

MY SISTER ELBA: TRANSLATION AND ANALYSIS

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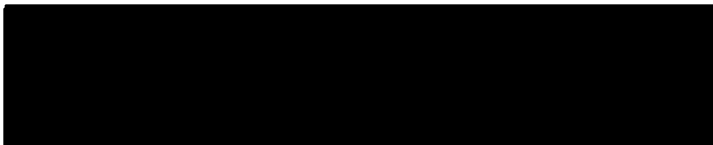
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APPROVED:

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Barbara Dale May

An Abstract of the Thesis of
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"My Sister Elba" by Cristina Fernández Cubas is a short story translated from Spanish into English for the first time. Many Spanish women writers are undiscovered by English speaking readers not because they are unworthy of attention, but because they are untranslated. The translation conveys the spirit of the text rather than mirroring it word for word, since it is essential to capture the emotion evoked in the original work. "My Sister Elba" is a story of a young girl who, because of her family problems, is placed in a Catholic boarding school. She learns to break the rules and test her strength against adult values. The analysis discusses her struggle to grow up and still retain her creative, individual self.

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PREFACE

When I began to understand the Spanish language well enough to read the literature, I realized that a door had opened for me, leading into a variety of Spanish speaking cultures. I had a whole new world of literature available to me. As a translator I can share that world with those who don't speak Spanish. By translating "Mi hermana Elba," currently not available in English, I hope to bring the voice of one more Spanish writer into this culture.

"Mi hermana Elba" ("My Sister Elba") was written by Cristina Fernández Cubas, a Spanish writer who was born in Barcelona, has lived in Latin America and Cairo, and has studied law and journalism. Among her other works are Los altillos de Brumal, a collection of short stories, and El año de gracia, a novel, and most recently, El ángulo de horror. "Mi hermana Elba" is the story of a young girl who, because of family problems, is placed in a Catholic boarding school. She develops a friendship with an older girl who takes her on adventures through the prohibited areas of the school and shows her secret hiding places.

My philosophy of translation entails maintaining fidelity to the spirit of the work. Gregory Rabassa, in "Problems and Pitfalls of Translation," defines the task of the translator: "It is the spirit that the translator must

go after. The meaning is really in the spirit." (1) The idea is to evoke the same emotion in English as the author does in the original language. The literary analysis in the third section of the thesis will give a clearer picture of what I believe is the writer's intent. Inevitably, my translation of "Mi hermana Elba" will not be an exact replica of Cubas' work in Spanish. I don't believe that a "pure" translation exists because of the combined intricacies of language and culture. Since the writer chooses words and phrases in Spanish that have specific cultural connotations for Spanish audiences, I can only attempt to find substitutions in English that bring out similar feelings and ideas. At times this means altering the literal meaning of a word or phrase to achieve accuracy in tone.

It is no accident that the writer I choose to translate is a woman. Too often twentieth century literary criticism focuses on male writers, reflecting male experience. What has been omitted and avoided is the body of writing done by women writers--the female voice, since the male canon of literature has acted as the generic or "human voice" for so long. This is especially true in Spain where women writers continue to struggle for literary acclaim. Ymelda Navajo, in her prologue to Doce relatos de mujeres, says that women had not begun to write and publish regularly until the beginning of the fifties. (9) Even after censorship was

lifted and more women began to write, they still represented an invisible literary world. In her essay on women novelists in Spain Phyllis Zatlin illustrates the literary climate for women:

Democratic Spain has brought an end to official censorship and has provided women writers with the possibility of giving free expression to the female experience . . . but has understandably not guaranteed publication, dissemination, and acceptance of their writing.(40)

This lack of acceptance is apparent in the fact that until recently, very little criticism has been done on works of Spanish women writers. Anthologies list only a few of the many writers. Janet Pérez discusses this issue in her book Contemporary Women Writers of Spain:

Another symptom of scholarly neglect of the majority of Spanish women writers is the limited space allotted them in literary histories and anthologies, where the few mentioned are exceptions that prove the rule that the woman writing in Spain is at considerable risk.(2)

Since only a few writers are considered in anthologies of the best writers of Spain, it is very difficult to find translations, or support for translations, of these works. Much of the work done by these writers remains undiscovered on the international level.

The purpose of this thesis, through translation and analysis, is to begin this discovery process, by bringing an untranslated story into the English language. I have looked

into publishing the story in feminist journals such as Calyx, a journal of art and literature by women, and Trivia, a journal which publishes translations, experimental prose, and reviews. Publishing the translation would be a contribution to the body of writing done by Spanish women.

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MY SISTER ELBA

Even now, after so long, it is not hard to decipher that childish writing plagued with errors and to fill in the blank spaces where pages have been torn out by an inexperienced hand. Nor is it difficult to look past the deteriorated paper, the faded writing, and the yellowing photographs, and recreate the diary from memory. The diary is leather bound, with a lock that I don't remember ever having used. It begins on the 24th of July, 1954. The first words written in awkward, cursive writing say: "Today, this morning, they began to talk about 'it' again. If only they would decide." In the pages that follow, I list my summer friends, give detailed descriptions of all my games at the beach, but most of all talk about my parents. The diary ends two years later. I don't know if I continued my childish confessions in another book, but I don't think I did. I wonder also about the fate of various photographs that I removed which I know existed because of certain remnants of homemade glue petrified by time. I'll never know what prompted me to disfigure, possibly with a penknife, a picture of my sister Elba.

