

**CARMEN RIERA RUMBAUT**  
**1923-1997**



**A REMEMBRANCE**

## Carmen Riera Rumbaut: A Remembrance

Carmen Riera Rumbaut was born on March 26, 1923, in Barcelona, Spain, but moved to Cuba in her infancy. Her father, Gustavo Riera, had emigrated in 1898 from Spain to Cuba, where he developed a garment factory and a textile business, and later owned a clothing store in Havana named "La Yarda." On a business trip to New York he met a young woman, Josefa Villafuerte, a native of Camagüey, Cuba. They were married in 1913 and had three children: Gustavo (Tavito) and Josefa (Pepita), and María del Carmen (Carmita). Carmita was nicknamed "La Catalana" by her beloved father, proud as he was of the fact that she was their only child born in his native Catalonia.

Carmita grew up in La Habana Vieja (Old Havana), the unforgettable haunts of her youth, which she could describe decades later in minute detail—its history, architecture, business and social life. She was educated at the Colegio del Sagrado Corazón (School of the Sacred Heart) in Havana, and was taught business fundamentals by her father and her brother. From very early on, she showed great interest in the family business, and skill in math and accounting. After the death of her parents while still in her teens, she became an effective assistant to her brother in maintaining the family residence and business.

In the 1940s her extraordinary leadership of the Juventud Católica Cubana (Cuban Catholic Youth), which left a vivid and lasting mark, earned her a rare recognition from the Vatican under Pope Pius XII, the *Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice* award. Her activities took her throughout the island to establish Catholic youth groups; she also handled the coordination and organizational logistics of the federation's national conventions. In time she was elected President of the Diocesan Council of Havana, and later moved up to the National Council. In the 1940s and '50s she also worked and rose rapidly at Sabatés, a subsidiary of the Procter & Gamble Company, excelling in marketing research and testing and introducing new products.

In 1947, after a courtship of several years, she married Rubén Darío Rumbaut, M.D., a psychiatrist, writer and poet with whom she raised six children, the first five of whom were born in Havana. To their many friends, "Carmita y Rubén" came to mean an indivisible unity. He became her constant companion in a romance that would span more than half a century, and that is reflected in four of his poems to her in this Remembrance. The period from the 1952 *coup d'état* to the 1959 Revolution spanned the Batista dictatorship and the political rebellion against it, and Carmen, mother of young children, played an occasional role protecting persecuted individuals.

The establishment of a Communist government in Cuba and its aftermath decisively changed the lives of all Cubans, and Carmita y Rubén saw the country turning into a system where they did not want to raise their children. In 1960 the family went into exile to the United States, taking with them only a handful of cardboard suitcases, beginning a new life in a country where they had no contacts, no employment, virtually no money or possessions, and knew little of the language. They resided first in Miami, then Albuquerque (where the sixth child was born) and Topeka, and since 1971 in Houston and Sugar Land, while Rubén rebuilt his psychiatric career.

She knew four languages with varying degrees of fluency (Spanish, English, French, and Catalan), taught Spanish occasionally, did professional translations, and gave frequent lectures on Cuban history and culture. Her focus, however, was on raising a family (now in two languages) and keeping it united amid the turmoil of the 1960s and early 1970s. Family reunions would become, for Carmen, the most important events of the calendar in the years that would follow. Indeed, her final instructions to her six children were to remain as united after her death as they had been during the many months of her ordeal with cancer, because in unity is found strength.

In 1973, at the age of 50, Carmen embarked on a new career as an entry-level clerk at the main office of Texas Commerce Bank in downtown Houston. She went on to work there for 13 years, again rising rapidly through the managerial ranks within the International Operations Division, eventually achieving the position of Vice-President of the bank. By the time she left she had a large and loyal staff working under her, handling half a billion dollars worth of accounts, elevating the esteem and morale of the unit through her contagious enthusiasm, pride, honesty, and the uniformly high expectations she set for herself and the unit's employees. After her retirement, she worked as a longtime volunteer in the sister parishes of the Basilian Fathers in Fort Bend County—St. Theresa and Holy Family--helping immigrants, refugees, and the poor, and she was also an active volunteer at the local public library.

Carmen was famous for her quickness, punctuality and efficiency, which led to her nickname at the bank of "Speedy Rumbaut." She never once took a *siesta*, considering it to be a waste of time. She literally and figuratively never hit the snooze button of her alarm clock in her life. She was also famous for always making others feel welcomed in her home, ever attentive to and concerned with the comfort of others. Even in her last days, she never lost her impeccable manners, her expressive sense of humor, or her ingrained commitment to duty that reflected the motto of the school of her youth: "*el deber ante todo, el deber siempre*" (duty before all else, duty always).

