





*I'm Still Here...*

# ***I'm Still Here...***

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*Selected memoirs of*  
***María Martorell-Fox***  
*from 1957 to 1986*

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*I'm Still Here...*



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## **Contents**

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|                                 |     |
|---------------------------------|-----|
| Prologue                        | 1   |
| How We Met                      | 3   |
| Trouble Ahead                   | 9   |
| The Dating Game                 | 15  |
| Viva la Revolución! Viva Fidel! | 27  |
| Wedding Bells                   | 35  |
| Uh-oh, We're In the Money       | 47  |
| The Pig                         | 53  |
| "Now Take People's Houses"      | 57  |
| Preparing to Leave              | 71  |
| Santiago de Cuba                | 77  |
| Guanabacoa                      | 85  |
| Preparing to Leave—For Real     | 109 |

|                                   |     |
|-----------------------------------|-----|
| A Year In Spain                   | 115 |
| Semana Santa in Grado             | 135 |
| Toledo and Salamanca              | 147 |
| Summer in Grado                   | 153 |
| Vignette: How I Learned German    | 167 |
| Vignette: The Boat                | 171 |
| Vignette: The Picasso Museum      | 175 |
| Vignette: Sailing in Cancún       | 179 |
| Vignette: My Father's Citizenship | 181 |
| Afterword                         | 185 |



## *Prologue*

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**T**his story is for our children, their children, and generations to follow.

It is the story of who we are and where we came from, how we faced the challenges of our generation, and how external events can shape your future.

It tells of how life is an infinite line with no beginning or end, on which we all leave our imprints to make it a meaningful experience.

It is a story about character and destiny and other things, but most of all, it is about memories that link our past to our present, evoking feelings already forgotten.

It is the story of our family.



## **How We Met**

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**I**t was the fall of 1957. My aunt Rosita and her husband Israel were visiting from Havana from their hometown in Oriente and made a surprise stop at our house late in the evening. It was their last night in Havana and they were on their way to the Tropicana night club. They liked to gamble and this was their only opportunity before returning to their sleepy home town. My young cousin Rosa María, aged 12 or 13, was with them, so they invited me to keep her company while they were in the casino since she was not permitted to enter and they couldn't leave her alone in the cabaret. I was not in the mood to go out at that late hour, much less keep an eye on a teenager. But I felt it was rude to decline so I reluctantly put on a black dress and some lipstick and got ready for a long boring evening.

We got in the car and my young cousin could hardly contain her excitement thinking of her “first night out” to a really adult place. She was giggling and asking questions about how far this place was, what did people do there, how did they dress, did they smoke or drink, and would they let her in if she was not wearing a long ball gown. I answered her questions as best I could, all the while mentally calculating how many more hours until I could go to bed. No doubt my aunt noticed my sour mood and tried to break the ice: “Have you ever been to Tropicana? It’s supposed to be the most beautiful night club in Latin America...”

“Once,” I answered unenthusiastically.

Back to silence. My cousin, sensing something was not right, got very quiet in a corner of the back seat of the car, throwing furtive glances at me from the corner of her eye. I was trying to control my boredom, anticipating the joy of my relatives parting with their money in the casino. My aunt, still trying to cheer me up, kept chirping: “I know we are going to have lots of fun tonight. I just know it...Who knows, maybe you’ll meet the owner’s son and he will fall in love with you and you’ll marry him.” Sure...like in the movies. I was there to babysit, I reminded myself, not to play Cinderella.

As we approached the nightclub I finally returned to my senses. A handsome blue-jacketed valet opened the car door, the soft

## *How We Met*

tropical breeze brought the mellow sounds of the orchestra playing in the outdoors cabaret “Arcos de Cristal” (Crystal Arches). Dancing, laughing couples swirled to the cadence of a *bolero* and a crowd of beautiful and elegantly dressed men and women swarmed around the bar holding martinis and daiquiris. My cousin was thrilled at his unexpected opportunity to peek into the “adult world.” Her eyes wide open, she didn’t miss a beat of what was going on.

My aunt and uncle put some money in my hand and mumbling some well-intended advice (don’t talk to strangers, don’t move from this spot, etc.) made a beeline for the casino.

A waiter approached us and showed us to a table at the outdoor cabaret. We ordered two Cokes and looked at each other: I had to admit we were starting to have some fun. The music swayed in tune with the breeze, the night smelled beautiful, and even though we were drinking Cokes I could swear I started feeling a little lightheaded.

And suddenly *he* appeared.

He stood at the top of the stairs taking in the room with a sweeping glance, as if trying to spot familiar faces. Then he looked at us. My cousin was almost impossible to ignore—a teenager, hardly filling the chair, happily sipping a drink in a nightclub at this late hour? Not in Havana in 1957! Then his eyes rested on me and he made a gesture as if he had recognized me. He

approached our table (by then my heart had started to beat faster) and said: “Hello...don’t I know you from the hospital?” Suddenly I remembered that my friend Elena had once mentioned that on her medical floor in the University Hospital she had met a young man whom she thought I would like and whom she had already checked out as a prospect for me...

“Aren’t you Elena’s friend? I remember seeing you when you visited her on our floor. May I join you?”

“Yes,” I answered, not knowing what else to say. Did I really want him to stay or just say “hello” and go? Was there anyone waiting for him? A swirl of contradictory thoughts and feelings invaded my mind in a few seconds. Maybe I realized subconsciously that this moment was going to be a definitive turning point in my life. Certainly a flurry of new emotions surfaced in the short time he had been standing in front of us.

He sat down, caught the waiter’s eye, and with an almost invisible and supremely elegant slight movement of his fingers (the sort of gesture that invites rather than commands) he ordered drinks for both of us and another Coke for my cousin.

“This my cousin Rosa María,” I said. “She is visiting for a few days from Holguín. Her parents went to the casino and we are waiting

for them.” I didn’t know why I felt I had to explain why I was there.

“I came to see the show,” he said. “I live very near and this is my study break every night. What a nice surprise, you should have let me know you were coming.”

“Oh, really, this wasn’t planned at all. I should be home studying but I didn’t want to disappoint my relatives on their last night in town.” (I really meant: don’t get any ideas, I am not coming back.)

Meanwhile my cousin was having a great time—her first time out to a night club, and along comes this movie-star-looking guy to sit at our ringside table... Then the orchestra started a new number: “Fascination.” He rose elegantly from his chair and looking me in the eye said: “Would you like to dance?”

Would I! Just as my aunt had predicted!

“*It was Fascination I know...*” started the song... I was indeed fascinated. He placed his arm around my waist and brought me closer; I could feel the warmth of his touch tender and firm.

“*And it might have ended right there at the start...*” continued the song...*I’ll never forget this song as long as I live*, I thought...

“*Just a passing glance, just a brief romance...*” He not only danced marvelously but had a way of holding me that made the “Arches under the Stars” swirl around. We danced, without

exchanging any words, without looking at each other as if we both were enveloped in the magic of the moment. The music came to a soft melodious halt and he released me and smiled: "Thanks," he said, looking at me as if for the first time.

We returned to the table where my cousin couldn't contain her excitement, her big black eyes shining and her smile filling her delicate face. She didn't say anything but her look of complicity was enough. My aunt and uncle returned from the casino and were pleasantly surprised to see that their prediction had come true. I introduced Armando, explaining how I knew him and they looked at each other and smiled. I overheard my aunt whispering: "I knew it!" He insisted on treating them as well, and they winked at each other and stayed some more to "consolidate" this encounter.

On the way home I closed my eyes and imagined it had all been a dream that would evaporate without a trace. Next day my life would be the same, my future plans would remain in place, and this fleeting encounter forgotten. I was convincing myself that this evening was not going to change my life, perhaps secretly realizing that the impact of his touch, his voice, his closeness had reached a part of my soul that will never be the same.

But outside the fantasy of the Tropicana, things were less than ideal.



## *Trouble Ahead*

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**I**n 1957, the political climate under Batista's dictatorship was steadily deteriorating and weakening. Revolutionary guerrilla warfare in the mountains of Sierra Maestra in the province of Oriente was progressively gaining support at all levels of the Cuban population. The student movement was widening their scope of action and recruiting young people who had so far remained neutral or disinterested. The general population was forming revolutionary "cells" to organize support for the guerrillas, establishing supply chains to send ammunition, arms, food, medicine, and technical equipment into the mountains. There was a very effective network of communication between the revolutionaries fighting in the mountains and the ones active in towns and cities that contributed money and supplies. Men and women with professional expertise were "defecting" to contribute their effort to the Revolution, and active members who were discovered had to join the rebel

guerrillas to escape persecution, torture and imprisonment. Those were the *alzados*, people who suddenly disappeared without a trace. Friends and relatives could not (or would not) speak of their whereabouts, but it was common knowledge that they had joined the guerrillas. No one talked about it but everybody knew.

The student demonstrations at the University, organized by the leaders of the student body, were very successful as a show of solidarity but unfailingly ended in police intervention with brutal repression and multiple students arrested and “disappearing.” Gradually, frustration on the part of the government forces led to an escalation of the repression and more frequent invasions of the area of the University Hospital, which was an independent territory, property of the University and thus theoretically, at least, outside the jurisdiction of the police. Nonetheless, almost daily, police cars’ wailing sirens invaded the hospital premises looking for arms and revolutionary propaganda. Fierce policemen carrying machine guns streamed out of the cars to invade the peace of the quiet hospital streets at odd hours of the night and raided the hospital buildings where the suspected revolutionaries hid. The University Hospital with its many separate buildings was the headquarters for persecuted revolutionaries

## *Trouble Ahead*

and an ideal place for hiding arms and ammunition destined for the Sierra guerrillas.

In 1955 the University had been closed “temporarily” by government order to avoid gatherings of students and stop the propaganda leaflets and manifestos that circulated all over the city. The reality was that this did not stop the current of subversive anti-government propaganda but concentrated the action in one place, easy to reach and with no possibility of escaping the search of a police raid.

After a year or more of this hopeless situation, many medical students left the country to study abroad. Some went to Spain, others to France, others to the United States and still others with no financial means to escape the situation returned home to their provinces to quietly wait for an end of the situation or join the revolution. Some of us stayed put and continued to work as volunteer interns in the different services of the hospital, turning this time into a learning experience and hoping to continue where we had left off once the political situation cleared up. I was one among those who chose to stay and work—as was Armando, the handsome young man I had met at the Tropicana who declined repeatedly the offers of his uncle Martín to send him to the United States to continue his studies. It was an explosive situation where at any time the police squads showed up acting on a tip to search the

floors of the medical buildings. I was working in one of the best-known hideouts, the neurosurgery pavilion. There were three call rooms for the physicians on duty that were regularly occupied by active members of the secret revolutionary cells, and we all knew that the boxes and crates stacked against the walls were full of machine guns, rifles and revolvers transported in the medical bags of the doctors who went in and out of the hospital on their double mission. One of my fellow coworkers, Jose Manuel, very committed and brave, was killed at the gates of the Hospital trying to escape a police raid. He was carrying arms in his medical bag and the police intercepted his flight on the winding street coming down from the hospital. He was killed on the spot.

