

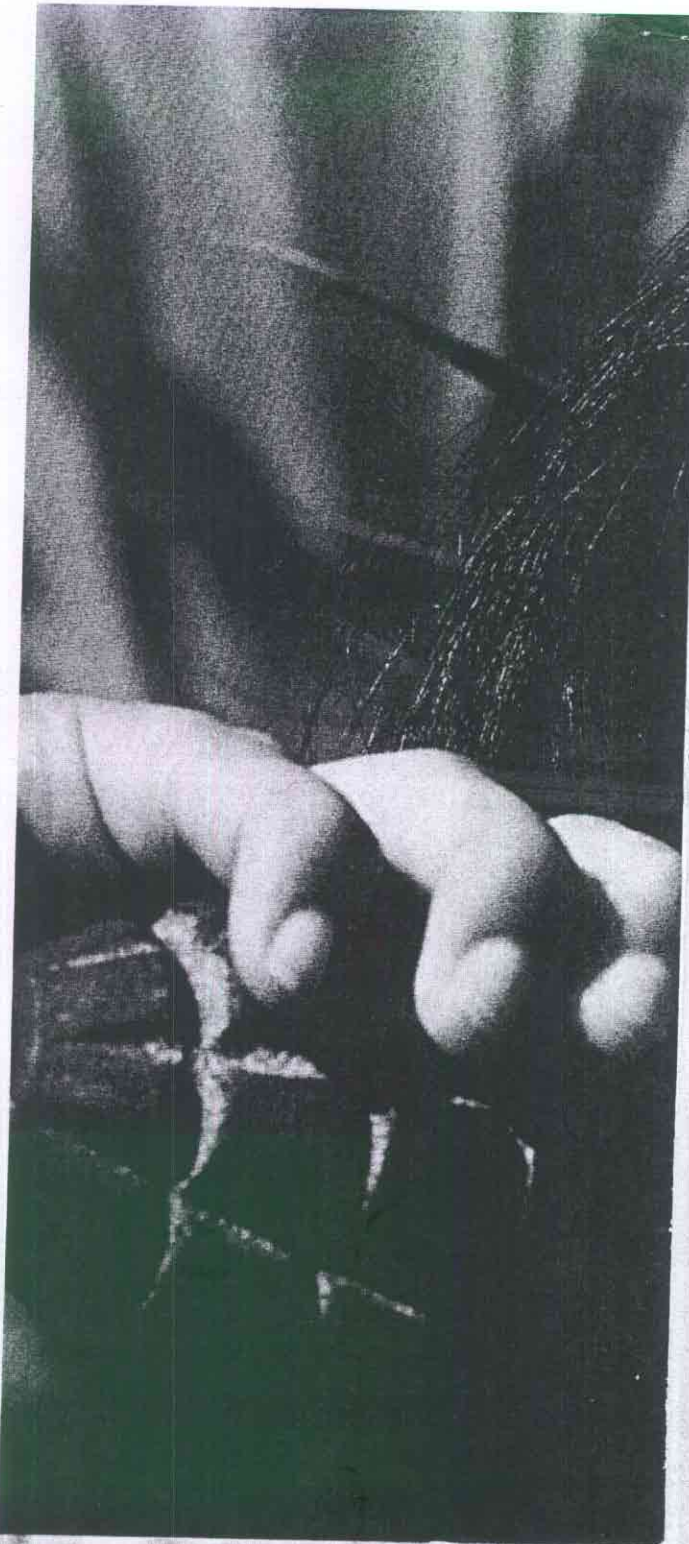
Girl Spy against Castro

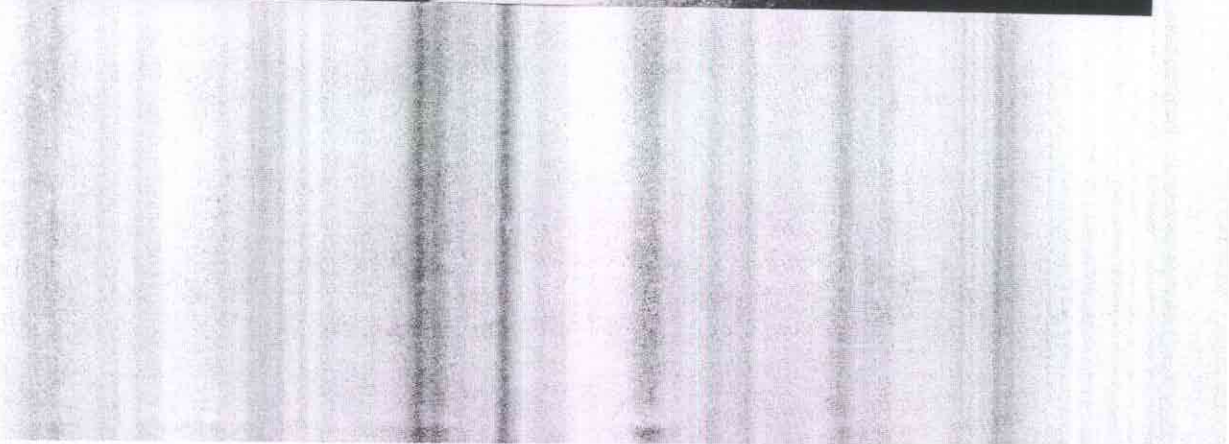
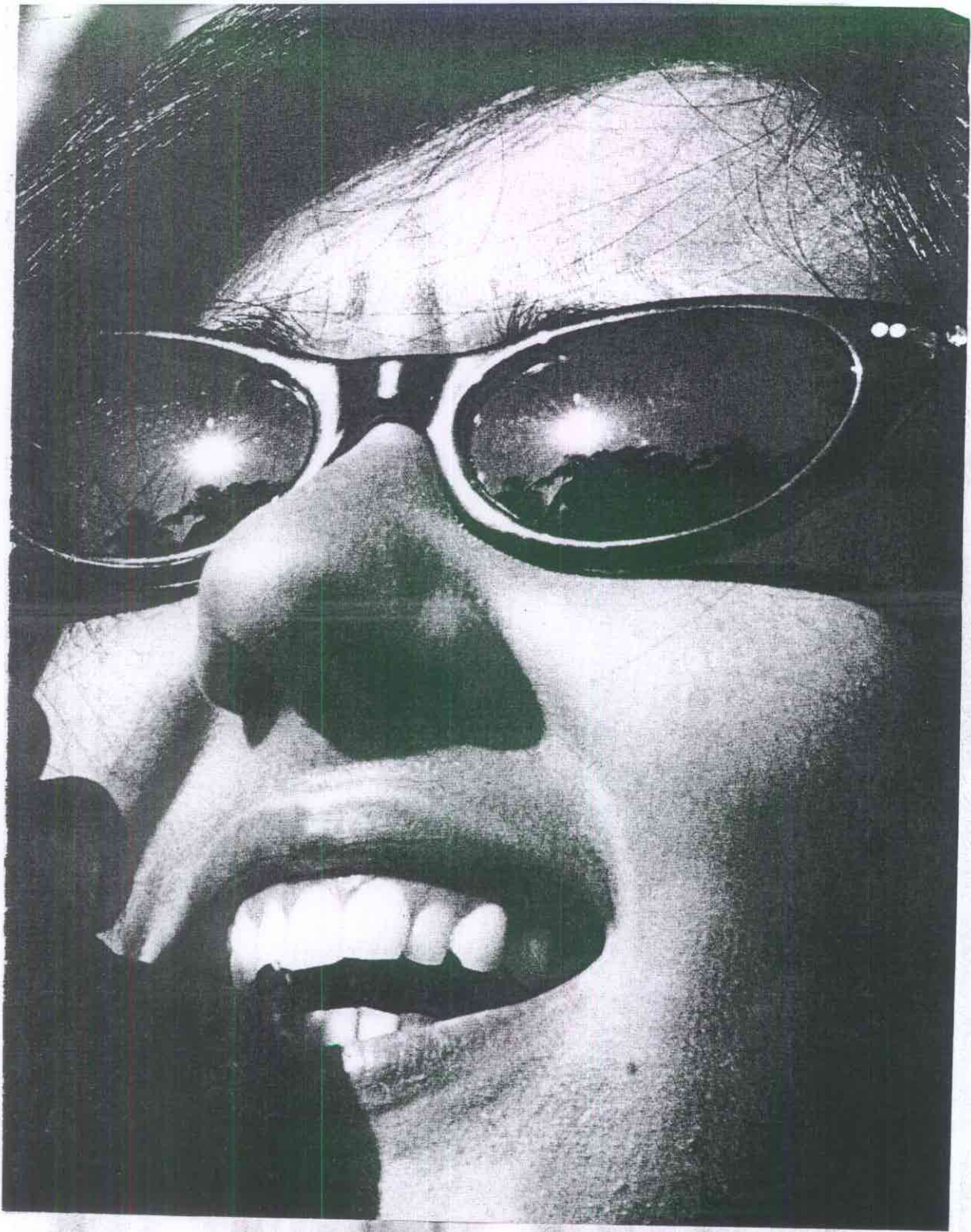
MIRTHA MARGARITA Borrás y Almanza, a quiet, bright, melting-diamond-eyed girl who wanted to be a language teacher, has become instead, at 21, a full-time underground agent working against Fidel Castro. An honor graduate of an exacting secret-service school near Miami, Fla., she has three missions in Cuba to her credit. She attends refresher courses in outlandish skills, from quick-draw grenade handling to booby-trapping electric appliances. While training, Mirtha wears an identification badge with her cover name, to remind old friends she might meet that no one must call out her real name. Security forbids it.