During the long summer of 1954 I kept my parents under the strictest surveillance. I had a feeling that something was about to happen, and that somehow I was going to be directly affected. I sensed this from my parents' frequent talks in the study, and mostly from their loud discussions in the kitchen that stopped abruptly the moment that our heads appeared in the doorway. Somehow a word or expression would always slip out, and then, after an uncomfortable pause, they would suddenly give us an overly tender, forced half-smile. One time my mother hurried to hide some papers from me. Our nanny, caught up in the drama of the situation, would allude from time to time to her uncertain economic future or to the inherent and irreversible wickedness of human beings. I decided to stay alert and pay attention to any detail that up until then might have seemed insignificant. At the same time, my lips became strangely silent, which to my delight and disbelief, had the effect of unsettling everyone around me.

Never before had my father been so communicative and attentive. During meals he covered Elba and me with kisses and asked us what we did at the beach. He even let us eat candy all day. No one seemed to mind that the meat on our plates remained untouched and that our pillows flew in the air until well past midnight. My persistent silence never ceased to work miracles. I noticed how my mother avoided my

eyes, which were always vigilant, and how the cook shook her head tenderly when I insisted on knowing the secrets of homemade custard or the fine art of beating egg whites. Sometimes I thought I heard her murmur, "You know about everything, don't you? Poor thing." Her words filled me with pride.

That summer seemed so long and my parents had so many hushed conversations full of names I didn't recognize that I finally resigned myself to the fact that my boring life was still not going to change. But luckily, the final decision was made, and although the words "separation" and "divorce" were never uttered I soon learned of their most immediate consequence. Elba and I would spend the winter in a boarding school. The papers, kept in a secret little box in the study, came out for the first time. The pamphlets described a big, lovely school not far from the city where we lived, surrounded by thick forests and dreamy gardens. My mother would repeat the description with a mixture of joy and sadness until it became a litany which closed with the promise: "We'll visit you every Sunday," she said, drying her eyes, something she did often in those days. Then she would smile and ask us if we wanted to go to the movies, buy colored pencils, or play with our dolls. It was--as my diary emphasizes with expressions of happiness--the end of a happy summer linked in my memory to my new sailor-suit uniforms and the constant visits to all the different

stores. I was amazed that the buying didn't stop and that any object, formerly inaccessible, had only to attract little Elba's slightest interest to become part of our belongings.

At the end of the summer, when we returned to the city, the final preparations were made. We went on so many shopping trips that I sometimes found it difficult to hide my uneasiness or to endure the silence that, unknown to me, contributed to the incredible changes that were going to occur. I counted the days impatiently. Very few were left until I would see my new school. I couldn't bear to wait until school started, so I entertained myself by dividing time into segments of six hours each which I called "steps". That way the days didn't seem so monotonous, and before I knew it I found myself just a few "steps" away, standing at the station with the smell of sea salt in the air and a delicious humidity that softened my curls. Night had already fallen and my father had nothing left to do but call a rental car to drive us to the school. When it arrived he said a warm goodbye to both of us. Then, as if following some higher inspiration, he bent down next to me and spoke to me quietly, almost in secret, "You're going to be eleven pretty soon, aren't you? Here, take this and buy some candy for yourself and for your friends." And then, while I noticed the light jingle of the coins in my pocket, I felt incredibly sorry for my father because at that moment he

seemed so small and helpless.

At school I was assigned a third of a desk which had been badly repainted in dark blue and was covered with carvings and ink stains. My desk partner for the course was an obese, greasy-haired girl who wouldn't respond to my attempts at conversation. During class she listened to Sister Juana with her mouth halfway open and an absent look on her face. At recess she didn't play with anyone; maybe because of her weight she couldn't run, or perhaps, always lost in a daydream, she couldn't concentrate on any pastime. Our relationship was limited to suffering each other the best we could. We drew a dividing line between our respective territories and arranged our chocolates in such an unmistakable way that any foreign nibble would be rapidly detected.

The obstinate silence of my deskmate, broken only by high little shrieks when the lunch bell in the hallway rang, forced me to look around in search of some more communicative being. I studied the students one by one. While Sister Juana inducted us into the secrets of arithmetic, read dark prophecies, or listed the basics of etiquette on the chalk board, I had time to memorize all their faces and choose my favorites. I soon realized that most of the girls formed a closed group and that to them I wasn't "the new girl" as I had imagined the week before I entered the school, but simply "a new girl," a category

which included, aside from four or five classmates, my own deskmate.