We heard the news the next morning, not surprised but with deep pain for a young, valuable, idealistic individual who could have given so much to his country. My father heard the news on the radio and that evening when I returned home he asked me about what had happened. He knew most of my colleagues, because very often when I had to work late in a surgical case, he picked me up to take me home and had met most of them. He was very concerned about this dangerous situation and worried about my safety. A few days later we were visiting my father's uncle and the conversation turned to the inevitable subject:

politics and more politics. His cousin Carlos was a policeman on patrol car duty and overheard our comments. He added: "I agree with your father. It is dangerous in that area. The other night while I was on patrol we intercepted a student coming out of the hospital trying to escape, and when we searched his bag he was carrying a machine gun. He cried and begged us not to kill him but I had no choice but to 'fry' him right then and there. What are we going to do? Orders are orders. I didn't want to kill him, I swear, he kept asking for mercy, but I had to shoot."

My father and I looked at each other in awe. Carlos had killed Jose Manuel! My cousin Carlos, the nice, gentle guy who always joked and played with me when I was a little girl, a family man with a wife and daughter, a devoted and loving son to his parents—he had killed my friend for carrying a gun!

I could not believe how my world had changed, how times change, how people change. From that moment on I saw him as a different person, I saw my world as a different one, like those toys that are turned over to make the snow fall, it all started to become blurry and imprecise. Up to this point I still had faith in the revolution and its promises, this was my first head on encounter with the reality of how our lives were changing fast and radically like after an earthquake.

The future was unclear, to say the least. In the midst of this series of events that we could not control or prevent, we would have to reevaluate our goals, reconfirm our direction, and keep our eyes open for the next turn in the road.

## ***The Dating Game***

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**M**eanwhile, though, Armando had called me the day after we met at the Tropicana to say he had a very good time. How polite, I thought, he has good manners. Then he didn't call for a long time, maybe weeks. My phone was on a party line, and it wasn't conducive to having romantic conversations, with ten or twelve unknown people listening and being interrupted by strange voices asking this or the other. I could understand he didn't call more often; it wasn't worth it, he couldn't even ask me on a date. Going on a date was out of the question.

The dating game in Cuba 1958 had its own rules. Girls could go out on a date only if chaperoned by a friend, a little brother or sister, or as part of a group. Going alone with a gentleman caller was not regarded as proper by

the older generation because—who knew?—they might hold hands or get too close in the movies. So I always had to tell my father where, when, and with whom I was going, and why; set the time of departure and arrival; and ensure that the group consisted of at least 3 couples (I don't know why this was the magic number). If I was returning late at night, a married couple had to be in the party.

Arranging all these circumstances to fall in perfect order was like waiting for a solar eclipse in the middle of the night.

The other alternative—unacceptable and shameful for a 24 year old woman in medical school—was to invite a chaperone, an old aunt or a spinster friend, to doze all night and secretly envy your luck. Not an option.

Armando called a few days later to tell me that he was leaving for Europe with his aunt for a long trip, a few months. I figured I would probably never see him again, or that maybe it was even an excuse to disappear. I wished him a good trip but neither of us mentioned any expectations of meeting again in the future. We were looking in different directions and realized we may never see each other again—at least I did, because my immediate plans were to leave the country and continue my medical studies on a four year scholarship in a Germany that I had obtained through the German Embassy. So I concentrated on my work in the Hospital



## *The Dating Game*

preparing for my upcoming trip and kept my social life revolving around the events there and at the German Embassy. The last thing I wanted was to jeopardize my plans of going to Germany to continue my medical career. I decided to put this whole episode out of my mind and continue as if he had never existed.

Armando returned from his trip 5 months later. I knew because my friend Elena told me. A few days later I saw him in the hospital where he was visiting his friends and reporting to the ward to start working again. Their group of friends was organizing a pool party and he invited me to go as his date. I accepted before I could figure out how I was going to get permission from my father, whom I knew I couldn't convince that a pool party was a respectable form of entertainment, wearing a bathing suit! But miraculously he understood my reasons for wanting to go—it was my hospital friends hosting it and I really never went anywhere fun, it was all work and study for me. His only condition was that he had to take me to the party and pick me up. He drove me to the house, introduced himself to the hosts and went back to his car where he waited for hours until the party had finished. And then he took me home.

Still, it was an opportunity to get to know each other a little and I guess also to check out each others' physical condition...We talked a lot

about how things were changing and how that impacted our future plans, but he persisted in his idea of staying in the country no matter what. After all, he said, his family was there and he only wanted to be able to practice his profession. I had different views on the subject of politics, perhaps influenced by my father's warnings about Communism and its consequences. My father had a lot of friends who were Jewish refugees from Europe, and a Chinese friend, Manuel, who had escaped Communism in China and would later predict with frightening accuracy all the events that would happen in Cuba. Instead of making small talk and trying to woo me, we had a serious conversation about life! This was unusual, I thought. Maybe he is different after all.

The party was winding down and after thanking the hosts Armando accompanied me to the door, said goodbye to my father with a handshake, and as we drove away I could feel his amazement and his disappointment after such a formal farewell. I am sure he expected more, like a cat when the bird flies away.

We had found a lot about each other...and the better I knew him the more I liked him. We had a very important thing in common: neither of us wanted a commitment that would take time away from our careers. I had plans to go to Germany on a scholarship to finish medical school and I had already started to make

## *The Dating Game*

contacts to go to Paris on a fellowship through one of my professors who had studied in France. (I spoke German and French so it was easier for me to get the position.) He, on the contrary, was perfectly happy with the idea of living there for the rest of his life. Our goals were different and we respected them. The perfect date for me was somebody who did not want a commitment so there was no danger of falling in love, getting married, etc. I suppose he felt the same way so we both knew that all of this would go away and we could remain free and uncommitted forever.

Meanwhile, it was 1958 and the Revolution was gaining support, government repression was increasing, and the people were squeezed between the two forces fighting for control of the country. We were working in the hospital ward as interns, fulfilling all the duties of a licensed physician but without a salary, waiting for the University to reopen. I was marking time, learning hands-on medicine and helping the subversive forces by covering the positions of doctors who had joined the revolutionaries in the Sierra. It was a dangerous situation: An informant for the government could give you up for making a comment or a joke, and you could disappear into the dungeons of the secret police for torture or death. It became obvious that no one could stay away from reality and it was necessary to take sides. Life was changing, you

could not ignore the news from the war fronts in the eastern part of the island, the casualties on both sides, Cubans killing each other. It was like a giant wave gaining momentum and we could all feel it coming although were helpless to stop it or escape from it. But at least there was hope that it was all for a just cause—the hour of disillusionment had not yet come. It was the Cuban revolution later to turn into the Communist revolution, by virtue of the treason of Fidel Castro and his men.

Two days before New Year's Eve Armando called. Would I like to go with him to the New Year's Eve party at the Tropicana? "Don't worry, you'll be chaperoned by my parents and sit at the family table," he assured. He had some nerve calling me at the last minute because he could not find another date. "No thanks," I said, "I have a dental appointment to have a wisdom tooth pulled." Of course I could have changed my appointment, but I would have pulled my own tooth rather than run desperately after him at the snap of his fingers. Who does he think I am? I had my tooth pulled and stayed home.

As it turns out, on New Year's Eve, the Cuban revolutionaries would declare that President Fulgencio Batista had fled the country, plunging Cuba into a time of political instability. I had spared myself a royal mess by not going, and I don't think he had a very good time. But more about that later. After that we

## *The Dating Game*

started seeing each other more often and going out with friends to theaters, parties and small night clubs of which there were many in Havana—La Zorra y el Cuervo (The Fox and the Raven), Scheherazade, El Gato Tuerto (The one-eyed cat), La Red (The Net), etc. This is when I learned to like Martinis. Our group of friends included a married couple, my friend Elena and Oscar her husband, and this was the magic formula for my father to accept my comings and goings with this young man. The success of our relationship was due to the fact that we both agreed that we were not going to get involved in any formal commitment. Yet in the meantime we were falling hopelessly in love. Armando stopped going out with other girls and I had no interest in going out with anyone else.

There was only one inconvenience for me: Every time he invited me out I needed a new dress, because girls were supposed to look pretty and fashionable (no jeans or sneakers, thank you) at all times. I could not afford to buy the kind of clothes that his friends wore, but I could sew, with the help of my neighbor Mercedes who was also my fashion mentor. When my parents got married and moved into our home, Mercedes's family was already living there—a widow, three daughters, an older son who shortly thereafter died of tuberculosis, and a younger son who became crazy and had to be tied up in their upstairs room. We became like

family to them, and the eldest daughter Mercedes was my confidant and like a surrogate mother to me. I would go to stores in old Havana that sold remnants of very good materials for almost nothing, and with Mercedes's help I could make a dress in one or two days. She would put on the finishing touches, and sometimes I even enlisted my father to help me with the length of the hems or a pinning a dart in the back. I have to say that the miracle always worked: I looked as well dressed and elegant as the rest, and *nobody* had a dress like mine!

On my birthday that year, 1959, I received several floral arrangements from other young men who were circling with obvious intentions. I organized a small get-together at my house in Vedado and I arranged the flowers in different areas of the living room, saving the space next to my picture for the vase of yellow roses he had sent me. The other beautiful, huge expensive arrangements were placed "somewhere else." I hoped he would notice and get the message.<sup>1</sup>

In October there was a traditional fundraiser party for "La liga contra el cancer" (the fight against cancer), a brilliant and exclusive event

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<sup>1</sup> I just asked him now as I write about this, and he says he doesn't remember, but I am sure he is either in denial or having another "Senior Moment". Anyways, I like to think he did.

## *The Dating Game*

attended by the cream of Cuban high society. He invited me to attend and sit at his family's table, and I accepted, looking forward to another night of fun and dance. This meant another dress, but this one had to be very special. I decided on a challenging *Vogue* pattern with a drape in the front in black jersey, very simple but very elegant. My father had to pin the drape for me and mark the hemline so it would all fall in place. It was a beautiful dress and I looked astonishing! I had no jewelry to wear so the effect was even more dramatic as if it was intended to be so plain. We joined the family at the table and after the greetings and introductions he asked me to dance.

I was not ready for what happened that night.

We were dancing and all of a sudden he took me by the hand and led me to a separate place away from the dance floor. We sat on a bench and started to make polite conversation: what a beautiful night, what a nice party, how beautiful you look (I knew), and how much he enjoyed being with me. And then he said that he wanted to be with me for the rest of his life. I realized this sounded like a proposal, but not wanting to believe "false testimony" I asked him: What do you mean? "I want to marry you!" he said.

Done! We had fallen into each other's trap! I said yes, yes, yes, we kissed and danced some

more and went back to the table to join his family. Among the guests was a very nice and beautiful lady, a friend of his family, who looked at us and said, "How wonderful, they are young, she is beautiful and he is handsome, they are both doctors and they are in love." She had seen right through us. He took me home, floating on air, and said good night to my mother who was patiently waiting in the living room praying her rosary.

