I know when I did not come home any more I know you missed me and looked out the window for your dad—this was a long time ago baby and possibly you don’t remember—but I do—And always will.

Morgan now doted on his baby girls, having concluded that a man who has “his family is probably the happiest person in the world.” In a debriefing by the C.I.A., a reporter said of Morgan, “He seemed happy and secure.”

But, after foiling the Trujillo conspiracy and helping to save the revolution, he grew increasingly uneasy with the political forces that he had helped to unleash. Morgan had predicted to the F.B.I. that the influence of radicals, such as Guevara and Raúl Castro, would diminish in Cuba. But Fidel had placed Raúl in charge of the armed forces, and appointed as head of the national bank Guevara, who pushed for increased state control over the economy.

On October 19th, Huber Matos, a heralded rebel commander, resigned from the government, protesting the growing influence of Communists. In a letter to Fidel Castro, he wrote, “Please, in the names of our fallen comrades, of our mothers, of all the people, Fidel, do not bury the revolution.” Two days later, Matos was arrested. He was sentenced to twenty years in prison.

Earlier that year, in March, the White House had approved a top-secret plan to topple the Castro regime. The operation came to eerily resemble the Trujillo conspiracy. A brigade of more than a thousand Cuban exiles—this time secretly trained by the U.S., at a base in Guatemala—would invade by sea, landing at a beach in the town of Trinidad. B-26 bombers would preyemptively strike Castro’s Air Force to protect the brigade, which, if necessary, could escape into the Escambray Mountains. It was the most ambitious covert operation in U.S. history. At a White House meeting, President Eisenhower told the plan’s architects, “Everyone must be prepared to swear that he has not heard of it.”

That summer, while preparations for an invasion were under way, the C.I.A. pushed the magic button. In another echo of the Trujillo plot, the agency turned to members of the Mafia, including an associate of Lansky’s, to assassinate Castro. Various stratagems were considered, including blowing Castro’s head off with an exploding cigar, jabbing him with a poison-filled Paper Mate pen, and contaminating a diving suit with tuberculosis germs.

Amid this blur of plots and counterplots, Morgan struggled to find clarity. No longer close with Castro, he could not tell if the Cuban leader was reacting to provocations from Washington, or if he was being undermined by more radical elements in the government, or if he was revealing that, beneath his rebel garb, he was just another dictator, willing to grasp any ideology that would consolidate his power.

One day, members of the Communist Party tried to organize a meeting on one of Morgan’s farms. He expelled them, saying, “Fidel and Raúl know that I’m against the Communists.”

A friend of Morgan’s from the Second Front recalls, “I said to William, ‘You have to be careful. You’re talking too much.’ But William loved to talk.”

In April, 1960, a reporter observed of Morgan, “Behind the bravado one senses confusion, regret, anxiety over what lies ahead.” In Havana, Morgan’s house had been shot at more than once—perhaps by agents of Trujillo or perhaps by an unknown enemy. “One time, they killed our dog,” Rodriguez recalls. Afterward, Morgan moved the family into an apartment building protected by more than a dozen guards, many of whom lived with them. “It always seemed that we could never be alone,” he once said to Rodriguez.

An informant told the C.I.A. that Morgan’s “every move was being watched by the Cuban military.” Rodriguez suspected that two of the bodyguards living with them were spying for the G-2, Castro’s military-intelligence service. “I wanted them out,” she recalls. But Morgan did not wish to be disloyal. In this sense, Morgan was not a classic double agent, for he was someone who wanted to believe. “He always trusted people,” Rodriguez says. Still, he took precautions, choosing his own driver, and going to work in a blue Oldsmobile outfitted with two submachine guns and a glove compartment stuffed with grenades.

Morgan had no desire to flee Cuba. As he later told his mother, “It would have been necessary to be a traitor to myself, my friends and my beliefs.” He continued tending to his frogs, with their deafening chorus.

One day, Morgan learned that his rebel comrade Jesús Carreras, now an antagonist of the regime, had been picked up by state security, in Santa Clara. Morgan raced to the military barrio. “Morgan, ‘Behind the bravado one senses confusion, regret, anxiety over what lies ahead.’ In Havana, Morgan’s house had been shot at more than once—perhaps by agents of Trujillo or perhaps by an unknown enemy. “One time, they killed our dog,” Rodriguez recalls. Afterward, Morgan moved the family into an apartment building protected by more than a dozen guards, many of whom lived with them. “It always seemed that we could never be alone,” he once said to Rodriguez.