Mirtha has three watches: a street watch, a waterproof, luminous stopwatch and a special watch for the secret radio traffic that runs on 24-hour time. They regulate her life, because, she says, "in the underground, everything is always timed to the minute." She is philosophical about the harsh loneliness of the covert existence, which sometimes even keeps her from visiting her stepparents, sister and three brothers when she is in Miami.

continued

*Arming a hand grenade with one hand
leaves the other free for a pistol.
It takes good teeth, excellent timing.*



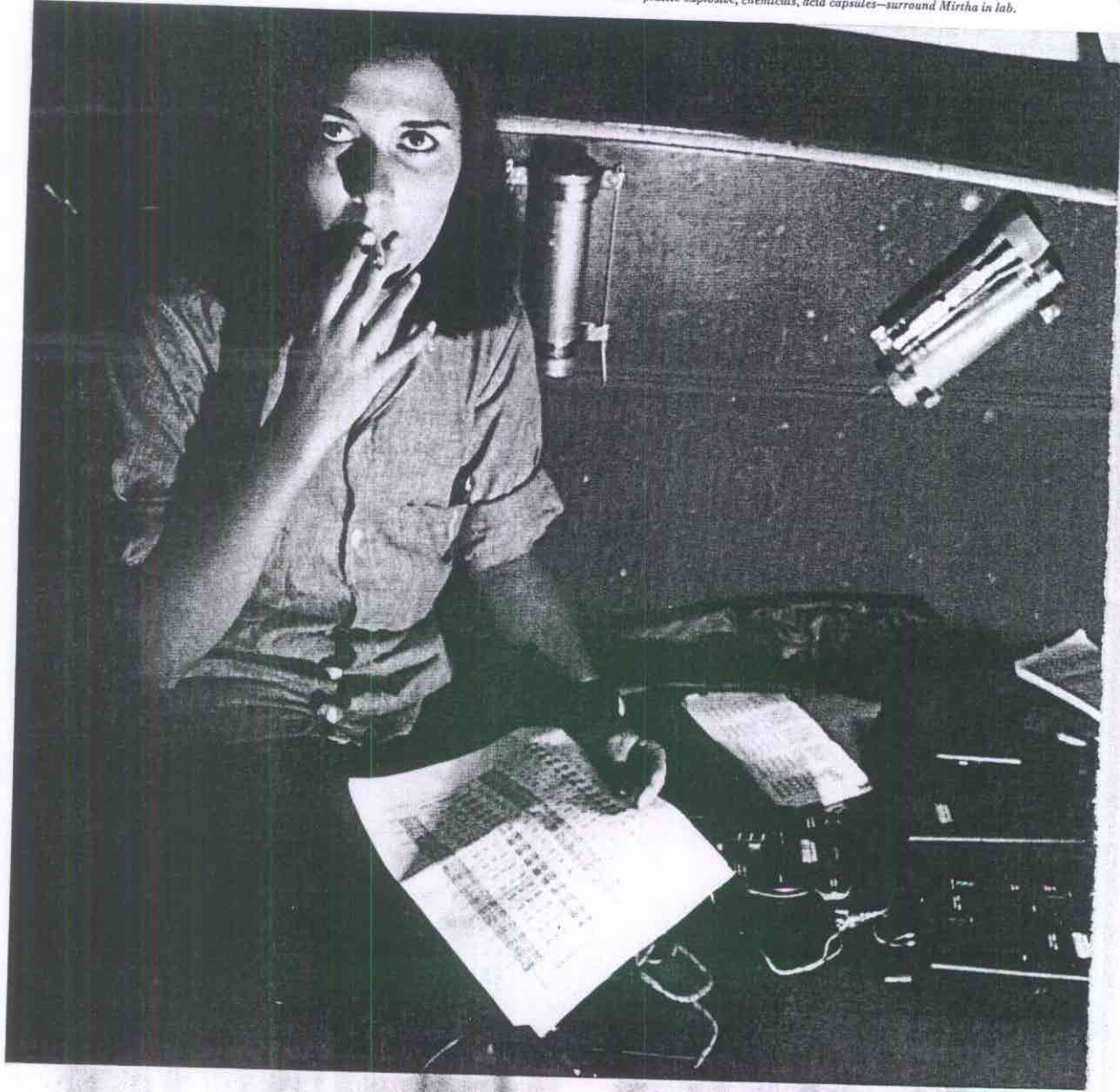


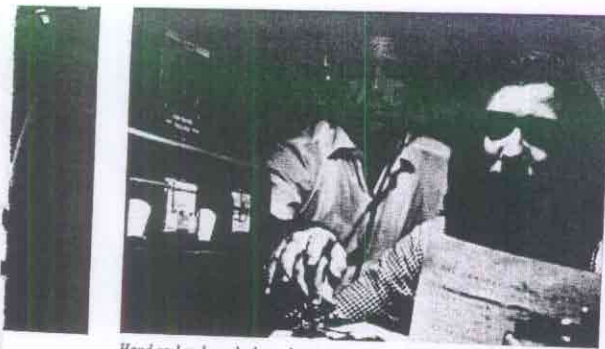
Girl Spy

She spent ten months
in a hidden villa,
learning black arts



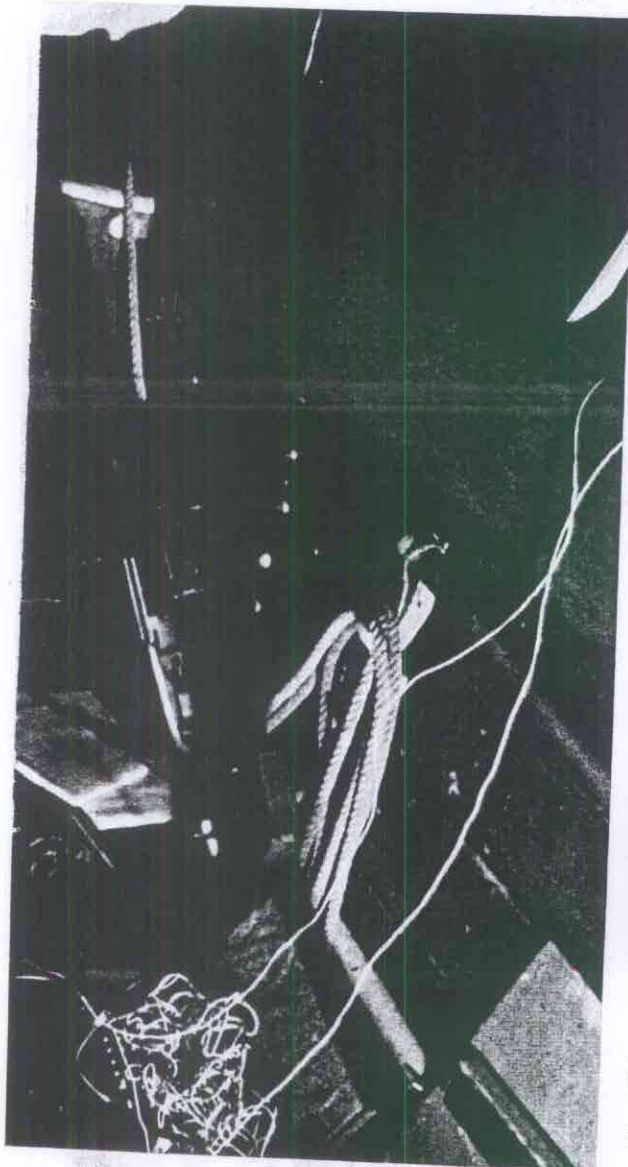
An agent's standard tools—plastic explosive, chemicals, acid capsules—surround Mirtha in lab.





Hand-on-hand method teaches intricate coded-transmission rhythms.

"Secret radio operators must train like concert pianists," says Maj. Raul Korda, the veteran instructor (left) who teaches communications at the *Escuela de Clandestinaje* or "School of Clandestine Arts." Students are hand-picked almost as carefully as astronauts; over half still wash out. They spend ten months in a hidden villa near Miami, learning the latest skills of demolition, cryptography, radio operation, weapons handling, commando tactics and other black arts. Harrowing tests explore everyone's emotional stability. Graduates like Mirtha, who placed second in a class of 19, go into the field equally adept at dispatching secret wireless traffic or concocting incendiary bombs from powdered sugar, potassium chlorate and a homemade acid capsule, all sealed in an ordinary envelope.



Exhaustion and loneliness envelop Mirtha, homeward bound in a rain-drenched motorboat after three days of sea duty.

In a camouflaged launch just beyond the reach of Castro's coastal radar, Mirtha handles urgent wireless calls from underground agents inside Cuba.