The heroic dreams I had that somehow my situation was unique didn't come true in those small classrooms. Many of the others were in the school for similar reasons, including the two orphans in my class, a condition that at first I envied, but only for a while because I realized that they didn't have any special importance. I soon understood that my life in that remote school began to resemble more and more the life I had left behind with so many hopes for the future. I had the feeling that the days were tremendously long--not turning into other days but stubbornly repeating themselves. I was convinced that my arrival there hadn't been months ago but centuries, and that nothing existed outside of the cold marble, the fruit trees in the garden, or the carob trees that flanked the entrance. Every night was the same. Elba, even though she was only six years old and belonged to the youngest class, got special treatment as a direct result of her frequent crying. To her joy and my disgrace, she was placed next to me in the dormitory of the middle-graders.

Disappointed by the monotony of those long days and the lack of anything new, and convinced of the futility of dividing the time into "steps," which weren't taking me anywhere, I consoled myself by imagining that I wasn't me, and that everything around me was just a phantom of a long,

tedious dream. But cold mornings, Elba's crying, or the presence of my deskmate brought me back to reality. I decided to do as the rest of my classmates and let myself be carried away by the scientific tone of Sister Juana citing Mendel over a large basket of peas, trembling with emotion while telling the story of spirited and valiant Biblical women, or discussing the plot of the movie previewed for Sunday. In the late afternoon, when the day pupils gathered their books and deserted abandoned the building, I watched the shadows that the pedestals of the statues cast on the marble façade of the chapel. Some were immobile. Others, the shadow of the pulpit, for example, didn't have a precise form. Its edges were defined by the number of lighted candles, or the presence of flowers, music stands, and missals. After the rosary, we formed a line to go to the refectory and from there to the study. With the excuse of watching Elba, I was the first to go to bed. I put her to bed and although I wasn't tired, I tried to sleep. I didn't wait hoping for the arrival of the morning because I knew that nothing new could present itself to me, but I closed my eyes as if adhering to one of the numerous ritual acts that a foreign and unknown mind seemed to impose on me. Until I met Fátima.

Fátima was fourteen years old. She failed course after course, and the teachers used to listen to her foolish answers with a curious mix of patience and resignation as if

nothing could be expected from her. Nevertheless, she treated the other classmates with arrogant superiority. We often consulted her on important questions, and when we chose up sides everyone fought over whose team she would be on. But she didn't seem to be interested in our games and would spend recess walking in the gardens, talking to other girls, sitting underneath the trees and sleeping a little, or completely disappearing for more than an hour. She used to return with flowers and leaves of a certain species that appeared only outside of the school property. She flattened and pressed them in between the pages of her books like strange trophies. Fátima, we all knew, went in and out of the prohibited areas with the greatest confidence in the world.

But what really caught my attention was her attitude during Sister Juana's classes. She sank down in the desk with an expression of extreme boredom, lazily watching a bee or scribbling distractedly over the newest ink stain that had fallen on her notebook. She wasn't called on very often, but when she was, Fátima waited a good while before responding or sometimes she would just shrug her shoulders. Her grades were always low, but she brushed them off with indifference.

It was hard for me to understand her behavior. On more than one occasion Fátima would demonstrate her command of any of the subjects she had failed a few minutes before. She

seemed to possess a wealth of knowledge superior to that of all her classmates. I remember one morning when some girls asked about the strange ways of the Hebrew people who, forgetting about Moses, had created an idol to adore. Fátima approached the group in her usual way and listened to our arguments with a half smile of condescension. That morning she took the floor, and sitting in the middle of the group, she explained other cases in which, according to history, similar adoration had occurred. She told us about Mohammed and the destruction of idols in Mecca and of a unique black stone, fallen from the sky, which was kept and protected in the Kabah. She described the ancient Egyptians and drew a picture of their god Hapis in the dirt. From there we went to Babylonia, its famous hanging gardens, and its fabulous king Nebuchadnezzar. We continued with Pandora's box which contained all evil. She told us about Sinbad and the enormous claws of the bird Rok and the intricate markets of Bagdad and Basra. We were fascinated as we listened to stories drawn from the most diverse sources and interwoven with such ability that it never occurred to any of us to doubt the smallest detail. When the dinner bell finally rang, some of the girls tried to get Fátima to promise to continue her story the next day, but she never gave her word. She just shrugged her shoulders. Deeply affected by everything that I had just heard, I dared to approach her for the first time in the hallway.

"Fátima," I said. "why haven't you said all that in class?" My classmates stared at me disapprovingly, warning me to leave her alone. But she stopped and seemed to think it over. "Well, I don't know . . . I guess I think of other things." Then she looked me right in the eye and asked me what my name was.

That day I felt very important. It seemed to me also that my classmates were looking at me with envy and that the rumor was spreading that Fátima and I had become inseparable friends, but to be more exact, I had come to be a faithful follower of the admirable Fátima. That same night I was going to discover some strange things that would make my new friend the most attractive person I could have met up until then, thanks, ironically, to the person who interested me the least in the whole school: my cheerful and obese classmate and deskmate who had incidentally become my roommate.