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Morgan considered seeking political asylum for his family. But he had confessed to one reporter, “I’ve run out of countries,” and noted to another that “a guy in the middle can so easily get caught.”

Cuba’s drift toward Communism continued, and several of Morgan’s friends returned to the Escambray, to take up arms against the regime. As Michael D. Sallah reported a decade ago, in an illuminating account in the *Toledo Blade*, Morgan started to have weapons smuggled into the mountains in the fall of 1960. “Every week, trucks would carry them up,” a worker told me. Once, Mor-
gan was planning to take a shipment to a hideout himself, but Rodríguez said that it was too dangerous. Everyone will recognize you, she said, insisting on transporting the weapons herself. "We had an argument," she recalls. Rodríguez prevailed, and this time it was Morgan who anxiously waited at home.

His opposition to the regime became more vocal. "If anything happens to me, you'll know the Commies have really taken over," he told one reporter, and said to another, "I don't know how long I'm going to last."

Still, Viola Cobb, the secretary, says that Morgan did not completely lose faith with Castro: "He had the idea that he was standing by, and that when Fidel finally realized that the Communists were taking over he would blow the whistle, and William Morgan and Gutiérrez Menoyo and some of the others would help him rescue the country."

On October 19th, two days after the Eisenhower Administration recalled Philip Bonsal, its Ambassador to Cuba, presaging the end of diplomatic ties, Morgan was summoned to a meeting at the National Institute for Agrarian Reform. He brought a handbag made from frog skin—a gift for the wife of one of the officials.

Rodríguez and Morgan had plans that evening, but by seven o'clock he had not returned home. "He was always punctual," Rodríguez recalls. Her premonitions coming back in a rush, she left the children with their nanny and told Morgan's driver to take her to the institute.

At the institute's gate, she shouted at a guard, "Where's William?"

"William had to go someplace," he said.

"I need to see William. I have to see him."

"William said you should come with us."

The guards began encircling the car, and she told the driver, "Go! Go!"

They sped away, returning home, but state-security guards soon barged through the apartment door. "I'm the wife of Comandante Morgan," she said, trying to intimidate them. But they shoved her aside and searched the apartment, terrifying the girls, one of whom was two months old, the other fourteen months.

Rodríguez learned what had happened to Morgan: upon entering the institute, he had been surrounded by state security and taken to G-2 headquarters. Jesús Carreras had been rounded up, too. Rodríguez had been right about the two bodyguards at the apartment: they were spies.

Rodríguez could not get permission to see Morgan, who had been placed in detention. According to an account that Morgan wrote in prison, which was later smuggled out of the country and obtained by the C.I.A., Cuban military-intelligence officials interrogated him. "I said I would only talk to Fidel," Morgan wrote. For nearly a month, he was in solitary confinement. He became violently ill and, fearing that the government was trying to poison him, made himself vomit to purge any toxins.

After a month, he was moved to La Cabaña, the prison overlooking Havana Harbor. Several times, he discovered ground glass in his food. He still felt extremely sick, and asked another prisoner if he had any medicine to "kill pain." When the man said yes, Morgan pleaded, "Shoot it into my arm." He didn't trust the guards to do it. The man obtained a syringe from a prison doctor and injected Morgan with the medicine.

In December, Menoyo, who says that he had not participated in the smuggling of weapons into the Escambray, visited Morgan at La Cabaña. "You are my chief and my brother," Morgan told him. Menoyo, who had lost both of his siblings to war, replied, "You are my brother." They embraced.

Not long after Menoyo left the prison, he and a dozen members of the Second Front fled the country, on three small fishing vessels, and headed for America.

On December 31st, Rodríguez, who had been placed under house arrest, was permitted to see her husband. Rats scurried in the corners of the crowded meeting room. Though she did not want to
upset Morgan, she told him that she was being held prisoner in their home, and that she had little water or food. “No one is allowed to visit,” she said. “The babies are sick.”