I still was afraid that the next day this would turn into memories of a wonderful night but like Cinderella I would watch it all disappear in smoke. I asked him to keep it a secret until we were really sure that we wanted it that way. I don't know if he thought I was leaving the door open to change my mind (remember my scholarship to Germany) but as days went by we became more impatient to tell everybody. Finally after a month it was time to make up our minds for good, and he said he wanted to talk to my parents. I suppose my parents were expecting it, because they looked neither surprised nor overjoyed in any way; their reaction was more like "Well, if this is what you want now, go ahead, as long as you continue what you're doing it's OK." My father was skeptical because one time when Armando visited me in El Cotorro driving his cousin's white convertible Cadillac, and made a turn into the driveway parking the monster in front



## *The Dating Game*

of the house, my father was sitting in the porch reading. He looked at Armando intensely over his eyeglasses. When Armando left my father told me, "Be careful, I think this guy is a gigolo." I assured him that on the contrary, he was a poor medical student who had to borrow a car to come visit me and he had no hidden agenda regarding our friendship. As time went by and he got to know him better this negative image disappeared from my father's mind and was replaced by affection. Armando's mother came on Christmas day for the official petition and we started to prepare for our wedding.

But the fateful New Years' Eve announcement that President Batista had fled Cuba was about to make our lives a good deal more complicated.



*Viva la Revolución! Viva Fidel!*

## ***Viva la Revolución! Viva Fidel!***

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**O**n New Year's Day, 1959, the radio announced the departure of Presidente Fulgencio and the triumph of the Revolucion Cubana. The night before, I had turned down Armando's invitation to New Year's Eve at the Tropicana. He called me to find out how we were all doing but there was no way he could come over; the city was in total chaos, the airports were full of families with innumerable pieces of luggage trying to flee the country to avoid reprisal from the new revolutionaries. Some relevant members of the government were even leaving in their own planes. Those were days of political instability and uncertainty. The undercover revolutionaries were waving banners of the "26 de Julio" movement and chanting "Viva Fidel, Viva Cuba Libre!" and marching in the streets trying to

uncover former government sympathizers. I lived along the Carretera Central (central highway) that stretched the length of the island. The revolutionary guerrillas coming down from the mountain passed by, wearing long beards and fatigues, waving flags, wearing rosaries around their necks and chanting the hymn of the revolutionary movement. People lined the highway and the streets cheering them, throwing flowers and shouting “Viva Fidel! Viva la Revolución!” Some people had signs on their front doors: “Fidel, esta es tu casa” (“Fidel, this is your home.”)<sup>2</sup>

The revolution had promised us a new country with equal rights for all, honesty, freedom; we would rid the country of the rich capitalists, latifundists and privileged rotten upper class. At that time, most people in Cuba did not recognize that this was the familiar rhetoric of the Communist agenda. Those who did recognize it were already trapped in countries under Communist dictatorships (right or left, they’re all the same), like the European Jews who fled before or during the Second World War or the Chinese who were subjected to the regime of Mao Tse Tung. My father had a very good friend who escaped China under the breath of the Red Army and established himself

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<sup>2</sup> Apparently Fidel took it literally because less than two years later private property would be abolished and all the houses would be seized by the government.

*Viva la Revolución! Viva Fidel!*

in Cuba in the fruit business with two compatriots. His name was Manuel Wong, but we called him “Manuel el Chino.” My father’s locksmith shop was located in Havana’s Chinatown, and they became friends through business contacts. My father did some locksmith work for him, and he supplied us with the best fruits, handmade ice creams, and Chinese delicacies, always saying they were “Pa’ Ca-mita”. (I was Carmita to my family and childhood friends, a nickname for Carmen. Only later did I become María del Carmen, my real given name, mostly through his wishes.) Manuel visited my father regularly to ask his advice on business and personal matters, since his language barrier made him an easy target for predators who tried to cheat him out of his hard earned money. My father always intervened on his behalf. Manuel never made any decisions without consulting my father and never forgot to thank him profusely in his heavily accented Spanish and with gifts of fruits and Chinese art objects. Until the time we left Cuba, we kept delicately-framed Chinese embroidered silks and house robes of the best and richest fabrics.

Manuel and my father had something very important in common: both were self-made men, who had started with nothing and established themselves as respected businessmen in the community. Manuel had left behind

in China his wife and his only son, and after many years of hard work in Cuba he had returned to his homeland and bought a house there to live out his old age with his family. But shortly thereafter the Maoist revolution took over the country, and towns and cities were occupied by the militia, forcing people to leave everything behind only to be captured later themselves. Manuel's business partner Andrés, who had also returned to his hometown, was beheaded in front of his family and had all his possessions confiscated. Manuel narrowly escaped the advancing armies and fled to San Francisco with the help of Chinese friends. His destiny caught up with him and he returned to Cuba to find the same oppressive system he had nearly died trying to escape. This time he had nowhere to go and was resigned to spend the last years of his life in Cuba. (After my family came to the United States, Manuel asked my father if we could send his family some money every month to help them survive in their impoverished country. We did this for a while but after a few months Manuel's son sent us a letter claiming that my father owed his father a lot of money and that he wanted \$600 in advance. Manuel denied the story and decided to cut off communications with his family. A few years later we learned through friends who came from Cuba that he had died at a Chinese nursing home there.)

*Viva la Revolución! Viva Fidel!*

Having been through the Revolution in China, Manuel told my father step by step exactly what the sequence of events was going to be in Cuba, and it did not sound like the good times the Revolution had promised us. “Not good times at all,” he warned. “Now comes taking big money. Now no more middle class, now change money color, old money no good, now *alanca-cabeza*.”<sup>3</sup> At every step he was right—chronologically, politically, historically. I remember the second day after the “rebels” came down from the Sierra we were gathered in the family room watching Castro’s first speech. His assistant Camilo Cienfuegos (who soon afterward perished in a mysterious airplane accident) was standing next to him assenting to Fidel’s words: “Vas bien, Fidel!” (You’re doing fine, Fidel!) A dove alighted on Fidel’s shoulder as if to announce the new era of peace and freedom. Rumor has it the dove was killed after the speech was over. I was all excited about the ideas and promises of the Comandante en Jefe (Commander in Chief). My father watched silently for a long time and then turned to me and said: “This is Communism. This country is going down the drain, and we have to leave.”

I was very angry and told him he was a throwback, his ideas were archaic, and he was going to end up eating his words. But it was I

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<sup>3</sup> From “Arranca cabeza,” or “rip off [their] heads”.

who had to do so, and very soon indeed. Changes were coming too fast for some people who could not resist the pressure of the government takeover of properties and businesses, and too slow for others who wanted to erase the past and take personal revenge on a society that they felt had passed them by. The exodus of Cubans started as a trickle headed by the European Jews who had experienced repression firsthand, and grew steadily as more and more people realized we were under a brutal Communist dictatorship. In 1960 Fidel would announce that his revolution had been Marxist-Leninist, a fact he had hidden from his own collaborators who gave up everything to follow his dream of a just social system.

Two of my best friends were Jewish and although we had frequent contact and discussed the political situation they never mentioned their families having any intention to leave. We were too involved in our final exams and trying to catch up the time lost in the last three years that the University had been closed.

When Armando and I met and during the first part of our relationship, I lived in the house that my parents built when they got married. It was a wooden house with a green vine covering the adjacent terrace, a big porch and lots of flowers and trees. My mother had told my father when they were engaged that her dream was to live in a white house with a green



*Viva la Revolución! Viva Fidel!*

vine and he built it for her, mostly with his own hands and the help of his friends. I was born and raised there and moved to Vedado after the Revolution. I needed to be close to the University because the commute was long and my medical school curriculum required a lot of time in the hospital, so we moved to a comfortable apartment and kept the house as a weekend retreat mostly for the memories and the lush vegetation.

But, as Manuel el Chino had predicted, “Now take people’s houses.” During one of his famous 6-hour speeches, Fidel Castro declared a new law effective immediately: Urban Reform. In revolutionary language this meant repairing the injustice of some people owning real estate for profit and the rest of the population not owning the homes in which they lived. Fidel’s solution was simple: let the Revolution own everything, and we will all be equal. The new law dictated that no one was allowed to own more than one property, namely the house in which one lived, and that even this house belonged to the government and could not be bought, sold, rented or otherwise disposed of. Our house was under renovation and my father had been allowing the workers to sleep there so they would not need to travel back to their homes everyday; when we went to back to the house the next day they had taken possession of it and told us bluntly: “This house belongs to us.

Fidel said that whoever lived in a house could keep it as his own, and we have been living here so it belongs to us!” We called the local “cuartel”—the equivalent of a local police station but also somewhat of a ranger authority—and they confirmed what these people said: That’s right, it is no longer yours. The files of the property registry had been burned or destroyed, so there was no way to make a claim that anybody would listen to. We sat on the porch until night fell and realized that Manuel had been right again. We said goodbye to the house and all the memories connected to it.

Some time later we passed by the house on our way to eastern part of the country and noticed that the lot had been divided into small parcels and the garden was planted with vegetables. The whole house was in ruins and tenements had been erected on the parcels. The whole thing was later demolished by the Revolution to build a highway connecting two towns. So at least we were even: Nobody got the house.

## **Wedding Bells**

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**A**round December 1960 we announced to our friends that we were planning our wedding for late summer the following year. As soon as the word spread, a group of our classmates started to organize a bachelor party.

The traditional “despedida de soltera” in Cuba was an “all girls party” with an array of gifts both practical and funny (some with veiled sexual innuendos), a few no-so-dirty jokes to make the future bride blush, and all the savvy advice that the married and divorced friends could give the innocent victim-to-be. It was more fashionable to hold the party at a friend’s house rather than in a public place, lest the “new bride jokes” seem a little too risqué for the reputation of the group; what was said or done privately was kept under wraps. The

remarkable thing is that this was all so innocent that a 10-year-old girl of today would probably find it boring. Only punch and Coca-Cola were served, and one of the ladies of the “older generation” had to approve the punch to make sure it was not too strong for the girls.

As for the bachelor, it was a night out with his male friends. They pretended it was a wild and orgiastic night. I asked Armando, since I knew he had been to several such parties, and he said “It’s nothing, they do nothing but drink and goof around all night.” But was he telling it all? Anyway that’s all the information I have, I never asked anybody else perhaps for fear of the answer.