At nine o'clock as usual I put Elba to bed. She was restless so I had to tell her a couple of stories to make her fall asleep. Afterwards I turned out the light and tried to sleep as well, but a certain sour, pungent smell made me cover my head with the sheets. Elba slept soundly. The odor didn't come from her bed as I had suspected. When I looked around, I encountered the empty eyes and half-opened mouth of my deskmate. I approached her bed. Now there was no doubt from which bed that awful smell came,

just like the odor that I was subjected to during classes. I was going to say something, but she curled up in between the sheets like a little hibernating animal. I recalled for an instant the peaceful nights at home, and to avoid that pitiful face that I had to look at every day, I left the dormitory and turned out the light. The hallway at night time seemed colder and more desolate than usual. I sat on the floor and waited for a dream, contemplating the hem of my nightgown and the unravelling fuzz of my slippers. Then Fátima appeared.

She was eating a piece of cheese and was still wearing her black robe with the embroidered collar, as if to challenge the rigid schedules that were assigned to all of us. She smiled at me and offered me a piece of cheese. "I'll bet I know," she said after a moment. "Your neighbor must have been snoring -- or something worse." I nodded. It was cold, and my attempts to pull my nightgown over my frozen ankles suddenly seemed ridiculous. Fátima smiled again, devoured the last bite, and started to leave, "Goodnight," she said. And to my indescribable surprise I watched her walk boldly towards the door of the cloister. "Fátima!" I shouted, jumping up. "Where are you going?" She responded by pointing to the hallway into which the half-opened door led. "That's the novitiate," I said, overcome by a strange agitation. "If they catch you, they'll expel you." Fátima shrugged her shoulders, still smiling,

and opened wide the door that marked the limit of the student area. She motioned me to come closer and listen. "They're singing," I said in order to stop the trembling that had suddenly overtaken my whole body. "But what if they catch us?" And still terrified by having so quickly included myself in the highest transgression of the rules, I ignored Fátima ordering me to be silent with a warning finger. The songs had stopped, but after a few seconds we heard the organ start up again. "They'll be in there for an hour," she whispered in my ear. "If you want to follow me, go ahead. If you don't, then shut up." So, almost without thinking, I found myself with Fátima walking through the long hallways of the prohibited area, contemplating statues and paintings, opening and closing doors, going up and down staircases that I never knew existed. Fátima responded to all the questions that I, in my state of excitement, couldn't begin to ask. "These are the nuns' dormitories," she said. "Did you know that the maids can't even come in here?" I was terrified. I wanted to go back to my room, but I was more afraid of showing my cowardice in front of my brave friend than of not knowing the way back. We went into a large sitting room full of books and Fátima showed me a thick volume of pictures similar to the ones that adorned the hallways we had just left: Abraham ready to sacrifice his son, Joseph tempted by the wife of Potiphar, Rebekah giving Eliezer something to drink . . . The library didn't

seem to be the end of our excursion. We continued approaching, now with slow steps, the outskirts of the chapel until we arrived at a big room furnished with ten beds, each one separated by screens, and an enormous wardrobe without doors. "This the novices' room," she explained. "And here are their underclothes." She had scarcely pronounced these words when to my surprise she pulled down a poplin hat and tried to put on a striped underskirt with pockets on it. Fátima looked so comical that for a little while my fear left me and I began to go through the wardrobe of the novitiates and dig through the pockets of the habits. I found missals, rosaries, a couple of hard caramels and a wrinkled piece of paper with some short prayers and good intentions written on it. Also, in one of the underskirts I found a rusty nail. "They do it to mortify themselves," said Fátima. "Some put them in their shoes and walk around as if it were nothing. Others just pinch themselves from time to time." Seeing that this discovery had shocked me, she whispered in my ear: "But there are others who do even stranger things." Breaking out into laughter, she showed me the inside of some underwear in which, inexplicably, three prints were sewn in the lining, one of them a portrait of the founder of the community. The surprise, coupled with my anxiety, made me start giggling uncontrollably. I picked up some of the rough knit underwear and the perfection of the darning made me laugh.

I held them to my body and then had to cover my mouth with my hand to keep from laughing out loud. I read some of the numerous good intentions and their candidness made me laugh even more. Infected by Fátima's confidence, I started to break open a little box lying at the bottom of the wardrobe, half-hidden by long skirts, that promised to hold new marvels. Fátima ordered me to be silent.

The clicking of the thick beads of a rosary against a habit, a sound we all knew well, left me paralyzed. Soon the imminence of someone approaching made me start trembling like a leaf again and my legs, endowed with lives of their own, began to shake in every direction possible. "Let's hide," said Fátima, but to my surprise, she didn't choose one of the screens or the inside of a closet as I had imagined. Without losing her air of extreme composure, she curled up in one of the corners of the room and with a rapid gesture, motioned me to sit down beside her. Panic stricken, I obeyed Fátima, who got even closer to the wall, and trying to overcome the beating of my heart I began to face the end of my adventures while my mind struggled to find some pretext for my inexcusable presence there.

In a few seconds the door opened and the two novices entered. They came in talking and laughing, but one of them, noticing that the light was on, stopped short. I was sure that I would be caught so I covered my face with my hands. But the two novices went to their night tables, took

a couple of prayer books out of the drawer and, laughing again, turned out the light and disappeared into the hallway. When we could no longer hear the sound of their old slippers scuffing on the wooden floors, Fátima and I tiptoed out and retraced our steps back to the dormitory. We went up and down all the staircases and hurried by, without stopping, that hallway filled with statues and Biblical scenes that only a little earlier had so powerfully caught my attention. Now I only wanted to flee. When we finally arrived at the dormitory, completely out of breath, Fátima held her finger to her lips and silently slipped into her room.