Morgan urged her to flee—to get the children out of Cuba before it was too late. “If you can, go to Toledo,” he said. “My mother will help you.”

He took her hand. “Everything’s going to be O.K.,” he said. But Rodriguez, who rarely betrayed fear, was scared. “I was so worried about him and what would happen to our baby girls,” she recalls. After five minutes, the guards said that her time was up.

“I love you with every part of me,” he said. They stole a kiss before being separated.

That night, when Rodriguez returned home, she crushed sleeping pills into hot chocolate and offered the drink to the men guarding her. At two in the morning, when all the guards appeared to be asleep, she gathered her daughters. “Hush,” she whispered to them. When the baby began to cry, she gave her a toy, and then, carrying both girls in her arms, she crept out of the house. She went to the Brazilian Embassy, where she was given sanctuary after telling the Ambassador and his wife, “Please, I’m in big trouble.”

Morgan was also trying to break free. He studied the design of La Cabaña and the routine of the guards, looking for a flaw in the system. “Morgan had all kinds of escape plots,” another prisoner later told the C.I.A. Morgan worked to regain his strength. A press attaché at the U.S. Embassy later wrote, “Up at dawn, he would put himself through calisthenics, then march around the compound, shouting commands at himself.” The inmate who had given Morgan painkillers recalled, “He exercised like an athlete and marched like a soldier.”

Morgan turned increasingly toward his Catholic faith. He wore a rosary and often prayed.

Hiram González, a twenty-four-year-old revolutionary who had been arrested for conspiring against the regime, had just arrived at La Cabaña, and watched in despair as prisoners were taken out and killed by firing squads, while birds swooped down to “peck at the bits of bone, blood, and flesh.” Morgan, he recalls, tried to cheer him up, offering his mattress. When Morgan found him crying in a corner, he went up to him and said, “Chico, men don’t cry.”

“At times like this, I’m not a man.” Morgan put his hand on his shoulder. “If it helps your suffering, then it’s O.K.” Morgan walked him around the prison yard until he felt better. “He was the only one to help,” González recalls.

Two days later, on March 9, 1961, guards seized Morgan and escorted him across the compound to a room where a military tribunal was being held. Along the way, Morgan, trying to summon courage, murmured song lyrics to himself: “Over hill, over dale, we have hit the dusty trail/And those caissons go rolling along.”

There were eleven other defendants at the tribunal, including Carreras. Rodriguez was tried in absentia. A few weeks earlier, Che Guevara had published an essay denouncing members of the Second Front. “Revolutions, accelerated radical social changes, are made of circumstances,” he wrote. “They are made of passions, of man’s fight for social vindication, and are never perfect.” The mistake of the Cuban Revolution, Guevara argued, was its accommodation of men like the Second Front commanders. “By their presence, they showed us our sin—the sin of compromise... in the face of the actual or potential traitor, in the face of those weak in spirit, in the face of the coward.” He went on, “Revolutionary conduct is the mirror of revolutionary faith, and when someone calls himself a revolutionary and does not act as one, he can be nothing more than heretical. Let them hang together.”

At the trial, Morgan and Carreras were charged with conspiracy and treason. Later, Fabián Escalante, who served for many years as the head of Cuban counter-intelligence, detailed the case against Morgan, claiming that he had been a longtime American intelligence operative—a “chameleon”—who, in 1960, had attempted to “organize, for the C.I.A., a band of counter-revolutionaries in the Escambray.”

Without a doubt, the C.I.A. was trying to foment the new insurgency in the mountains. But U.S. documents, which have since been declassified, suggest that Morgan was never a C.I.A. operative. Indeed, an agency memorandum dated October 5, 1960—two weeks before Morgan’s arrest—voiced “strenuous objections” to the idea of using him. This followed an inquiry by Army intelligence, which had concluded that enlisting Morgan would be “extremely worthwhile.” The Army had considered sending him a “secret writing system”—most likely, one involving invis-
ble ink.) After Morgan's arrest, an Army internal memo noted that Morgan had not become a registered operative.

“William was never an American agent,” Menoyo says. “It is simply a lie by the Castro regime to justify its actions.”