If the essence of a person is revealed in how they cope with crisis, it can be said that she met with characteristic grace, refinement, and resolve the gravest crises of her life: the loss of both of her parents at an early age, the loss of her Cuban homeland, and the loss of her very life after a prolonged battle with lung cancer.

Carmen died peacefully at her home in Sugar Land, Texas, on January 14, 1997. She had received the Last Rites of the Catholic Church, and died, in her own words, "at peace with myself, at peace with the family, at peace with the world, and at peace with God." An apt epitaph for a gracious, faithful, self-effacing, and loving person who sought throughout her life to live up to the spirit of the simple prayer of St. Francis, centuries old, that hung on the wall of all of her homes in exile, and that did not leave her bedside in her final weeks:

*Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light;  
and where there is sadness, joy.*

*O divine master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console,  
to be understood as to understand, to be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

Carmen is survived by her husband, Rubén, now Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry at Baylor College of Medicine; her six children, Rubén Gustavo (and his wife Irene), Luis Eduardo, Carlos Alberto (and his wife Marilyn), Miryam, Mari Carmen, and Michelle (and her husband Dugan Taylor); eleven grandchildren, Sasha, Jessica, Joshua, Jazmín, Andrea Rose, Clint, Keegan, Rubén Darío, Luis Ernesto, Robert and Audra; a sister, Pepita Riera, and sisters-in-law Carucha Rumbaut and Rosario Riera; several nieces and nephews, and other members of the family in Cuba, Spain, and the U.S.A. Carmen will be remembered with genuine fondness by countless friends, colleagues, clients, neighbors, acquaintances and others whose lives she touched and enriched. In keeping with her wishes, her ashes will be thrown into the sea that washes the shores of her beloved Cuba, this time slowly, eternally, making their way home.

## TEJEDORA

(La Habana, 1944)

Un suéter me tejiste en el silencio quieto  
de tus ratos tranquilos, a solas con tus manos.  
Y a solas con las mías, en empeños hermanos,  
dentro de mi silencio te tejí este soneto.

En la lid has triunfado. Tus dedos marfileños  
al tejer enhebraron tan profunda caricia  
que apresaron mi alma. Por tu sutil pericia  
eres hoy tejedora de mis más bellos sueños.

¿Qué puedo hacer ahora, preso en los hilos tersos  
con que a tí me has tejido por siempre, sino versos?  
No tienen de tu arte, más sí de mi emoción.....

Un suéter me tejiste en el silencio quieto.  
Yo ceñiré la prenda sobre mi torso inquieto.  
Tú ceñirás mis versos sobre tu corazón.

## SONETO AL HOGAR RENACIDO

(Houston, 1971)

En mi jardín un surtidor de rosas.  
Nota viva en el alto pentagrama  
un pajarillo silba, canta y llama  
mientras la luz disuelve mariposas.

Calienta, sol, mi techo en que te posas.  
Luego, en la noche, en la mullida cama,  
la mujer que yo amo y que me ama  
me enseñará a olvidarme de las cosas.

El rincón de mis libros. La tristeza  
por quien ha muerto, por quien está ausente,  
o en prisión, o en destierro. La belleza

del pan ganado digna y libremente.  
Sueño, refugio y lar... Y la certeza  
que sólo aquí la vida no nos miente.

## EVOLUCION DEL NIDO

(Sugar Land, 1986)

Nació como una flor de primavera.  
Rama tierna, hoja suave, arcilla blanda.  
*Agil danzaba el árbol con la brisa  
bajo un cielo color de rosas frescas.*

Con el verano se llenó de trinos,  
ávidas bocas y plumajes nuevos.  
*Altivo, corpulento, verde el árbol;  
el cielo era un gran lago aguamarino.*

Los pichones volaron en otoño  
y el nido-hogar se nos quedó vacío.  
*Nostalgia en oro y fuego sobre el árbol;  
melancólico cielo silencioso.*

El invierno lanzó su húmedo reto  
contra el nido nudoso, terco y duro.  
*Desnudo y solitario el viejo árbol;  
dormido el cielo en su grisáceo lecho.*

Levanta tu mirada interrogante  
sobre el ayer y el hoy y mira al nido.  
Míralo allí, clavado en una rama,  
solo signo vital en el encaje  
del árbol hibernante;  
persistente perfil contra la nube  
transitoria y fugaz;  
sobreviviente de los huracanes,  
del tiempo y del peligro;  
imagen pertinaz, fiel y segura  
bajo cambiantes cielos y estaciones.

Míralo allí, erguido, indestructible,  
recio, sólido, austero, desafiante,  
irreductible, inmóvil, inmutable.  
Míralo allí, de un largo amor testigo.  
Nido tenaz y nuestro,  
siempre vivo...

Nido y poema que forjé contigo.