That night it was impossible to sleep. Images of the dangerous adventure we had just lived were still going around in my head, but above all I had a million questions to which, as much as I tried, I couldn't find any satisfactory answers. I waited impatiently for morning and the opportunity to approach Fátima.

We ate breakfast, as usual, at separate tables, but I could see Fátima spitting out her milk with a look of repugnance and refusing to eat the dry bread and rancid butter. She seemed to be in a bad mood and the indifference of her neighbors at the table led me to believe that this behavior must be pretty normal and that maybe it was better to leave her alone and wait until she was in better spirits. I waited until noontime recess and discreetly followed her

in her solitary walk through the garden. I looked for some sign, some indication of interest before I approached her, but it never came. She walked very slowly, humming and picking pebbles up off the ground. From time to time she would throw them as far as she could. She pretended not to notice me, but I knew that was pretty unlikely. So, with determination I covered the few steps that separated us, and Fátima, with an expression only comparable to the disinterest with which she attended Sister Juana's class, could do nothing else but acknowledge my presence. She sat down wearily in the shade of the carob tree and searched me with her eyes. I approached her timidly. "There is something I don't understand," I said. "The novices yesterday didn't see us or anything." Fátima shrugged her shoulders and began to draw in the dirt with a stick. "But we were right there and they didn't even look at us." Her eyes pierced right through me. "You're dumber than I thought," she said. "I thought you knew." After making sure that nobody could hear us she continued. "We were there, but we weren't there. And although it seemed to you that we were there, we weren't there." I sat down next to the carob tree a little stunned. I didn't dare interrupt Fátima's explanation, but I couldn't hide the admiration that her amazing words had produced. I kept quiet and didn't take my eyes away from hers. Fátima sighed. "Don't look at me like that," she said, and immediately, like

someone who repeats a multiplication table, she began to sing. "There are hiding places all over the world. Some are very good and others are not. Some fail sometimes and others, never. The one from last night is small, but very secure. So I almost always go to the novices' dormitory." She turned away and started scribbling again in the wet dirt.

I wanted to ask her something else about what had happened, but I was afraid that my excessive curiosity might try her patience, so I kept quiet. "Fátima," I finally said, breaking the interminable silence, "there weren't any walls or anything." She sighed again. "I see," she said again in an identical tone, "that you still don't understand. I repeat: we weren't there. Do you get it, now?" I nodded, still confused. "In this school," she continued, more animated, "there are four or five more, but I don't know them all. In my parents' house when I was little, I discovered an enormous one. Then they enlarged the room and I couldn't find it anymore." Suddenly my deskmate appeared devouring a banana and Fátima stopped talking. Afterwards, when it was safe to talk, she whispered in my ear: "Near here in this very garden, there's a really old one. The other day I found it with your sister Elba."

From Fátima I learned of the four hiding places in the

school. Three, counting the one in the novices' room, were in the interior of the building and two of them were similar in structure. The third, unlike the first two, didn't occupy one of the angles of the room, but stood right in the middle of the chapel exactly at the height of the seventeenth tile counting from the pulpit. Since the search was a little complicated, Fátima had marked the tile in question with a cross, but just the same, the hiding place was hardly ever used because of its narrow dimensions. The fourth was in the garden. It was big and pleasant and for a while we went there regularly to talk and watch people without being seen. Elba used to join us with a special sparkle in her eyes at the fact that I had suddenly begun to take her seriously. Fátima also treated my sister with a lot of respect, and on our nocturnal excursions we let Elba be the leader. Elba found one more hiding place by herself: it was underneath the stairway, a place Fátima claimed she had somehow forgotten. This last find, without a doubt the best in the school, furnished us with a great deal of entertainment. Once one of the maids went off in a huff (underneath the stairway, she said, there lived a demon bent on lifting up skirts). The poor cook, accustomed to passing by the stairway to serve the meals to the community, one day prudently changed her itinerary.

Elba surpassed Fátima herself in her ability to travel through those secret, limitless worlds. More than once

while my friend and I were leafing through the thick volumes in the library, stopping by the statue of Samson, or avidly going over the illustrations of the plagues of Egypt, Elba, whom we had just seen playing in the garden, would suddenly appear with an unmistakable guilty look on her face. She didn't bother to tell us how she had been able to reach us so quickly, and if one of us insisted on knowing exactly how she had done it, she became perplexed at our questions. We thought that my sister had been able to discover some hiding places deeper inside the ones we knew or that she travelled by mysterious channels whose meaning escaped us, or maybe that she knew how to change places without being seen by going through the smaller buildings surrounding the school. One day Elba told us about "tiny passages" but neither Fátima nor I could get anything out of her vague explanations.