At the tribunal, Morgan complained that his lawyer had only just learned of the charges against him. Morgan and Carreras, branded pseudo-revolutionaries, faced death by firing squad.

The prisoner who had given Morgan the painkillers recalled, “The whole prison was agog with the news that Morgan and Carreras were actually going to stand trial. Not even the most zealous of the young rebels believed that Fidel Castro would shoot these two men, who had played such a big role in the Cuban Revolution.”

Morgan denied that he had ever been a foreign agent and said, “I have defended this revolution because I believed in it.” He explained, “If I am found guilty, I will walk to the execution wall with no escort, with moral strength, and with a clear conscience.”

A young man in the back of the courtroom, ignoring warnings by authorities, spoke out on Morgan’s behalf. It was the rebel who had broken his foot in the Escambray. “William would not abandon me,” he recalls.

The trial lasted little more than a day. A defendant’s fate was usually signalled by which room he was taken to before the verdict. “If you went to the right, you went into a copiea, a little chapel-like room, and you knew you were going to get shot,” a prisoner recalled. “For most prisoners, if you went to the left, you got thirty years.”

Most of the defendants were led to the left. Rodríguez, who was twenty-four, also received a thirty-year sentence. Morgan, along with Carreras, was led to the right, and condemned to die the next day. An American radio broadcaster at the trial told his listeners that he had witnessed “a farce.”

Morgan asked to speak one last time to his mother, but the request was denied. Morgan had written Loretta a five-page letter on La Cabaña stationery—“the longest letter I have ever written,” he told her. (The letter was recently uncovered, by Michael Sallah.) Morgan understood that the very cause that had helped save his life would likely lead to his death. “I have been prepared for this as long as I have been in prison,” he wrote. “For after all it is not when a man dies but how.”

Morgan knew that he had to get the letter past government censors, so his criticisms of Castro were oblique. “No man has a right to impose his will or beliefs on others,” Morgan wrote. “I feel sorry for those who accuse me and who are responsible for what will pass. They accuse with fear in their hearts and ambition in their minds not knowing that good never comes of evil.” Morgan was ready to give his life for Cuba: “The way of freedom is hard—and the road is covered with the blood of those who must die so that the rights of man can live.” He wanted to protect what he considered sacred about the revolution, and believed that only in time would a proper verdict be rendered on his life: “Humans leave their actions to be judged by other people in the pages of history so it is not what we do but the result of what we do that is finally judged.”

Morgan went on, “I write these things as they run through my mind so that by reading this you might better know what kind of man is your son…. Raising a boy like me was not an easy task or did we always agree what was the right thing to do. But I have always worshipped you and dad.” He told his mother, “Don’t cry for me. I know that you understand. The life of a man is in the hands of god and he calls when he is ready for us. It is very few who are fortunate enough to have time to prepare to meet him. If now is my time I will be ready and am looking at death not with fear but with expectation. God bless you…. Until we meet again, take care of Olga and the children.”

Loretta could not so easily accept his fate, and launched a furious campaign to save him. She enlisted the local office of the F.B.I. and contacted the White House, which responded, “We fully understand and deeply sympathize with your anxiety for your son.”

After Cuban officials denied Morgan’s request to talk to his mother, he asked if he could say goodbye to Rodríguez. Again, he was refused. So Morgan sent her a letter, knowing that the only thing that could ever separate them was upon them. “As a writer of love letters I am not so good,” he said. “To tell you that I love you, it’s not sufficient, because words could never express my feelings towards you. Since the first time I saw you in the mountains until the last time I saw you in prison, you have been my love, my happiness, my companion in life and in my thoughts during my moment of death.” He regretted how little time they had spent together, and he recalled the “beautiful plans” that they had made to settle in the “mountains with the girls, living in peace and tranquility.”

He tried to console her, assuring her that he was not afraid, and did not consider death “an enemy.” Though some members of the Second Front had vowed to retaliate if he was killed, Morgan told Rodríguez that he did not want anyone to seek revenge on his behalf, not even against the bodyguards who had betrayed him. “They are young and will have to fight with their conscience,” he said. “I do not want blood spilled over my cause. . . . It’s better that I die because I have defended lives. I only ask that someday the truth will be known and that my daughters will be proud of their father.” He told her, “I have great peace in my spirit,” because at least she and the girls were safe.