## RECORDATORIO A CARMEN

(St. Luke's Hospital, 1996)

En un descuido nos llegó el ocaso.  
Aquella juvenil fisiología  
es sólo pertinaz patología.  
Tocan a baile, y no hacemos caso.

Pero el amor persiste, paso a paso.  
Entre la bruma de melancolía,  
sobre la noche que oscurece al día,  
aún busca mi cabeza tu regazo.

No sé lo que vendrá. Pero sí sé  
que de tu lado no me arranca el viento  
ni las pruebas me causan desaliento.

Si te asaltan la duda y el quebranto  
recuerda que aquí estoy, promesa y canto:  
Carmita Riera, te acompañaré.

Rubén



***MAMI:***  
**DESPEDIDA Y RECUERDO**  
**[FAREWELL AND REMEMBRANCE]**

**(Palabras dichas en el funeral de mi madre, Carmen Riera Rumbaut)**  
**[Words spoken at the funeral of my mother, Carmen Riera Rumbaut]**

Rubén G. Rumbaut y Riera

January 19, 1997 / 19 de enero de 1997  
Earthman Southwest Chapel  
Stafford, Texas

*“La muerte no es verdad cuando se ha cumplido bien  
la obra de la vida... La muerte es vía y no término.”*

*—José Martí*

*Yo soy Rubén Gustavo Rumbaut y Riera, su primer hijo, y quisiera decir unas palabras en nombre de mis hermanos—en español y en inglés, que pienso es como ella lo hubiera querido, y que además refleja las circunstancias de su vida: Carmen would have been 74 this March, and she lived exactly half of her life in Spanish, in Cuba, and the other half in English, in exile. She would have approved our use of both Spanish and English in this last reunion, all the more should it serve as added incentive for her beloved grandchildren to remember the language of their ancestry. But she would also have made sure that everyone felt comfortable and included in this gathering, and I will do my best to speak tonight with that in mind.*

*After a long goodbye of fifteen months, during which she struggled with the agony of a terminal illness with characteristic and amazing grace and dignity, we have come here together to take our final leave of Carmen, and to remember her—to remember in the original heartfelt sense of the Spanish word *recordar*, "to pass back through the heart." *Nos reunimos hoy, en esta nuestra última reunión familiar con Mami, para despedirnos de ella, y para recordarla, entrañablemente.**

*Nos despedimos en el espíritu de una poesía profética escrita hace veinte años por nuestro padre, Rubén Darío, titulada “Poema del Bien Morir (Consejos para un alma al punto de partir).” En parte, dice:*

Despídete del mundo en voz baja, despacio,  
para que no se turbe la paz de estos momentos.  
Qué no se quede nada de lo que tú quisiste  
sin que el recuerdo encienda sus luces sobre todos  
los rincones sombríos, las pálidas imágenes,  
los olvidados trastos del ayer sumergido.  
Qué no se quede ninguno de los que tú has amado  
sin que tu mano pase su caricia postrera  
sobre los ojos fieles, sobre los labios húmedos,  
sobre el pelo sedoso y la piel tibia y suave...  
*Que sea tu despedida como una canción lenta  
de gratitud, de elogio, de tristeza, de amor.*

Vamos, déjalo todo. Vámonos a lo oscuro,  
al silencio, al refugio, a la infinita paz.  
Quizá del otro lado nos espere otro mundo  
más sereno, más puro, más hermoso, más justo.  
Pero este mundo nuestro del que estamos partiendo,  
a ratos tan absurdo, tan confuso, tan cruel,  
es sin embargo un mundo tan bello que al dejarlo  
se rompen las raíces y las fuentes del llanto  
y una oleada de lágrimas espontáneas y dulces  
nos separa por siempre de la orilla natal.

*Quizás se pudiera añadir que nos despedimos de Mami con una "oleada" de recuerdos espontáneos y dulces que nos une por siempre a ella. Ella, que con amor nos trajo a este mundo, que nos amó más que nadie, y que nos enseñó a amar, perdurará en nosotros y entre nosotros: porque el amor siempre permanece, y renace; y el amor con amor se paga.*

*La vida es cuento.* We have written a *Remembrance* that seeks to tell our mother's life story in a way that reflects her essential self: deeply modest, unpretentious, fast, brief and to the point, so as to waste no time. I need not dwell on it, therefore, and others will add in a moment to that portrait of Carmen. But we should not lose sight of the fact that hers was a life well and fully lived, a complex life that spanned most of the twentieth century, taking her from Barcelona to Havana, and to the many outposts of exile in the United States—none of which is reducible to a two-page biography, or to a few minutes of talk. She left behind a remarkable legacy, and with a gracious, sweet-tempered, understated nobility she touched and enriched the lives of countless others who will forever remember her with genuine and heartfelt affection—such as the Professor Emeritus from Baylor whom I did not know but who told me here this afternoon that my mother was one of the most elegant ladies he had ever known.