But at any rate neither of us wanted a traditional “despedida”. Instead we asked our friends to prepare a party for everybody who wanted to attend, all ages welcome. There was no need for gifts or dirty jokes; we suggested that guests pool their money for the party and we could all enjoy the evening together. The date chosen was the end of July. The place chosen by the organizers was a beautiful restaurant near the city on a river called “Rio Cristal” named after its clear crystalline water that ran through the forest. The background sound of the water flowing was the best music to accompany the delicious dinner served under a canopy of palm leaves and bamboo trees whistling in the breeze. Long tables were placed

## *Wedding Bells*

in an L-shaped configuration and the center of the room was reserved for dancing. The younger crowd took one side of the room and the “other generation” placed themselves in a comfortable corner where they could talk without having to shout at each other, farther away from the music. The ages ranged from ladies over 90 years old—Armando’s great aunts—to children as young as 10. Four young ladies had a date with destiny that night: they met their future husbands and four marriages resulted. (All four couples are still happily married after 46 years. one of them is my cousin Rosa María who met Moises, one of my classmates who was sitting across the table from her and did not take his eyes off her all night. They got married four months later after a torrid romance. Little did she and I know how that night at Tropicana would change our lives. One of the couples stayed in Cuba, the other three came to the US and are happily living in Miami.)

My students from the German Club also prepared a party for us and surprised us with a beautiful gifts. After so many years I’ve forgotten what it was but I believe it was a cut crystal piece or something of the sort. They were a fun group with people form all walks of life, retired ladies, accountants, artists, young girls waiting for the University to reopen, business men: they all had in common their passion for the German language and felt very

encouraged to see that a non-German person who had never lived in Germany could speak the language. It was a great motivation and it kept them working very hard. I enjoyed working with them watching the fast pace at which they advanced in the knowledge of the language and sharing personal stories and anecdotes. We also shared our opposition to the Communist regime—we were all *gusanos*, counter-revolutionaries, and some of the students were marking time waiting to leave the country.

Most likely this place was under surveillance by the government because any gathering of more than three persons that was not for political purposes was considered illegal and the participants subject to arrest. But this place was under the sponsorship of the German Embassy and it was spared until West Germany and Cuba broke diplomatic relations. The Club was “intervened” (the term used to designate the act of the government taking possession of an institution or a business evicting all its former members and owner upon immediate notice), and the building closed.

The year went fast and we started to prepare for our wedding in the traditional Cuban style, buying sheets and towels and embroidering our monograms on every piece. Armando came to visit every two months and I always surprised him with a new item to add to our future home. We were feathering our nest and although there

## Wedding Bells

were not many feathers to speak of we managed to put together a very nice household.

Before the wedding it was traditional to organize a bridal shower for the bride and groom separately, but we did not want a traditional event. Instead our friends and families prepared a party for all: young, old , friends, family, which was a great success. Three generations were represented, from the 80-plus year old aunts and grandmothers to the *chicas*, the young cousins 12 and up. No bad taste jokes, no surprises, no presents. It was all clean fun, and very successful for the girls: Four couples met at this party who are still happily married, among them my cousin Rosa María (only 17 at the time) with whom my classmate Moises fell instantly in love. He visited me on my floor in the Hospital where I was an intern and announced me that I was the first to know that he was going to marry Rosa María, in spite of the protestations of her mother who wanted to get her out of Cuba fast, and those of his parents who thought he was crazy to marry “esa niña gentile.” But love is stronger than reason, and they got married 4 months later. They are still married, have two children and are very happy.

I believe this was a good omen for us.

The civil wedding took place on August 25, two days before the religious ceremony. It was a simple operation at the family lawyer’s office,

Manuel Barruecos. We had a champagne toast and went to dinner all by ourselves for the first time ever, now that it was “legal” and there was no possibility of ruining my reputation. Very proper indeed!

We had a very funny party at the German club where I taught. My German language students loved me and were very happy to share this moment with us. They all attended the wedding and a few weeks after we got married we invited them to a party at our house. It was not easy to prepare food for so many people because of the very strict rationing; the food supply was limited to basic items and no frills. We managed to get a box of saltine crackers and a loin of pork through our underground contacts and everybody contributed with whatever they could put together. It was amazing that so many people ate and drank (two of them so much that they passed out) with so little. We filled a crystal serving dish with water colored with mercurochrome in a pale rose shade and threw in votive candles. The effect of the candles floating in the pink water and reflecting off the ceiling was very romantic.

There were no wedding dresses for sale or rent, but—lucky me—one of my private students had a younger sister who had just gotten married and she offered me her dress. It was my size, I didn’t have to alter one stitch,



## *Wedding Bells*

and it was the style that I wanted. This must have been a wedding protected by the gods because things were coming together really well. The rest—tiara, shoes, etc.—was easy. My father went to get fitted for tails (it was a daytime wedding) and a few days later the outfit was delivered to our house and my mother put it in the wardrobe. On the day of the wedding Mercedes, our close friend, came to help me dress. My mother left earlier for the church to greet the guests while we finished our preparations. I was in my room struggling with a crinoline skirt when I heard my father screaming “Where is my suit? What I am supposed to wear?” In horror I pictured myself entering the church with him wearing one of his old gray suits and seeing the groom faint on the altar steps. Mercedes came to the rescue and, lo, “the suit” was found in a plastic bag in the wardrobe. I was so nervous I didn’t even look at my father—all I could do is try to negotiate the hallways with my three crinoline skirts without any damage to the dress.

It was a beautiful clear afternoon, the kind you see after a heavy summer thunderstorm, and as I entered the church and looked at my future husband, I noticed in a panic that he was not dressed the same as my father. Sure enough, the “suit” that Mercedes had so propitiously found was an *old* tuxedo that my cousin Cesar had borrowed from my father for a

sweet sixteen party and which had been returned to my house a few days before. The other suit was sent back to the rental place intact but except for the pictures I don't think too many people noticed the difference. The more discriminating guests who did notice probably thought we were trying to make a statement, like showing the past and the present of fashion.

The religious ceremony was scheduled for 5 pm on Sunday at Corpus Christi church in Miramar. The church stood on a hill and spiral stairs on both sides of the entrance led to the atrium. The interior was simple modern and very clear; the aisle was lined with large vases of white lilies leading to the altar. The guests packed the sides and the back of the church.

We had wonderful music for the ceremony. The music program was prepared very carefully by us and Livia Trimino, a childhood friend from his hometown and an excellent opera singer. She sang with such emotion and love it made your heart stop. The accompanists, a violinist and an organist, were the perfect complement. As we were walking out of the church I could not help but look up and thank them for lifting me up to heaven. This is one of my favorite pictures of the wedding. Our witnesses were a composite of our lives: the obstetrician who delivered me, the German ambassador Count Spreti, Mercedes my good

## *Wedding Bells*



friend and surrogate mother, Armando's uncle Manolo, and other good friends of his family.

After the church wedding we invited some of the guests to a restaurant in Vedado "El Castillo de Jagua" for a sit-down dinner with strolling violins, a gift from Armando's brother Álvaro, who was not in Cuba at that time. He had been tipped off to his impending arrest after the "intervention" and seizure of the Tropicana; he had had to flee the country, leaving his wife and daughter behind.

The cars formed a long line streaming out of the parking lot to the restaurant. We had not expected so many people and my father talked to the restaurant manager to take over the whole place, not just the area reserved for the catering. When we came in, the place was packed, and our surprised look was captured in a very funny photo that is also one of my favorites. We had a wonderful time greeting people from table to table and posing for pictures. At the end of the evening somebody packed a bottle of champagne and some chocolate cakes for our honeymoon trip to Varadero; that was our only food for the next two days.

We left for Varadero that evening to spend our honeymoon in a villa at a resort called Villas Mar Azul and later to Hotel Kawama. When we returned, all mellowed and happy and on cloud nine (remember in those days a honeymoon was really the first time you were alone and unhibited with your mate), I still had to take one more test to finish my medical school curriculum. With the basic knowledge of urology I had, I left for the Facultad (Department) early in the morning only to find it closed. A janitor told me: There is no exam here, the building is closed until Monday. I panicked. I ran to the hospital through a small door that connected the back of the Facultad building with the hospital. The University

## *Wedding Bells*

hospital was spread over a large area and consisted of a group of 2 or 3 story buildings for the different specialties. I went straight to the Urology Department where sure enough the test was taking place, only I hadn't known it because for the last two weeks I had been totally disconnected from reality. I explained my situation to the professor in charge and probably the expression in my face made him believe my story. He let me take the test in a separate room and there I completed the journey of my medical school saga—after 9 years, rather than the 7 it should have taken.



## ***Uh-oh, We're In the Money***

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**M**eanwhile we had a very happy married life and a great group of friends with whom we went out every weekend to restaurants, movies, dancing, nightclubs or to the beach house in Varadero that belonged to Armando's godmother Rosita. We had the best of what was available. We kept the car that belonged to his uncle Martín, a new fiery-red "cola de pato" ("duck tail") Cadillac that was the envy of the big shot Communists, especially the Minister of Health, who coveted the car for himself. Ironically this was one of the reasons we ultimately obtained permission to leave the country: he knew he would get the car. I remember driving it down one of the avenues in Vedado, a nice residential neighborhood, and someone on the sidewalk yelled at me "Enjoy it, you don't have much time left!" I swiftly

lowered the automatic window and yelled back: “Suffer, you never had it!” and sped away.

One Friday night, Fidel, in one of his now-famous 6-hour speeches, announced that the currency was going to be changed to prevent the capitalists from stashing away money and depriving “the people of my country” (his famous phrase) from developing their own economy. As of the following Monday, the old Cuban pesos would no longer be valid and everybody would have to bring their money to the bank to be exchanged for the new currency. The new law—again, which came into being just by Fidel’s uttering it in a speech, and took effect instantly—permitted a monthly “allowance” of 100 pesos per person or 200 per family, regardless of the amount of money you had brought for exchange; the rest would be deposited in a bank account “until further notice.” The old Cuban peso had historically been stable relative to the US dollar, but this new currency had no value in the world financial markets. (It still doesn’t; outside of Cuba, you cannot exchange Cuban pesos for anything.) This was a very clever way of dispossessing the people who had hidden their money hoping for a change of regimes. Now that money was just worthless paper. Needless to say many people suffered heart attacks, strokes and even committed suicide, but this bloodless and cold “self-cleansing” was considered a



*Uh-oh, We're In the Money*

necessary loss to the revolution. Remarkably, the new money was already printed and ready to be used as Castro spoke. This is not a coincidence and only goes to prove what a careful and methodical plan they had worked out for our country.

It got worse. Now, if you were caught with old currency you could go to jail! My mother-in-law had more than 100,000 “old pesos” in her house, carefully sandwiched between two plywood boards placed as one of the shelves of her closet. A few months before a friend of the family had come over and told her very secretively that the G2 (the secret police) was going to search her house very soon. When she told us we both panicked because we knew she also had a drawer full of pictures of herself and Martín and other members of the family with the previous dictator Fulgencio Batista and all his “esbirros” (aides) partying at the Tropicana. She was very upset when we told her we had to burn all those pictures. She claimed this was a social event, not politics, but we knew this was not an argument the police would accept. We burned all the pictures despite her protestations and hid the 100,000 pesos. The search never occurred but we became more careful about the things we kept. And now suddenly we had to dispose of the hidden money in two days, before the new law took effect on Monday!