In fact, things were in tumult. A few days earlier, a distraught Rodríguez had learned that several of their allies were planning a last-minute assault on La Cabaña. In a kind of delirium, Rodríguez—who later cut her hair short and dyed it black, as she had when she first went into the mountains—told the wife of the Brazilian Ambassador that she needed to leave for a few days. Protect my daughters until I return, she said. The Ambassador’s wife, with whom she had grown close, pleaded with her not to go.

“I have to save William,” Rodríguez said. Carrying her .32, she slipped into the trunk of a waiting car, and raced away.

Morgan, meanwhile, was granted permission to see his girls, and one of Rodríguez’s relatives brought them to La Cabaña. Morgan was briefly allowed to talk to them, to hold them. Morgan told Rodríguez, in his letter, “Let them know someday who their father was, and what my beliefs and ideals were.” Earlier, he’d sent a note to Bill, his son from his second marriage, who was now four. Saying that he could “speak from experience, most of it hard,” Morgan told him, “Love your God—and Your Country—and Stand Up for both,” adding, “And I know that your Country . . . will always be proud of you.” In his letter to Anne, he had said:

“When the time comes for you to get married and have a family of your own. Pick a good man Baby—One with his head high but both
feet on the ground—And if you find one who wants to see the world—or dreams of castles in the sky—let him see the world—honey—by himself—Possibly you may never see this letter. But if you do, remember your dad was one of those people—who saw the world—And its very hard for those who love such a man.

Not long after Rodríguez left the Brazilian Embassy, Castro’s forces smashed the plot to liberate Morgan, killing or arresting many of the conspirators. Rodríguez, meanwhile, sought refuge in a safe house, in Santa Clara.

Late in the evening on March 11th, Carreras was taken before the firing squad and shot. Five minutes afterward, Morgan—who had made his plea to speak with Castro directly—was brought outside. Morgan prayed the whole way, then removed the rosary around his neck and gave it to a priest, asking that his mother receive it. As he had written her, “I leave a love of God and country.”

Through the floodlights, Morgan peered at the muzzles of the rifles. There was no longer any hope of escape. No more castles in the sky.

According to a prisoner’s account, a voice in the distance shouted, “Kneel and beg for your life.”

It was the last thing that Morgan could control. “I kneel for no man,” he said.

One of the executioners shot him in the right knee. The Yankee comando tried to stay on his feet, blood spilling around him. Then he was shot in the left knee. Finally, he collapsed, and was repeatedly shot in the torso and head. His face, a witness said, was “blown off.”

“My fellow-grads, today we leave behind the trappings of youth, step boldly onto the road of life, and move back in with our parents.”

A month later, the newly inaugurated U.S. President, John F. Kennedy, launched the invasion of Cuba that had been approved by Eisenhower in 1960. Although America’s role was evident, Kennedy hoped to maintain deniability, and so the landing place was shifted from the town of Trinidad to the more remote Bay of Pigs—a location that would reduce the “noise level” but that was too far west to allow escape into the Escambray Mountains. At the last moment, Kennedy also cancelled a second wave of air strikes, fearing that they would betray direct U.S. involvement.

Soon after the counter-revolutionary brigade landed on the beach, it was
bombarded. The commander sent out urgent messages over his shortwave radio to American officials:

12:28 P.M.: Without jet air support cannot hold. Have no ammo left for tanks.
1:25 P.M.: Need air support immediately. Red Beach wiped out.

Late that evening, the commander said, “I have nothing left to fight with.... Farewell, friends!” The line went dead. The brigade was obliterated: a hundred and fourteen members killed, and more than a thousand captured. A C.I.A. operative said that, for the rest of his life, he would have regrets about what happened, but added, “That is the echo of anybody who’s ever tried to do anything in history.”

At the outset of the Bay of Pigs attack, Castro declared, for the first time, that Cuba was socialist. Philip Bonsal, the former Ambassador, later said of Castro, “He cannot endure any sharing of authority. . . . This drive for power is a far more constant element in his makeup than is the philosophy behind any particular revolutionary panacea he may be peddling. Castro has now attained his goal. Everything in Cuba hinges on him. He holds his job at his own pleasure.”