We simply trusted the strange immunity that seemed to protect us in certain areas of the school. That unforgettable winter passed and vacation arrived again. Fátima went with her parents to a town in the mountains and Elba and I were taken to the beach like every summer. My parents had arrived at an understanding on their personal situation, but during that summer I was only interested in the company of Elba. I became more attached to her every day. At first Fátima wrote me every week and I told her about all of my sister's abilities. "I don't know how she

does it," I wrote on one occasion," but the clock by the stairway stops when she stares at it ." Fátima's letters, each time farther apart, soon turned into postcards until finally they stopped coming. I didn't know why she stopped writing but I consoled myself by thinking of all the new things I would be able to tell her at the beginning of the next school year. Since I had forgotten everything that didn't have to do with Elba, I dedicated myself to carefully writing down whatever she said, did, or hesitated to say in my dreams.

When vacation drew to an end, we again heard whispers in the study, talking in low voices, and my mother crying. We listened at the door and figured out that the next winter Elba wouldn't go back with me to school. My mother tried to explain it to me on my twelfth birthday: "Elba," she told me, "needs to study in a special school with girls like her." My protests and vehement defenses of Elba's talents were useless. Everything had been prearranged for a long time already, behind our backs, while Elba, Fátima, and I were happily playing at school. I took every opportunity to insist that it was a terrible mistake, but even telling them the secret didn't work. I tried everything to save Elba. My father ordered me to keep quiet before I could even say a word and then, feeling responsible for my suffering, he tried to make me understand the reasons which, to me, seemed incomprehensible. "Your sister," he told me, "is not a

normal girl. She's seven years old and she hardly speaks. In the new school they will try to help her." I cried, begged, stomped my feet until I finally realized that the possibility of success in that stubborn adult world was practically nil. I kept asking Fátima for help but she didn't answer me. Not until the end of the summer, a few weeks before returning to the school, did I receive a postcard: "Sorry for not having written sooner, but I'm very busy. School's starting again. What a pain! Kisses, Fátima."

The place they had assigned me to this year was better than last year's. This time I was right in the middle of the desk and my new deskmate had a look about her which was much more agreeable than that of my old neighbor. I asked about Fátima but she still hadn't arrived. I was sad and I really missed Elba. Since I didn't have anyone to play with, I walked alone through the hallways of the cloister, or huddled up in the garden hiding place. In the chapel they had done some renovation over the summer, so I didn't know how to find the exact location of tile number 17, but it didn't really bother me. Actually, the fascination of last year's games was now lost without the company of Fátima and Elba.

One morning, when I was hopelessly bored and about to leave the hiding place and join the games of the others, I saw a group of girls running towards a black car that had

just stopped in front of the door. I realized that it had something to do with Fátima, but I didn't move, nervously hoping that she would be the first to discover me. Some of the girls formed a circle around the car and although it was difficult to see without completely abandoning my position, I could hear with clarity the unmistakable voice of my friend and her loud laughter. The circle broke up and the group of girls slowly came towards me. I looked at her more carefully. She had grown, and with her hair pulled back she had a certain look of seriousness that didn't seem at all like the disheveled student of last spring. She wore black high heeled shoes and she had a black leather purse instead of a book bag hanging over her shoulder. When they walked by the hiding place, I waved to Fátima, but she didn't seem to notice me. I stood there confused for a minute and then left the hiding place to run after her.

She greeted me politely, still listening to compliments from everybody around her, without a special word or look in her eyes that might have made me think I was her best friend. Later, in the next few weeks, I realized that Fátima was no longer interested in the games we used to play, that she now undoubtedly thought were childish, and that my presence had become something annoying and detestable to her. My explanations of Elba's abilities and her tragic confinement in an institution didn't even awaken her curiosity. She always listened to me reluctantly,

pretending to pay attention to everything I was telling her, so that right afterward she could tell me about her last vacation, show me photos of her friends, or complain about being cut off from civilization and the world in such a remote school. She made friends among the students her own age who studied in a higher grade and, much to the surprise of her old classmates, she dedicated herself to her schoolwork with ardor. Fátima, the great Fátima that everyone admired--I with the most reason--had ceased to belong to me.

I just couldn't give in. Elba's eyes, her anguished expression when she said goodbye the day we separated, pursued me wherever I went. At night I thought I heard her voice, and in my dreams she appeared to me constantly with her little arm reaching out as if she were desperately asking me for help that I, without the company of Fátima, found it impossible to give. At recess, especially when I was alone, taking refuge in the garden hiding place, I heard her voice again. "Help me!" she cried and her words, each time more urgent, turned into a horrible nightmare that haunted me even when I was awake. Sometimes I asked her to be patient; other times, more frequently, I begged her to leave me alone. It seemed as if Elba never rested, as if she were always lying in wait, as if she feared being forgotten.