That was a frenzied weekend for the Cubans. Everybody dug out their reserves and took to the streets to try to exchange their money for goods. People bought everything that was for sale: jewelry, silver, food. A few people accepted the old paper money in exchange for their goods, not realizing the power of the system and naively believing that things would eventually return to the way they had been before the Revolution and they would then be wealthy. It never happened.

We bought a little Opel, gray, swift and brand new, which became my car. At least now I didn't have to drive the red monster and get all the dirty looks and leave a trail of envy behind. The Opel was all we were able to buy, and it only cost 9,000 pesos; very few people wanted to be loaded up with invalid currency that could land you in jail. Even the businesses were ordered to close and were monitored by the Defense Committees to make sure they didn't break the new ordinances. Try spending 100,000 pesos in two days when no one wants to sell anything. It isn't easy.

So we still had 91,000 pesos, in denominations of 20 and 100 bills. It took a long time to burn those bills and flush them down the toilet. We were in the bathroom for hours, afraid that our next door neighbors, the residence for revolutionary students, would hear all this continuous flushing of the toilet as

*Uh-oh, We're In the Money*

if somebody was dying of dysentery. We had prepared an excuse to blame it on his mother in case somebody knocked at the door to offer help. It is a very unreal feeling to be happy to get rid of money but we were relieved when it all went “down the drain.”

A few weeks later the police were summoned to the neighboring building, the residence for the “becados” (scholarship students) of the Revolution. The area was surrounded by *milicianos* (militiamen) with machine guns; sirens blared down the street. We did not dare go out because we feared our building was going to be next. One of the “responsables” of the residence (like a house mother), who had become friendly with my mother-in-law’s housekeeper, told her that one of the girls accidentally broke a ceiling lamp while cleaning, and five thousand US dollars came down like confetti from the ceiling. Apparently Tia Lita, who had lived in that building until she left the country, must have hidden the forbidden cargo in the safest place she could think of: in the middle of the living room! She could not be apprehended because she was safely in Miami. But that’s what we would have faced if they had found our money, except that finding dollars was probably worse because it suggested you had contacts with the counterrevolution.

They say that in a true socialist workers' paradise, money is useless. But probably no one thought Fidel would take it so literally.

## **The Pig**

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**C**ertain basic needs have to be met every day, like feeding yourself. If you live surrounded by abundance, food is not perceived as a need but as a choice. This story is about a pig that was not a choice, but a need.

It was 1961, two years after the Revolution. The need (again) to redistribute the food supplies made it necessary to establish a system of ration cards allowing each person quotas for every food item. Typical rations might be: one pound of rice per person per month, four eggs per person per month if available, half a chicken for children under two or seniors over 65, and so on. Since these quantities were never enough to feed a family, people tried other alternatives to supplement their diets. Some people grew vegetables or raised chickens or pigs in their backyards and

traded eggs or meat for rice, coffee or *dulce de guayaba*. Food became the most-appreciated gift you could give someone, as well as the focus of a new and complex black market.

My husband and I worked as physicians in a semirural clinic serving a middle class community of very appreciative patients. In their zeal to show their gratitude they presented us with gifts of coffee, a head of lettuce, mangos, and even, one time, a pig.

The butchered pig was a gift from one of my husband's patients. It was delivered to our home on a Saturday afternoon without any warning. We were not home at the time, having gone out to dinner and a movie. The housekeeper received the package from the stranger and did not dare to ask any questions for fear of being indiscreet or uncovering some secret counterrevolutionary plot. She placed it on the kitchen counter and left for the weekend.

When we returned home around midnight, as soon as we entered the apartment a strong smell of rotten food punched us in the nose. We followed the trail of the stench and found a tightly packed bundle on the kitchen counter, oozing dark blood and permeating the whole house with the smell. We had a corpse in our hands and needed to get rid of it!

This was not a simple matter of throwing it in the garbage and taking it out. We lived surrounded by revolutionary spies recruited by

the Defense Committee of the Revolution and each block was closely watched for counterrevolutionary activities. They were in charge of logging the comings and goings of every household on the block. If a pig was found in the garbage, it would mean we had been buying food on the black market—a crime for which the sentence could be labor camp, community work or even losing your ration card for a while. So, we would have to eliminate every trace of it if we wanted to avoid trouble. We considered several options and the safest appeared to be to cut the pig into as small pieces as possible for transportation. With our mouths covered by masks we started the grisly task, taking turns leaving the kitchen to catch a breath of fresh air and relieve the nausea. When we were down to the bones we made small packages but had no place to take them. If the bones were found in the garbage we would be giving away the secret. I called my parents and told them to come over to discuss our “new situation” (we couldn’t speak openly over the phone because it was common knowledge that many phones were tapped). They arrived at our house in the middle of the night and my father came up with a brilliant idea: Bury the pig! But where?

“Well,” he said, “my brother Bebo will help.” My uncle Bebo lived in a secluded house on a slope in a beach community near Havana and

his backyard was adjacent to a big farm covered with thick thorny bushes. It was not likely that anybody would look for a pig there, so my father packed the pig in the trunk of his car and started his journey. When he stopped for the red lights the people in the cars next to him turned their heads to find out where this strong smell of putrid meat was coming from. He pretended not to notice and sped away as fast as he could. He arrived without being stopped, and by the light of a kerosene lamp covered by a paper bag he and Bebo started to dig the grave of what could have been a culinary feast for the family. They finished their job close to 4 AM, hugged each other, and congratulated themselves on their great luck that none of the few neighbors in the area had noticed their maneuver. My father returned home and called us to give us the good news: message delivered safely. It was 7AM and we prepared to spend a restful Sunday at home with an empty refrigerator but a clear conscience. The pig was gone.



## ***“Now Take People’s Houses”***

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**N**ineteen fifty-eight had been a difficult year for Armando. His father got suddenly ill in February with severe bone pains and was diagnosed with metastatic cancer but the primary tumor could not be found. He traveled to Boston with my mother-in-law to Peter Bent Brigham hospital for a diagnosis, but they could only offer him palliatives and he died in July in terrible pain. He was only 57 at the time and looked much younger than his age. In the midst of this ordeal Armando had to contend with final exams and spend nights next to his father to relieve his mother, since his father did not allow anybody near him except her, and then attend his medical school classes during the day.

After the Revolution, in order to obtain a medical degree you had to do a year of service

in a rural area. So a few days after his father's funeral he received his assignment to his post in the province of Camagüey working at a sugar cane mill community about 900 km from Havana. The Revolution accepted no excuses or postponements—either you did as you were told or you were labeled a counter-revolutionary traitor and might end up in jail. He left his mother, distraught and astonished after his father's short illness and painful end, with his younger brother Emilio, then only 13. Emilio had to be sent away to Miami under the care of his aunt Lita because of the impending establishment of the law of Parental Custody (Ley de la Patria Potestad), which stated that children older than 13 were no longer under the guardianship of their parents but rather of the State. Therefore after age 13 they could no longer leave the country, and upon turning 18 they had to serve in the military for 2 years. Parents scrambled to get their under-13 children out of Cuba; the resulting exodus is known as the "flight of the Peter Pans." The Catholic Church sponsored families to send away their children to the United States to relatives or host families who would accept them as foster children. This was a secret operation run by a group organized around one of Cuba's past presidents and his family, Dr Ramon Grau San Martín (San Martín Mongo to his friends), who risked their freedom and

*“Now Take People’s Houses”*

perhaps their lives to help save the young generation from the claws of an oppressive regime. The children were taken at night to designated places, organized in groups, and sent on special flights sponsored by the Church. Some of these children were never reunited with their parents; others, after many years of separation, had mixed feelings after seeing their parents again. Testimonies of these stories are recorded in the book *The Peter Pans* written by my good friend Ivonne Conde Loret de Mola, herself a Peter Pan who was fortunate enough to be joined by her family 8 months after her arrival in the US. This is some of the collateral damage of the Revolution published many years later when the wounds had turned to scars. I sincerely recommend her book for a better understanding of how a political system undermines the very fibers of a culture.

We were planning to move into one of the apartments in his mother’s building (or at least, what used to be her property), and I started to prepare it while he was away at his rural job. One day after a few months of stocking sheets and towels and other household items, my mother-in-law called to tell me that the Building Authorities had sealed and padlocked the apartment. I went to the office of the Reforma Urbana—the new ministry for everything related to housing—and was told that an informant had reported that the

apartment was occupied by the “privileged” son of the previous owner. I was furious and tried to explain the situation to them but to no avail. The procedure to follow was to collect all the rent receipts that I had paid and proof that he was really intending to move in, and join the line of hundreds of other people who were in similar predicaments—trying to claim properties that had until yesterday belonged to them, or trying to obtain permission to stay in other people’s properties that by virtue of an instant verbal law had become theirs. The law was laid down during Castro’s speech stating that it was counterrevolutionary, capitalistic, etc., and therefore illegal, to own additional houses besides the one you lived in; therefore whoever was living in a particular house at that moment was instantly granted ownership of the property, just by being there. That is how we lost the house where I was born in El Cotorro, as is told in another chapter.

I had better luck with our apartment because I could prove that we were dedicated, cooperative physicians working to help the Revolution achieve its goals of health for the people, blah blah blah, and we were following the glorious path blazed by our leaders, blah blah blah. This was the only way you could talk if you hoped to make yourself understood. I left the parking lot with the keys in my pocket and when I got home close to midnight my parents

*“Now Take People’s Houses”*

were on the verge of a nervous breakdown and his mother had already had one. But at least we had a place to live thanks to the Revolution (Viva Fidel!).

We settled into our new routine and he started to work as assistant professor in the Department of Internal Medicine of the University Hospital in the service of a well known professor who was one of the personal physicians of Fidel Castro. Fortunately this man was intelligent and open minded and he accepted the political rift between himself and my husband. His cousin Susana was a close friend and high school classmate of mine, and the relationship was somewhat different as we knew his family and had frequent social contact with them. Meanwhile I stayed home and did all the things young married women did then (cook, read, go to the beauty parlor, go to the seamstress for a new dress and other silly things). Our apartment was on the ocean and there was an area prepared for swimming where the rocky bottom had been flattened and barrier of rocks placed as a breaker to create a sheltered cove. Every morning I picked up our niece Maura Isis, then 3 years old, and took her with me to the beach while Maura, her mother, and little Álvaro Martín, only one year old, watched us from the shore. Sometimes I went to my parents’ apartment for lunch where Armando joined us for his lunch break. I spent

the afternoons trying to fill out time with what other women considered occupations but most of the time I was thinking about what I was going to do about my profession which I loved so much. My alternatives were working for the government, which meant joining the Communist work force and never being able to leave the country as I intended to do, or else not doing anything at all and wasting away my life. When he came home in the evening and told me about the interesting cases he had seen and how much he was learning my eyes filled with tears of envy and frustration... I could not go on like this. I decided to approach one of my former professors in Pediatrics and ask him if I could do volunteer work in the University Children's Hospital. I was ready to accept full responsibility for the patients assigned to me except for the night calls which I could not do because I was not an official member of the staff. He accepted and I started working regular hours and attending the conferences. This was a satisfactory albeit temporary arrangement which at least allowed me to focus on something other than the obsession of leaving the country.