Menoyo was released from the Texas detention center. After writing to Morgan’s mother that “William will be our eternal symbol until we will either win or perish,” he went to Florida and founded Alpha 66, a paramilitary organization aimed at overthrowing Castro. On December 28, 1964, Menoyo and three members of the group boarded a boat in the Dominican Republic and landed at the southeastern end of Cuba. After twenty-eight days on the run in the mountains, Menoyo and his party were captured. When guards removed a blindfold that they had made Menoyo wear, he recalls, he was standing before Castro. “I knew you would come, but I also knew that I would catch you,” Castro said. Menoyo was thrown into prison, vanishing along with Rodríguez.

THE LAST FIGHT

One day not long ago, while researching Morgan’s story, I went to Miami to meet Rodriguez. An elegant woman in her mid-seventies, she had gray hair and stooped shoulders that made her seem shorter than her five feet two inches, but her face was still striking and she moved with steely purpose, as if beating back a strong wind. “I still have the spirit of a revolutionary,” she said.

After her arrest, in 1961, she spent a decade in prison. She had been a plantada, meaning someone who was “rooted,” and had refused to take classes in Marxism-Leninism or to be “rehabilitated” by the state. To protest the treatment of prisoners, she went on several hunger strikes, her body becoming an X-ray of itself, and she was often locked, virtually naked, in solitary confinement, using newspapers to keep herself warm. She read, under the faint light, the Biblical story of Job. The incessant beatings by guards left one of her eyes impaired and her veins damaged. Her daughters were raised by her parents, in Cuba, and their teachers told them that their mother and father were traitors. “When you’re in jail, it’s your family that hurts the most,” she said. The girls suffered “great trauma.”

One of her daughters once visited her in prison and screamed at her, “You abandoned us!”

Recalling those years, Rodríguez says, “I no longer know how to cry, but I cry inside.”

William’s mother, Loretta, had never met Rodriguez, but she campaigned for her release, petitioning members of Congress and drawing support from the clergy of the Catholic Church. In 1971, in response to mounting international pressure, Rodriguez was released early from prison. Though constantly followed by Cuba’s secret police, she tried to rebuild her family. Eight years later, she and her daughters, by then grown and married, arranged to fly to the United States, along with relatives. As the group boarded the plane, officials seized Rodriguez, forcing her to stay behind and pushing her to the edge of madness.

She continued to try to get out. In 1980, Castro began the Mariel boat lift, allowing many Cubans to leave for the U.S., among them criminals and mental patients. Rodriguez claimed that she was a prostitute, but was recognized by authorities and stopped. For a month, she slept in a tent by the harbor. Finally, in August, as the last of the boats were about to leave, an official told her, “You can go tonight.” Carrying only a toothbrush and a comb, she got on a creaky, thirty-foot boat crammed with passengers.

As the boat left the harbor, she heard a loud crackling sound, like that of a firing squad. A Cuban Navy cutter was firing at
them. Bullets splintered the hull, and, as the boat slowly began to sink, it seemed that Rodríguez’s life would end in a scene of cosmic cruelty. Then she heard another sound: a helicopter from the U.S. Coast Guard. Another boat was summoned, which rescued her and the other passengers.

Upon reaching Florida—her mind filled with memories of travelling there with Morgan during the Trujillo conspiracy, two decades earlier—she bent down to the ground, overcome with emotion. Taken to an immigration holding room, she told an American official, “I am Olga, the widow of the Yankee comandante, William Alexander Morgan. I was a political prisoner.”

Rodríguez was released, and she flew to Toledo. “I knew this is where I had to be,” she says. She immediately went to see Loretta. “She wrapped me in her arms, as if she were holding a part of William,” Rodríguez recalls. Loretta, who had never much approved of William’s previous relationships, told her, “I can see why my son loved you so.”

If Rodríguez had lived with Morgan only in the present, she now seemed imprisoned in the past. At every turn, she was forced to remember, or recordar—a word that derives from the Latin recordar, which means “to pass back through the heart.” Rodríguez often says, “The past is the past, but it’s always present.”