continued

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW ST. GEORGE

Girl Spy



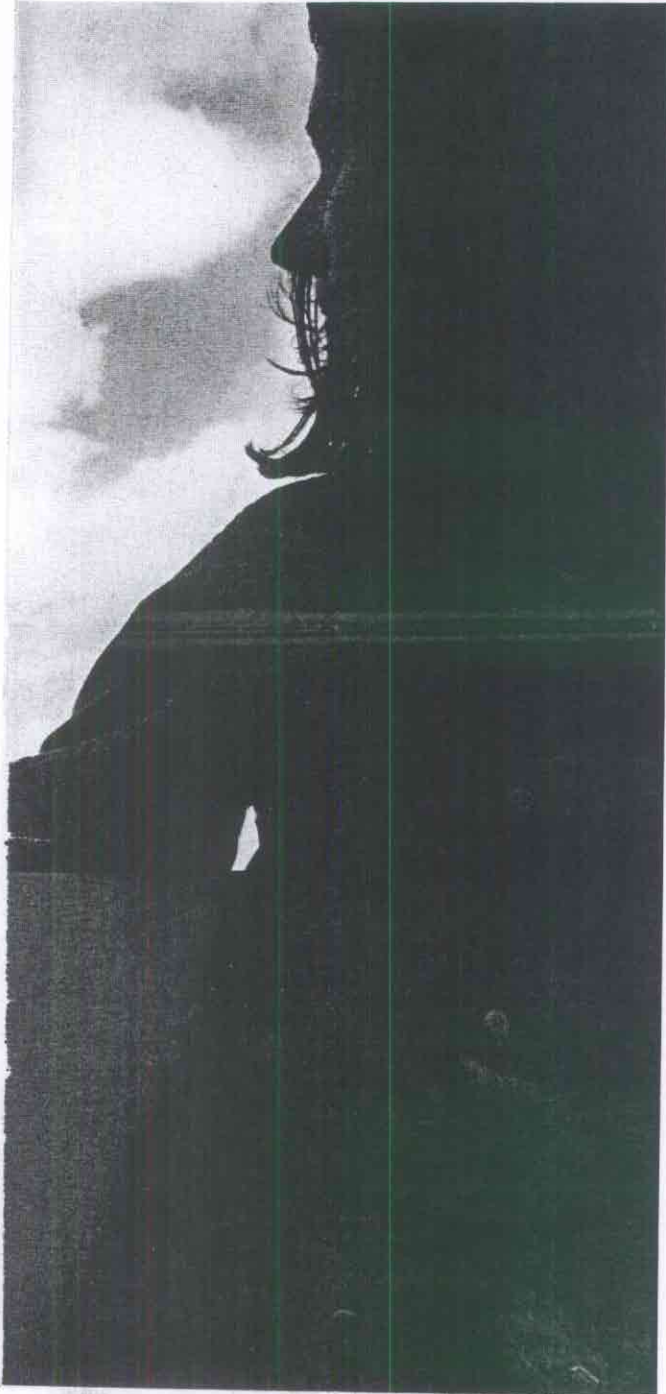
Ticking parcels are passé. Ordinary appliances, such as a telephone rigged with C-4 explosive, make the deadliest booby traps.



Caught by the U.S. Coast Guard, Mirtha and the boat skipper expected trouble. They were towed back to Miami and released.



Cuban girls grow up with an unashamed patriotism that American youths would consider "out"



Mirtha is an unexcitable girl with a sudden, brilliant smile to get her past any roadblock. She has never been caught inside Cuba, where the penalty for underground activity is death. On her fourth mission, a British destroyer intercepted her group, commanded by Manuel Ray, the exile leader, 30 miles off the coast of Cuba. Mirtha's picture was published, ending her usefulness as a spy. Now, she monitors radio messages from still-anonymous agents operating in Cuba.

Cuban girls grow up with an unashamed, flag-waving kind of patriotism that American youths would consider "out." It shows at beer-and-restaurant parties of the underground, where Mirtha passionately recites *Mi Bandera* (My Flag) to thunderous applause. Doubts about the eventual liberation of Cuba, if she has them, are buried deep.

From her work, Mirtha gets fraternity and, in a sense, family. Both her parents died in Camagüey before she was 15, and visits to her stepparents aren't always possible. In JURE (*Junta Revolucionaria*), her underground group, she belongs, inhaling the heady pleasure of doing something important exceptionally well. Her success helps overcome the uprooted feeling that sometimes makes her temper flare. In Miami, she mixes a fondness for strawberry ice cream and hungry reading with the new sophistication of an occasional martini. But pleasures remain scarce.

The mysterious Morse messages passing through Mirtha's small radio launch may well be the most explosive stuff she has ever handled. As Cuba completes six years of Castro's rule this month, it remains the target of the greatest U.S. surveillance effort in peacetime history. Much of the political and military information on which critical U.S. decisions depend must come from "clandestine people" who are, like Mirtha, trained volunteers with a cause: the liberation of their homeland. The price is high. Privately, Washington intelligence sources estimate that over 650 infiltrators have lost their lives during the past four years. Perhaps five percent were women.

Mirtha sees no incongruity in being both a good dancer and an excellent pistol shot. She wants, eventually, to marry and raise at least three children. No steady boy friend is in sight. "It's not possible now," she says. "We might fall in love, and then I would be sent on a mission, and I'm not allowed to say anything about that, not even good-bye. I guess that's the hardest part, not being permitted to say good-bye."

END

A Coast Guard patrol boat closes in on Mirtha's launch. She feigned unconcern, but fooled no one. Moments later, the pursuers were aboard.