Armando didn't feel the same way I did about this issue. First, his mother was still living there and vowed she would never leave her home. Her financial security had been taken away and all she had to live on was the

*“Now Take People’s Houses”*

“allowance” she received from the government. Second, he loved his work and had ample opportunity to be promoted, and he felt sure that if he kept his political ideas to himself and only practiced medicine he could live in peace in his own country.

This proved to be wrong. Gradually the noose tightened around everybody’s neck. First he was asked to join the political rallies in the hospital, then he was summoned to participate actively in them. One day he came home very upset and told me there had been a meeting on his floor and emotions rose to the point where everybody stood up and joined hands to sing the International (the anthem of the Communist Party). This made him so upset that he had got up and left, and after the meeting one of his bosses, a devoted “comrade,” told him, “Don’t do that again, or there may be very bad consequences.”

This was the same person who had told him a year earlier: “If you want to leave, do it now.” At the time Armando had been very surprised. “Do you mean to tell me that if I want to leave later I will be stopped? This is not what the Revolution is all about!” His colleague answered, “I don’t mean to tell you anything but what I said. And I’m only saying this because I consider you my friend.” Sure enough, a few weeks later it was announced that professionals were no longer allowed to

leave the country. The Revolution had given them an education, and now it was collecting its dues. Now, if you wanted to leave the country, you had to request permission, find a replacement to cover your position, and work for an undetermined length of time at a place designated by the government. That is what happened to us and all the others who wanted to leave the country. Some could never leave, others were afraid to try because once you openly expressed your desire to leave you became a target of the Revolution and joined the black list of “gusanos” (“worms”—the term used for those who were against the regime, the counterrevolutionaries).

By now the revolutionaries had exchanged the rosary beads for bayonets. Armando was fulfilling his obligation to the Revolution working in the countryside. We wrote long romantic letters trying to share our daily lives in our different environments. I had given up my German scholarship; Armando had 24-hour tours of duty in the policlinic, so called because it was open to all medical emergencies, and he had to be available day and night, even outside of regular clinic appointments. These policlinics were established all over the country to make medical care available to even the most remote areas. Unexpected inspections by field supervisors could happen anytime, and it was considered counterrevolutionary to abandon



*“Now Take People’s Houses”*

one’s post, comparable to an army desertion. Only on every other Sunday afternoon was he allowed to leave the premises. Every two months he was given time off to visit his family and came to Havana to spend a few days—very few—with his mother and the few friends who were still in the city; most of his classmates had either left the country, were trying to leave, or were out on similar assignments in different areas. Those who did not accept the tours of service were banned from practicing medicine and had few options but to leave the country.

During one of his visits, in October, my friend Elena called and asked us if we could visit her—it was very important, she said. She had just given birth to her first baby and we thought this was the reason for her invitation. We called on her on a Saturday looking forward to a pleasant evening with them, not expecting this visit to be the first direct impact this new political climate would have on our future.

We rang the bell expecting to be greeted by Oscar’s broad smile and warm hug. Instead Elena opened the door, holding the baby, a little pink bundle on her shoulder with a disoriented look on her face, pale and disheveled, appearing lost in the midst of the piled boxes filling the living room. “Come in,” Elena murmured in a weak voice.

“What happened, where is Oscar?”

“In Miami,” she said. “He left yesterday, my parents are there already, and I am leaving tomorrow.”

“Why?” we asked almost simultaneously.

“Oh, we just can’t live here any more. You know my family came from Europe fleeing the Nazis, and they all say this is going to be the same. They have been preparing for a long time, but I couldn’t tell anyone, even you. I don’t want to leave but I have no choice. Everyone’s gone except my sister and me. We are leaving tomorrow with the children but I wanted to at least say goodbye. We don’t know if we will ever see you again. It is all so sad...”

There was no place to sit. The house had been totally dismantled. The only furniture left was her bed and a little bassinet for the baby. Everything else was tightly packed in duffel bags (also called “gusanos,” like the counterrevolutionaries who thrived in the dirt). We stood in the middle of the room, looking at each other feeling the force of a powerful and unstoppable current taking us in different directions. We could not find the right words and stared blankly at her for a while. She apologized. But there was no need, as her life was not under her control any longer. *Soon it might be like that for us too*, I thought. I hoped Armando was thinking the same.

*“Now Take People’s Houses”*

Finally we recovered from the shock and asked her if she was up to the trip ahead. She assured us she was able to take care of herself and her baby until the family was reunited. Her parents had left a few weeks before and were living in New York, where she and her husband would temporarily go until they decided on their final destination. Her parents had left Poland just before the Holocaust but most of their families perished in the pogroms. They did not need much to figure out what was coming in Cuba and took advantage of a gap in the traveling restrictions to escape to freedom. Her father’s business had been repossessed by the government as were many other businesses in Cuba.

After these events, and two years living under this political system, it was obvious to both of us that we couldn’t keep our lives separate from political events. There was only one alternative: we had to leave the country. I was faced now with another problem: I had not served the obligatory tour of duty in rural medicine after finishing my career, and unless I complied with this law I could not even think of requesting permission to leave. Looking for alternatives we discussed the situation with one of his classmates who was in the same predicament. He told us of this person he knew who could get us out of the country through his contacts in one of the precincts of the city. We

set up an interview with him in his office (he was a lawyer) and he explained in detail the procedure and the price, assuring us that this was a foolproof plan that he had used several times without any problems. We needed time to think about it, we told him. The plan involved falsifying some facts, and the price to pay in a communist system was high. We set up another interview for the following week and agreed to pay him half the money at that point if we decided to go through with it. The price would be \$8,000.00 plus expenses.

We paid him a small deposit in cash and wrote down a couple of addresses and names that we had to remember. The first step was to move to the area where this particular police station was located. The key contact would interview us and process our request for permission to leave, then we would go home and wait to be notified of our departure date. It looked easy enough, but we had to prove that we really lived in that area and act accordingly. In the meantime, Armando's classmate (who had recommended the lawyer) had left already on a ship that traveled regularly between Cuba and Spain. This encouraged us to continue with our plans.

The police station with the key contact was located in the middle of the city, where it was out of the question to rent an apartment or a house. The law regarding Urban Housing

*“Now Take People’s Houses”*

stipulated that houses were owned by the government and only official authorities could grant permission to live there—in a word, there was no private property. The lawyer found us a room by the month in a cheap hotel, and we registered posing as students but using our real names. The place was dark, gloomy, and had the looks of a “date motel”. We agreed to “move in,” and brought a few clothes to hang in the armoire.

This is where we’d live until we were given permission to leave—if we ever were.



## ***Preparing to Leave***

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**T**he next day I walked to the local police station and made an appointment to present the documents required for the petition. From then on we had to live a double life, pretending we really lived in this neighborhood without being recognized by anyone who knew us from the hospital or from the other places we frequented. We tried to change our appearance as much as possible and come and go at night or very early in the morning, with no pattern. When we came home from the hospital we immediately changed into casual clothes. I changed my hair style to cover as much of my face as possible, and used reading glasses. We parked our car a few blocks away in a public parking lot and in the morning we went back home to change into our work clothes and start another day of our double life.

Our garage at home was on the ground floor and we tried to make the least possible noise not to awaken the “becados,” the students lodged in all the surrounding buildings who were peering out their windows at all times. Armando’s mother knew what we were doing and waited every morning to make sure that we were home and had not been picked up by the G2, Castro’s secret police.

This went on all summer and we were getting impatient, but our contact reassured us that everything was going as planned and in October we would be able to leave for Spain.

We received the letter from the police station and I went to interview with the contact person. He took down all the information we had concocted: we were students from Matanzas (Armando’s home town a few miles from Havana) living at the hotel, we had been married a few months, and some other lies that I forget. He stamped our passports and said: “Everything is OK. You will be notified of your departure date.”

Then in October 1962, the missile crisis erupted. Within 24 hours we were being prepared for an attack by “the enemies of the Revolution.” The army and militia were mobilized and entrenched around the island. Soldiers with machine guns and small cannons were placed around our building. The rooftop was used as a reconnaissance platform. There



## *Preparing to Leave*

really were American destroyers off our coastline, and our street was closed to traffic since it had coastal access.

Armando was quarantined at the hospital and could come home only for a few hours every two or three days. There were road checks, streets were closed around embassies and police stations, IDs were checked. Although no official curfew was declared, nobody dared go out after dark.

After three weeks things calmed down and we could finally return to the hotel. I went there to check our mail expecting news about our departure. The clerk handed me three letters with an official seal and told me that two men had been asking about us. The letters included a subpoena and an arrest order for Armando.

I felt dizzy imagining the worst: detention, accusations of treason, jail, never leaving the country, being sent to an unknown place to work for years...For one thing we did not want our parents to know what kind of trouble we were in until we had an idea of what was to follow. We had to do something quickly, before they started searching for us and discovered our real identity and plans. I decided unilaterally that I would go to the police station alone, because if Armando showed up he would be arrested on the spot as the letter stipulated. Armando resisted but finally agreed with my argument that women are better at telling lies—

or rather modifying the truth for the benefit of others—and if all else failed I could always burst into tears. So I went alone.

The person in charge of our documents did not look friendly at all and it was certainly not the same person I had interviewed with. I had to perform well to pull this one off! He started by asking me if I was really who I claimed to be and I showed him my passport. Then he asked: “Where is your husband?”

“He is working,” I said, “and cannot leave his revolutionary duties unless you specifically request permission for him to appear here. He has been quarantined in his job since the crisis.” (This was the only truth in my story).

He looked at me with an air of suspicion hoping to catch a gesture or a word that would give me away. Then I opened my heart to him. “I’ll tell you the truth: we come from another city where our families live. I am pregnant and I want to leave the country to get away from some people who hate me. His family does not know we are trying to leave. I was the one who insisted; this is all my doing and it’s going to cost me my marriage and now maybe my child...please help me!”

At this point my eyes welled up with tears—not of sorrow but of fear, but he couldn’t tell the difference. He kept looking at me intensely and said “*Compañera*, you have made a mistake. But the Revolution is generous. I don’t know if

*Preparing to Leave*

you are telling the whole truth but I am going to dismiss the case.” He tore up the papers, threw them in the garbage and got up to indicate the end of the interview. I took my stamped (cursed) passport and walked out shaking but trying to look calm.

I walked a couple of blocks looking for a public phone to call Armando and tell him the good news, but standing in the phone booth I had a sudden feeling of being watched, like when the little hairs on the back of your neck tingle, and when I turned around there was a man standing a few feet behind me pretending to be waiting for the phone.

Then I really panicked.