I made new friends partly because of the cold weather,

but mostly because I wanted to be free of the memory of Elba and the excursions to the hiding places. I gradually stopped going to those refuges whose existence for some dark reason made me feel ashamed. When my parents came to visit me on Sundays, I brought along a classmate who, after a while, became my good friend. We walked through town, ate at the wharf and went for boat rides. But Elba's voice knew neither pity nor rest. She made herself heard at the most inopportune moments: when with the ball raised I was sure to make a basket, when I was the one in charge of doing the reading at lunchtime, when I was trying to organize my ideas to get the right answer on a test. Elba was always there with her anguished face, and her arm reaching out, each time with a more demanding look, sometimes smiling at me, other times whining, following each and every one of my thoughts. Her memory became hateful to me. "Enough!" I finally yelled one day. "Go away forever." Gradually her voice weakened, slipping farther and farther away, blending in with other sounds and finally completely disappearing. A few happy months passed, full of projects for the coming vacation. My friend and her family were going to spend the summer in a rambling old house just a few kilometers from my parents' house in the same area. They were a large family group that I was becoming a part of. We planned excursions and speculated on all the possible reactions that my appearance might provoke in her cousin Damian, whose photograph I was

able to get secretly and who ruled, and had for some time, all of my daydreams.

But with the summer there would also be the inevitable Elba. My parents went to the city to get her and returned beaming with pride. Elba had made some progress, they said, and with excessive delight they showed me my sister's notebook in which I only saw some poorly drawn letters and some sketches of squares and circles. The moment she arrived, when she saw my face at one of the windows, her eyes shone with satisfaction, and reaching out her little arm--that arm that I had come to detest--she pronounced my name with a clarity unknown in her. Later, when we went to the den, I noticed that she was distracted and absent. She didn't look for my attention nor did she seem set on lavishing me with shows of affection as she used to. She ran through the house with big open eyes, caressing the coverings on the stuffed chairs like someone who returns to her hometown after a long, distressing trip. It suddenly hit me that I had lost a sister, but to my surprise I didn't feel sad at all. In a few minutes my friends would appear in the yard on their bicycles. I quickly put on my new suit and stood by the railing. "I hope they don't see her," I thought.

A few days went by. Elba, from her silent world, seemed to sense that she made me uncomfortable. She didn't want to go to the beach--where a couple of years before I

had taught her to swim. Because of her bad behavior at mealtime she had to eat in the kitchen. This year she wasn't going to share a room with me either. An outburst of tears was the excuse for me to demand to be moved. I hardly saw her, but her eyes, each time more penetrating, always watched me from her bedroom when I went out.

One morning nanny appeared at the beach at an unusual hour. She took my arm and with a quavering voice she told me that I was to run home. Under the awning by the baths I saw a group of people, looking at me with curiosity. It was about Elba, I heard. On the way home I learned bit by bit what had happened. My sister had lost her balance on the balcony. Would they be able to save her? Nanny wouldn't answer me.

I didn't want to see the body and my parents didn't make me. But through the conversations that I heard all afternoon I found out that the blood ran out in torrents and that it was my father who first came to help and closed her eyes for the last time.

The next few days were eventful. The house was filled with people and crying. Some women leaned on my shoulder and wept. Others touched my head sadly. They discussed the measurements and characteristics of the coffin. It would have had a glass top, I heard my mother say, but her little face had been destroyed. The coffin was white like the flowers and the shroud in which she was enfolded.

People crowded into the church early in the morning. When my parents and I got out of the black car, everyone stepped aside respectfully. We went up the main aisle arm in arm and knelt down in the first pew, close to the tiny white coffin guarded by four white candles. The priest spoke tenderly of my sister and of the pain of the family members that she left in this world. When he said my name, I started shaking. I looked at the pews behind me out of the corner of my eye. Everyone seemed to be looking at me. When they were saying the "Our Father" all kinds of images passed before my eyes: Fátima, Elba, Eliezer, my obese deskmate, and the hiding places . . . I didn't hear the prayer, but a strange buzzing. My mother was fanning me with the cover of a missal. I had fainted.

We walked down the main aisle and my father motioned us to stop at the door. Words of condolence and handshakes followed. I felt observed. One by one all the families of the town went by. Damian, with his eyes all red, came by and kissed me on the cheek.

It was the seventh of August of an especially hot summer. On that date the following words were written in my diary: "Damian kissed me for the first time." And below it, written in thick, red capital letters: "TODAY IS THE HAPPIEST DAY OF MY LIFE."

ANALYSIS: THE MAGIC OF ELBA

In "Mi hermana Elba," by Cristina Fernández Cubas, two young girls search for identity after being put in a boarding school. Their lives change dramatically as they come up against the rules and structures of the school as opposed to life at home with their parents. Elba and her sister meet Fátima, a rebellious girl who teaches them to break the rules and question adult values by going into the prohibited areas of the school. Fátima shows them hiding places all over the school. The narrator struggles to find her place in the school, among the other girls, without losing the freedom the hiding places provide. She survives this battle by finally conforming to the rules, but her sister Elba dies, unable to change.

"Mi hermana Elba" is the autobiography of a girl whose name never appears in the story. The absence of a name and the close parallel between the experiences of the two sisters suggest that Elba is not just the sister of the narrator but her creative inner child. As the narrator of the story becomes assimilated into the world of the school, Elba begins to die. Fernández Cubas illustrates, through the growing rift between the two characters, how a creative, individual soul must struggle to survive within the

unbending framework of society.