Rodríguez learned that, a few years after Morgan was executed, his father died from poor health, which some family members attributed to his grief. Morgan’s son, from his second marriage, had also died, from uncertain causes. His daughter Anne had been rebellious in her youth. “I know I got that from my father,” she says. Her grandmother always wrote her on the day that Morgan was executed, to keep “his memory alive inside me.” Anne eventuallymarried three times—“I’m an adventurous lady”—and had two children. She has kept the final letter that Morgan sent her. “I still cry when I read it,” she recalls. “That’s my daddy.”

Morgan, in his final letter to Rodríguez, had begged her not to “let your life become lifeless and sad. If you should find someone who you should love and who respects you, marry him; because knowing that you are happy, I will be also.” In 1985, Rodríguez married a welder in Toledo. “He is a very good man,” she told me. She paused, then added, “What I had with William was…” She struggled to find the words in English, then chose a Spanish phrase: “un gran amor.” A close friend of Rodríguez, Jon Richardson, told me, “She still loves William as if he’s just now coming up the mountain.”

For more than two decades, Rodríguez, honoring a request from William’s mother, who died in 1988, has waged what she calls her “last fight”: to restore William’s U.S. citizenship and to retrieve his remains, so that he can be laid to rest in his family’s plot, in Toledo—and finally come in from the cold. “He did not deserve to die without a country,” Rodríguez says.

The U.S. government has reinstated a person’s citizenship only in rare instances, such as that of General Robert E. Lee, and for years Rodríguez’s pleas were rebuffed. In 2005, she sent a letter to President George W. Bush, saying, “Please Mr. President, may God have you make the right decision. I beg of you.” Though she was nearly seventy, she threatened to go on a hunger strike outside the White House. “I’m ready,” she told the Miami Herald. “I can go a long time without eating. This time, it’s for William.”

In 2007, she received a letter from the State Department, acknowledging that its original finding against Morgan could not be sustained. The letter stated, “Mr. Morgan shall be deemed never to have relinquished his U.S. nationality.”

Still, Rodríguez told me, she could not rest until Morgan had been buried in America. In 2002, Marcy Kaptur, an Ohio congresswoman, visited Cuba and received assurances from Castro that Morgan’s remains could be retrieved from the Colón Cemetery, in Havana, where he had been buried along with Carreras. Since then, Rodríguez says, she has been stymied. In a bizarre twist, Cuban officials claim that they cannot find Morgan’s bones. “They are playing a trick on me,” Rodríguez says.

She has received support for her crusade from the aging, dwindling members of Alpha 66—though Menoyo is now an outcast from the group. In 1986, after serving almost twenty-two years in prison, during which he was repeatedly tortured, Menoyo went into exile in Spain and renounced any efforts to use violence to overthrow Castro. “When you are subjected to a policy of savagery and barbarism, you come to the conclusion that you have to reject those methods, that you have to be the first to set hatred aside, otherwise it will destroy you,” he has said.

To the shock of Rodríguez and many of his friends, Menoyo permanently returned to Cuba in 2003, seeking reconciliation and a peaceful transformation. “The day I lose my dreams,” he said, “I will be lost.” Although Rodríguez still speaks fondly of Menoyo, many of his fellow-rebels now dismiss him as a traitor.

Menoyo recently suffered an aneurysm, and when I last spoke to him by phone his voice was faint, and he had only enough strength to talk for a few minutes. He had watched Castro cling to power until 2006, when he was eighty, only to hand the Presidency over to his brother Raúl, who was seventy-five. Menoyo told me that he still hoped to see “the end of this movie.” But he did not believe that the regime would ever turn over Morgan’s bones. “Just the other day, Fidel was going around and denouncing William, saying he worked for the C.I.A.,” Menoyo said. He explained that, for the regime to address Rodríguez’s request, it would have to confront the betrayal of the revolution.

Rodríguez, however, has faith that she will prevail. When I met her in Miami, where she had travelled from Ohio to attend a meeting of Alpha 66, she said, “I can’t give up. If I have to, I will go to the cemetery and take the bones myself.” She lit a cigarette, her mottled fingers trembling. “William and I had so little time. We could never have the life we dreamed of.” For a moment, she closed her eyes, as if holding back tears. Then she said, “I’ll can do this for him, then we can both finally have peace, and be free.”