I dropped the receiver and started to walk away slowly and aimlessly looking back, sure that somebody was following me. I could not go home—they would follow me and find out. I could not go to my father’s business or to the hospital where Armando was working. I had to get lost. I walked to the shopping district, entering stores through one door and exiting through another. I went to the bathrooms, stayed for a while, always looking back and seeing spying faces in every passer-by until the stores closed and the crowds started to disperse. Only then did I walk to my father’s business and casually told him: “I’ve been shopping and am very tired. I’ll have dinner at your house and you can take me home later”.

He was very happy and suspected nothing. Close to midnight he took me home to Miramar where my mother-in-law was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. She knew everything but did not dare get in touch with Armando or my parents for fear of complicating matters even more.

From that moment on we lived with the fear that this episode would be discovered and we would be sent to jail for trying to escape our revolutionary commitment. Our passports had been stamped by a police station far away from where we lived, something we would not be able to explain to the authorities. In other words the passports were useless now. To apply for new ones we had to go to our local police station. When we presented the request the officer asked: "Where are your old passports? I am showing here that they are still valid."

"Oh—the cleaning lady threw them out with some old newspapers."

"What? How stupid can you be?" he said.

Oh, very stupid indeed.

## ***Santiago de Cuba***

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**B**y now the exodus of professionals was starting to take its toll in the medical community, especially in the inner city hospitals where the vacuum was felt more intensely and affected larger areas. The “Commander in Chief” had the brilliant idea of dispersing the competent and better trained physicians from the major teaching hospitals to areas in the country in need of organization and expertise. In other words it meant “mobilizing” personnel to remote areas and restructuring medical care upside down. From a social and humanitarian point of view this proved to be a working solution, but it disrupted and uprooted a great many physicians who received long assignments far from their homes. The changes were mostly political, and as a result some physicians were assigned to positions where

they could not practice their specialties, while the tertiary care hospitals were staffed with recently-trained physicians as a reward for their participation in the Revolution.

So it was that after we had been married for almost two years, with Armando working as an assistant professor in the University Hospital and me trying to fill my empty time at home, that he came home one evening with the news that he had to leave for two months to work in Santiago de Cuba as part of the rotation of hospital-based physicians in teaching hospitals. Santiago was the farthest-away city on the island, and was one of the places we had visited on our “farewell trip” less than a year before, knowing we would be leaving the country soon. And now Armando had to return there for an assignment from which he could not back out. He had not yet declared our intentions to leave, so he would be there on a Revolutionary assignment in the vanguard of the Revolution’s changes in medical care to help train new physicians. Life teaches you lessons at every turn.

“I’m coming with you,” I said.

“You’re crazy, there’s no room there for you and you’re not even employed as a physician in the hospital.”

“I don’t care”—I replied stubbornly—“I am coming with you.”

## *Santiago de Cuba*

My bed seemed to triple in size after he left. I felt like crying myself silly but then on second thought I thought to myself: After all he didn't abandon you, he is not in jail, he is not in a war...I imagined the deep pain of the families who had relatives in prison, of all the young people who had been executed or killed in the mountains, and everything else seemed so unimportant compared to this. Nothing really mattered as long as we were alive and had each other to hold on to.

So I talked to my former mentor in Pediatrics who was a very devoted Communist and explained to him that it would be a good idea if I volunteered in the Pediatric Hospital while my husband was working there. Two weeks after Armando had left I arrived in Santiago de Cuba ready to share the experience and protect my marital investment. He was too young and too handsome to be left alone for so long among all the *compañeritas*. Not that I was ever jealous or that he gave me any reason to be, but as the saying goes, *mas vale prever que lamentar* (it's better to foresee than to regret).

I arrived in Santiago de Cuba on a steamy morning in July. As I walked down the stairs of the plane onto the tarmac it seemed as if I had stepped into the crater of a volcano. Used to the mild Havana summers cooled by an evening breeze, I had never experienced such intense heat and wondered if our living quarters had air

conditioning as cold as the one I had in my bedroom at home. At least the airport reception area was somewhat cooler. I spotted him waving across the room, and as he crossed to meet me in the waiting area, we hugged and kissed after not seeing each other for only two weeks, though it seemed like an eternity.

He started talking about work, friends who had also been assigned there, and the place where we were going to live. “Don’t get any ideas, I don’t want you to be disappointed, it’s only a small room, but with our own bathroom!”

That was encouraging, I thought, as I had always taken my own bathroom for granted. This building had been converted into a residence shortly after the Revolution. It had been a private clinic for “affluent *gusanos*,” meaning rich privileged counterrevolutionary people. It was therefore symbolically dismantled and repurposed for the people’s benefit. As “servants of the people,” we were allowed in.

The building was located on a mountaintop on the outskirts of the city and had a magnificent view extending to the mountain range on the far side of the city. Santiago de Cuba is located in a basin surrounded by the largely-unexplored mountain range of the Sierra Maestra, where the rebel armies of Castro had operated since the start of the Revolution. The access road winding through elegant neighborhoods and beautiful views



## *Santiago de Cuba*

opened onto a garden in the front of the building from which spectacular sunsets offered a moment of inspiring beauty, with a magnificent view of the city reaching across to the other side of the mountain range and all the way to the bay, as if to remind you that nature and beauty are eternal and not affected by human behavior. I thought: don't look down, look up and you'll still see beauty.

The building had a large waiting room area that served as a lobby or common area in the evening, a large kitchen to which only the employees had access, and stairs leading up to the 4 upper floors where the rooms were located. Each room had a small balcony, barely large enough for two people standing close together, and a bathroom so small that you could take a shower sitting on the toilet. The room was as he had described it, reasonably comfortable with an iron hospital bed, an armoire, and a small desk and chair. But the building was so beautiful that you forgot where you were: It was surrounded by a beautiful garden with benches positioned strategically to enjoy the incredible views, palm trees, beds of flowers, and winding paths extending to the edge of the cliff: in all, a place to relax and enjoy the beautiful Cuban landscape. Later I realized it was also an opportunity to work and live among people who really appreciated the help

they received and reciprocated with the best gift: gratitude and honest friendship.

The Pediatric University Hospital of Santiago de Cuba was a group of buildings adjacent to the University campus that served a large community of urban families. It also served as a tertiary-care hospital for smaller community hospitals that referred difficult cases for diagnosis and treatment. The newborn and infant ward held 30 to 40 beds in a large room with large glass windows that let in light and insects both day and night; the only source of ventilation was fresh air and the small beds were covered with mosquito nets to protect the little patients from the ravaging beasts. Some of the windows had screens but most of the time it was necessary to remove them due to the intense heat and the dust they collected. At the bedside of each crib was a chair for the person staying with the baby, sometimes the mother or elder sister, but sometimes no one was there to console the little one in a strange environment.

Some families lived in remote places that were one or two days away traveling on horseback crossing rivers and mountains in a frantic race against death and were forced to leave their babies behind for one or two weeks; if they got better there was no one to take him home and if he died there was no one to notify. Other parents stayed at the door of the hospital day and night waiting for visiting hours to be

with their children and find out more about their condition. Only very sick children or the ones who needed constant supervision were allowed to have a parent with them at all times.

These conditions changed very soon and 24-hour passes were given to one person to stay with the children. It not only helped the babies adapt to their different environment but also relieved the nurses of tedious and time consuming tasks such as bathing, feeding and changing the patients. This was still the era of cloth diapers and each bed had a laundry bag to place the soiled diapers that were collected once a day and fresh ones delivered. It is not easy to imagine what the smell is like in the “gastroenteritis ward” at the end of the day. We physicians could identify that infection by the smell of the stool and we rarely made a mistake. It was just part of our job, no big deal.

It was a familiar sight in the emergency room door to see people lining up in the early morning carrying a bundle wrapped up in a towel or an old blanket waiting to be received into the mysterious world where their children might be given an opportunity to live—parents with pleading looks, not daring to ask any questions for fear of the answer. Some infants were moribund, dehydrated and infected, and it was too late for them even if they were rushed in and immediately taken care of. Others were admitted and stayed in the hospital until their

parents could come for them. It was July and the temperature exceeded 100 during the day.

This sad situation changed when smaller communities got access to primary care facilities better equipped to handle emergencies. Medical school graduates had to serve for two years in these clinics, like the one where Armando was assigned in Camagüey. To give credit where it's due, this was an accomplishment of the new government. Working in Santiago de Cuba was a unique experience I would have missed had it not been for the bizarre turn of events, an opportunity to work and live among people who really appreciated the help they received and reciprocated with the best gift: gratitude and honest friendship. It is a pity more people don't take advantage of experiences like this.



## ***Guanabacoa***

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**S**pain was one of the few countries to still maintain diplomatic relations with the new Cuban regime, and it was possible to get a visa to visit relatives or as an exchange student. Many Spaniards had migrated to Cuba and settled there while keeping their Spanish citizenship, and now were taking advantage of this opportunity to leave with their families. Armando's father was Spanish by birth and we requested an interview with the consul to inquire about the possibility of obtaining a visa. The consul, Don Patricio Aguirre de Carcer, explained to us that given our profession as physicians, it was a totally different situation and he could not help us to obtain a visa. But he suggested we try to get a scholarship and leave as exchange students, never to return. He advised us to get letters of recommendation from the French and German Embassies, and he would send our application via diplomatic mail with a good word from the Embassy. We got a letter from the German Ambassador,

Count Spreti, whom I had been tutoring in Spanish; one from the the French Embassy Attaché whose daughter was one of my German students; and one from the Swiss Ambassador whom I had met through my translation work.

At the end of May, barely two months later, we received the confirmation of the scholarship. It was important not to reveal our true intentions, because that could have resulted in the government boycotting our request and banning us forever from leaving the country. Next day the front page of the main newspaper in Havana announced: “The distinguished physician (*el distinguido galeno*) Dr. Armando Fernandez Fox has received a scholarship for the Fundacion Jimenez Díaz in Madrid.” My mother-in-law’s-phone was ringing off the hook with messages of congratulations and regrets: now they are leaving you alone, they will not return, or: how lucky they are, tell us how they did it! We were devastated because we knew this was going to ignite the revolutionary ammunition against us.

Next day Armando went to work at the hospital, but his punch card was not in the slot. The clerk claimed he knew nothing about it. “It wasn’t there when I arrived in the morning,” he said. Armando went to the Medical Director’s Office and the secretary very casually told him: “Oh, it’s because you’re fired.”

“But why, what have I done? Nobody told me I was fired!”

The medical director received him in his office, standing behind his desk and reviewing some papers and without looking at him said: “The reason is because you have requested permission to leave the country, and you have not informed the authority of your intentions.” He wouldn’t listen to Armando’s explanation that this was for a scholarship the authorities had known about for a year. He continued to look at his papers and dismissed him with a smile: “I suggest you talk to the Minister about it.” And that concluded the interview.

In fact the Minister knew about the scholarship and about the dismissal. Armando requested an interview with the minister the same day hoping that it was a misunderstanding and the situation would be corrected right away with apologies. He was well known in the Department after his many visits during the past year. The Compañero received him in an office covered with pictures of Fidel and Che. “Of course I remember you,” he said.