Another such expression came unexpectedly from a long-ago physician-friend of the family in Cuba, in a letter two months ago to my brother Carlos. It reads in part:

*“...Formas parte de un 'clan' maravilloso: honesto, trabajador, con principios; y esa obra maravillosa de tus padres y abuelos es lo que con orgullo dejará Carmen. Ha cumplido bien la obra de la vida... Si al fin se va la noble Carmen, recojan la antorcha y sigan luchando con pasos firmes, con alegría, y con la tranquilidad de que hicieron todo lo mejor por ella y principalmente le dieron amor, que es la medicina mejor cuando fracasa la otra.”*

That “marvelous clan” he refers to in his letter was indeed my mother's proudest (and jointly authored) achievement. Orphaned in her youth, she went on to create with our father a large, tightly-knit family for whom she was the emotional center, filling the lives of her children and grandchildren with praise, good cheer, gentleness, and love.

Few outside the family may know that the traumatic experiences associated with the death of her parents when still in her teens had led Carmen to vow never to marry a physician nor a man with a mustache—a considerable handicap to overcome, it would occasionally be noted with amusement in our family, for the physician with a mustache who would become her constant companion in a romance that would bloom for over half a century, as is reflected in the four selected poems that grace the back of the *Remembrance*. But how can one read “*Tejedora*,” a charming poem that he wrote her in 1944 during their long courtship, and not know how my mother's defenses must have wilted? I must add here, and I am certain that my mother would have approved, that we have admired our multifaceted father for many things throughout our lives—even for his mustache!—but never as much as we have admired him for the profoundly loving manner in which he cared for our mother day and night without respite in the last fifteen months, and in which he affirmed, as no words can, the indivisible unity that was “*Carmita y Rubén*.”

And few who met this quintessentially self-effacing woman could have guessed the enthusiasm and drive for excellence with which she approached her work. When in 1973, at the age of 50, having devoted herself to raising her six children until the nest had all but emptied, she got her first regular job in the United States as an entry-level clerk at the downtown Houston main office of Texas Commerce Bank (one of the nation's largest), she had lacked strong English language skills and any credential higher than a high school diploma. But by the time she opted for early retirement twelve and a half years later, she was Vice-President of the bank. Her rise at the bank was a classic American immigrant tale of gumption and *ganas*, aided by her maturity and style and uncommon courtesy, her business experience in Cuba, her cultured Spanish, and her sharp math skills. Of this last, she is remembered as the first person in the history of the bank ever to have completed its math ability test within the allotted period (with time to spare) and achieved a perfect score.

Her quickness, punctuality and efficiency in all things led, within her first six months at the bank, to her nickname “Speedy Rumbaut.” For Carmen, time was literally of the essence, and not to be wasted. If an elevator was too slow in coming, she would take the stairs and walk up two or three flights rather than lose time. Coming to work in the mornings in congested traffic on the freeways, she reveled in chasing after the occasional speeding ambulance so as to cut through traffic and not be delayed. I was not surprised to learn just this week that in Cuba, before I was born, she already had a similar nickname—“*fuguilla*”—because of the lightning speed with which she moved.

Throughout the immensely difficult and depressing circumstances of exile, right down to her very last day on Tuesday, she remained extraordinarily attentive to and concerned with the comfort of others—“*los otros antes que yo*”—and never lost her impeccable manners, her expressive sense of humor, her loving fidelity.

*Mami murió en paz, en su casa, rodeada por sus seres queridos. Murió, en sus propias palabras, “en paz conmigo misma, en paz con la familia, en paz con el mundo, y en paz con Dios” [“at peace with myself, at peace with the family, at peace with the world, and at peace with God”]. Qué mejor epitafio para una vida que reflejó fielmente el espíritu de la sencilla plegaria de Francisco de Asís, su favorita, que siempre la tuvo en su casa durante los años en el exilio... An apt epitaph for a life that was lived faithfully in the spirit of the simple prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, her favorite, that hung on the wall of all of her homes in exile, and that did not leave her bedside in her final weeks:*

**L**ord, make me an instrument of thy peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love,  
where there is injury, pardon,  
where there is doubt, faith,  
where there is despair, hope,  
where there is darkness, light,  
and where there is sadness, joy.

**O** divine master, grant that I may not  
so much seek to be consoled as to console,  
to be understood as to understand,  
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
and it is in dying that we are born  
to eternal life.

*Mami, como una canción lenta de gratitud, de elogio, de tristeza, de amor, nosotros, tus hijos, nos despedimos de tí.*

The English word “goodbye” is an abbreviation of “God Be With Ye”—much as in Spanish, “*adiós*” literally means “to God,” a shortened form of “*A Dios te encomiendo*.”

Goodbye, Carmen. God be with you.

Adiós, Mami. A Dios te encomiendo.