Elba and the narrator are closely linked. The narrator describes her own feelings through the character of Elba. Elba has crying fits while the narrator coolly accepts her fate. When the narrator begins to drift away in her mind, "cold mornings and Elba's crying"(12) bring her back to reality. Elba, with all her outbursts of tears, represents the untamed emotional force inside the narrator. Coming home from the school, she caresses "the coverings on the stuffed chairs like someone who returns to her hometown after a long distressing trip."(30) She has a "special sparkle"(23) in her eyes at the fact that her sister begins to take her seriously. In contrast to Elba's expressiveness, the narrator persists in a strange silence, watching everything that happens as if from a distance.

Elba also symbolizes the creative part of the narrator. Using her special talents, she travels mysteriously through the boundaries of the school: "Elba, whom we had just seen playing in the garden, would suddenly appear with an unmistakable guilty look."(24) The narrator records her amazing abilities in a letter to Fátima: "I don't know how she does it but the clock by the stairway stops when she stares at it."(24) Elba even travels through dreams, the most uninhibited place in the imagination. The narrator "dedicates" herself to "carefully writing down everything she said, did, or hesitated to say in my dreams."(25) Her

magical qualities suggest that she is not real, but some fantastic element of the narrator that inspires the girls and leads them to new hiding places.

At first the narrator embraces Elba, discovering the power of her own creativity: she reads on her own, studies paintings, and explores the ways of the novices, gaining knowledge independently, outside of Sister Juana's classroom. The girls have a kind of vision by seeing without being seen that gives them power over their situation of being in a boarding school. They remove themselves by going outside the boundaries and regulations of the school and looking on.

Another element of the first stage of the narrator's development is writing the diary, on which the story is based. In it she describes her adventures and the magical world that Elba provides. Her perspective, similar to the perspective from the hiding places at her school, allows her to remove herself, observe events, and record them. The diary gives the narrator a medium through which to express her creative voice. Elba, even though she doesn't speak, has a voice in the children's world. She expresses joy, travels through dreams and visions to ask for help, and communicates through facial expressions. She leads the other girls to hiding places and builds her own pathways through the school. Her voice is unique yet silent to the adult world. When Elba's parents announce the pending

institutionalization of Elba the narrator tries to explain her sister's special abilities, but Elba's voice, much like the creative female voice, cannot be heard.

Elba represents not only the creativity of the narrator, but female creativity in society. As a child, she can be innovative and independent, but since she doesn't speak the adult language, her efforts have no meaning in that world, just as the female voice in writing is not listened to in the male-defined literary world. She may write, but her writing is not recognized or accepted within the existing framework of literary criticism.

In the second stage, the narrator confronts the loneliness of her position as Fátima accepts her role as an adult female by following the school rules instead of seeking to rebel against them. Elba, as a last effort to survive, pursues her through dreams, the most uninhibited part of imagination. At this point, the narrator battles with the freedom to challenge the school boundaries and the acceptance of the other girls. In essence, she has to choose between her values and the values of the church, the school, and her parents.

The narrator's rite of passage consists of letting go of the child Elba and conforming to the school rules and her sexual role. Fátima's disassociation from Elba soon makes clear that creativity and freedom are childish things. At the same time that Elba is sent away, Fátima rejects the

childish ways of Elba and her sister by joining the adult world. She arrives at the school wearing "black high heeled shoes and ... a black leather purse instead of a book bag." (27) She conforms to her sexual role by wearing "grown-up" feminine clothing, and her role as a student by "working with ardor" (28) and forgetting about the hiding places. When Fátima returns, the narrator stands helpless in the old hiding place, unseen by Fátima, who now lives in the adult realm. Fátima refuses to see her. The narrator, left alone in the hiding place, is forced to choose between her creative self and the world around her. She doesn't have the option of claiming both.

When the narrator finally tells the vision of Elba to "go away forever," Elba as a creative force begins to die. She learns to speak the adult language and draw circles and squares. She sits quietly without a fight when the narrator abandons her to be with the group. The group now guides the narrator's activities, which focus only on Damian. Elba's actual death marks the end of the narrator's creative pursuit in the diary. The kiss of Damian (an initiation into her sexual role) is the last entry. In order to come of age as a woman, she must leave behind the child, or creative force within her.

The dilemma is that the narrator cannot have a creative life and be a part of society. In essence, choosing the path of independent thinking and creativity denies her a

place in the world. Isolation, solitude, and going into hiding is the only alternative. Early on in her life at the school, the narrator perceives "the numerous ritual acts that a foreign and unknown mind seemed to impose on me,"(12) which lose power as the girls break the rules. In the end, the hiding places transform into tiny cells with no room to move. The freedom of the midnight excursions is in reality only illusory since everything happens within the confines of the school and, on a greater scale, the church. The areas explored are not areas that would empower them, but areas in which women are confined--in the nun's dormitory where the women mutilate themselves, in the Bible.

The diary itself, telling her story, is what truly gives the narrator power and freedom. She is able to observe and analyze her own life, just as she observes others from the hiding places, but this time, solitude is a positive force. She frees the creative inner child, by giving her a voice and a means of expression through writing. Even though she "comes of age" and rejects Elba in the end of the diary, the narrator grown to woman, looking back on her childhood through the written work, can rediscover the lost child Elba and regain her creative side.

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