“Then please tell me since when is it against the law to request a scholarship?” replied Armando “You knew about this, you yourself told me what to do to obtain the permission, and now I have been expelled from my job.”

“Well,” he answered, “that’s a little surprise we have in store for people who don’t want to

fight for the Revolution. This is out of my hands now, you have to go to the Department of Internal Medical Affairs and you will be appointed to work someplace, somewhere in the countryside, for an undetermined period of time as a punishment. After that you may or may not be allowed to leave, provided you find a replacement for your position. And by the way, your wife will have to do her tour of duty in the Rural Medicine program or else she will not be able to leave either.”

Talk about being hit by a ton of bricks.

But we were determined to continue our fight. Next step please. The “compañero” in charge of appointing the positions and determining the length of the punishment was, to Armando’s surprise, a childhood friend from his home town of Matanzas, and was very surprised to see Armando there and was in a friendly disposition. After listening to the explanation of the problem he said: “I am very surprised that you have used the word *punishment*. The Revolution does not punish: it teaches, it guides, it enlightens.” He turned to his assistant, who was dressed up in guerrilla attire, and asked for the list of places to be covered. There were two places available. One was in the province of Oriente, light years away from civilization and accessible only on horseback. The other was in Guanabacoa, a small town near Havana, about 30 minutes



## *Guanabacoa*

drive from our home, where I could get a position as a pediatrician and still fulfill my requirement of rural medicine. This would allow us to live at home and work in the same place, so it was kind of a consolation prize.

Guanabacoa, a city of about 100,000, is only about 10 miles east of downtown Havana but worlds apart in its culture and traditions. It was like the Vatican City of the Santería religion in the eastern part of the island, with enough institutions such as schools, hospitals, and cemeteries to consider itself independent. I had attended my first “formal” school there when I turned seven. My father firmly believed that a child should develop first into a healthy animal and then into an educated human being, so my schooling had not been a priority. But one of our neighbors told my mother that there was a school in Guanabacoa that would send a school bus as long as there were at least three students to pick up, and she had already enrolled her two daughters. My parents agreed and that’s how I came to attend “La Virgen Milagrosa” school for girls (The Miraculous Virgin) in Guanabacoa. I had learned to read at home, so the school’s principal, a very nice nun who looked more like a grandmother, decided I could start in first grade. I attended this school for three years until the bus service to our neighborhood was stopped. From then on my

education continued in a different scattered way.

The bus that took me to school passed three cemeteries on the way: Catholic, Chinese, and Jewish. The bus attendant—an old heavy-set lady named Milagros—made us stop talking and cross ourselves out of respect for the dead when we passed the Catholic cemetery, but not the Chinese or Jewish cemeteries. At my tender age, I wondered what difference between dead Chinese, dead Jews, and dead Catholics could account for this difference in treatment. I never dared to ask but it always intrigued me. I am not sure I ever found out the answer.

Now, more than twenty years later, I was returning to Guanabacoa in a very different situation as part of the saga to leave the country. We had openly stated our intention of applying for the scholarship awarded by the Instituto de Cultura Hispánica in Madrid, but given our anti-communist and anti-government background, nobody in the medical community believed we had the slightest intention of returning to Cuba, even if they couldn't prove it. If our request to leave had been treated as a possible desertion, we would have to “serve the Revolution” for an indefinite number of years.

The year in Guanabacoa turned out to be one of the most interesting experiences of our lives. The first day of our assignment we took the short drive to the hospital in a somber

mood. We didn't talk much but I could almost hear his thoughts in the heavy silence.

"At least we are close to home," I said.

"Hmm."

"And we are going to be together."

"Hmm".

I wondered if he felt responsible for the mess we were in because he had refused to leave earlier, when it would still have been possible. It didn't matter at this point, I thought.

We had arrived at the hospital early to get a better idea of the location. The hospital occupied almost a city block and consisted of a main central building and three large wards, for adults, children, and maternity. The emergency room opened onto a big courtyard where ambulances could arrive directly at the door. It was very busy even at this early hour of the morning and that made a good impression on me: I had come here to work, the harder the better, so the time would go by fast.

We were greeted by one of the emergency room physicians, a small dark-skinned man with a big toothy smile and a hopeful look in his eyes upon seeing the new help.

"We are here to interview with the Director, we are the new physicians," said Armando.

"He is waiting for you," replied the dark-skinned man. "Come with me."

We followed him across the open courtyard and past the reception area where a door

marked "Director's Office" had been left ajar as if expecting a visitor. The physician knocked gently, pushed the door open, and announced us. Apparently we were "news" in this place.

The Director was sitting in a large swivel chair that made him look smaller than he really was, and his secretary sat next to him on a small stool that could not contain her voluminous body. They stood up to greet us, she with squinting eyes in a small witch-looking face and he a short round man with thick glasses and a smile that made him look like he had suddenly turned into a Mongol with his slanted eyes curling up embedded in the fat cheeks, expressionless and stiff. He told us that he had been living in New York for the last twenty years, in Staten Island, and had returned to Cuba to enjoy the "greatness of the Revolution."

The secretary, a curvy sixty-year-old trying to pass for a younger forty-year-old by wearing clothes at least two sizes too small, had the gaze of a viper. She took a good look at Armando from head to toe and I almost saw her tongue whipping out in anticipation. Then she looked at me and curved her thin lips trying to smile, probably thinking "She is not a problem,

looks too meek.” How wrong she was! Little did she know what a good grip I had on him!\*

The interview was brief and to the point. He outlined the need for extra help in all Departments and then proceeded to talk about his life in the United States: his house in Staten Island which he had sold and brought the money to Cuba, the low calorie spaghetti he loved, the car he had left behind...All this time I was wondering if life was so good there, why on earth was he here? Perhaps he realized he had made the wrong move but couldn't admit it, or he was looking for an opinion on the subject. We listened patiently. All this time the secretary was devouring Armando with hungry eyes and crossing her legs a little bit higher. Wasting her time, I thought. Each one of us was on a different subject like a string quartet playing in harmony but each one on a different melodic line. After a while the “God bless America” speech stopped, and the Director, rising slowly and painfully from his chair, invited us on a tour of the Hospital. We followed them through the sunny corridors, with him leading the march swinging his round body from left to

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\* My impression of her was confirmed at the end of our assignment when we finally received the authorization to leave for Spain. We asked the Director and his secretary if there was anything we could leave behind for them. She looked me straight in the eye and said: “Yes, him.” “Sorry,” I replied without missing a beat, “That’s the one thing I’m taking with me.” Some nerve...

right and the secretary swinging her hips at high speed to reinforce her intentions. I remember thinking she deserved a lot of credit, and wondering if I would have the stamina to do that at her age. We completed the tour and returned to the office to sign some papers and say good-bye, ready to start the next step of the long road we knew was ahead.

Our duties were to do the outpatient clinic every morning, do inpatient rounds in the afternoon, handle consultations from the emergency room during the day, and cover a 24-hour in-house shift once a week. We arranged to be on call the same day so we could commute together and have the same days off.

The first week, we found out we were not the only ones there on “punishment” assignments. There was another couple, both obstetricians, working at the hospital in the same situation as us: “marking time” waiting for their release. Their situation was worse because having the same specialty meant they had to alternate call days, so they were hardly ever off together. But they were still happy knowing this was the last step in their struggle to leave the country. There was also a young pediatrician, previously an orthopedist, who had had to change specialties to cover the position available for his two-year punishment. The rest of the staff was more or less with the Revolution (“integrados”) but they made no political remarks and we kept the

relationships on a very professional and impersonal level.

The Chief of Pediatrics was an old practitioner who had no formal pediatric training. He was a *de facto* pediatrician and had a great reputation in the community and a large private practice. The second in command was following his steps closely and eyeing the position for himself in a few years. By coincidence, the two had the same name, so when people talked about them they referred to them as “el viejo” and “el joven.”

I came in as a destabilizing force to change the way they had been practicing for so many years: requesting laboratory tests they never used (or knew existed), questioning their treatments, and teaching the head nurse how to prepare the intravenous solution to hydrate babies. I was not a welcome colleague in their placid and stable world. I had been part of only the second cohort of medical graduates formally trained in a specialty; previously the only requirement to practice a specialty was a medical degree and some experience from assisting a specialist or working as a hospital volunteer in that specialty. This was true not only in Cuba but also in many other Latin American countries until fairly recently; many small-town and village doctors in Latin America must still practice general medicine and resort to specialty hospitals in extreme cases. The

pediatricians in practice in Guanabacoa were such self-appointed specialists doing their best to serve the community and referring their difficult cases to the University hospitals. After the Revolution the residency system was established in Cuba, a long-overdue change, and I was a rare graduate of that new system. I had formal training in the best pediatric hospital in the country, and they were *de facto* pediatricians with no specialty training, but neither they nor I had a choice: we had to work together and make the best of it. Armando faced the same situation in the Department of Medicine, where his chief of service was a cardiologist in his mid sixties who happily relinquished his leadership to Armando in matters of medical decisions.

The Chief of Service (“el viejo”) introduced me to the head nurse, Esperanza. “This is our new pediatrician,” he said with a forced smile. “Dr. Martorell trained at the University Children’s Hospital.” I wasn’t sure if this introduction was a good or a bad omen. Did he mean I was not part of their world? For I was certainly not. Young physicians consider themselves the saviors of humanity, all-knowing scientists ready to save the world. This stage lasts until you encounter your first serious case and your magical healing gifts shake you to your foundation, but it’s the general feeling after graduation. I was still



under the magical spell and ready to test myself in the real world for the first time.

Esperanza proved to be a very kind, hard-working woman, and a firm believer in the Revolution. She had been working in the hospital for 25 years and felt like she was part of the life of “el viejo,” who had started as a young graduate in the Hospital just as she did. She was very pleasant and received me cordially and curiously as I was the first woman pediatrician that had ever worked in the hospital, and, I guessed, that she had ever seen. In the sixties, young Cuban women inclined to careers in health care thought of themselves as nurses rather than physicians, and she asked me why I had become a physician instead of a nurse. I told her women were more aggressive in pursuing their careers these days, and I was sure she would have been an excellent physician. She blushed and felt very proud of this statement. What I didn’t tell her was how difficult it had been for me to convince my father that I wanted to be a physician—but that’s another story for another time.

We worked very well together. After a few weeks it was almost as if she was reading my mind. I wrote the orders and she was preparing the medications before I even finished. The number of admissions had more than doubled because we stopped referring to secondary level

hospitals. I talked to the emergency room physicians and we agreed that before sending a pediatric patient out to another hospital they would consult with us. After that we had almost no referrals to out-of-area centers, which meant that parents could visit or stay with their children without traveling to the city and leaving their other children unattended. The ward was full most of the time and we even had to add cribs to accommodate new admissions.

Our hospital was considered “primary care” so there were no facilities to treat very sick patients. This status of “transfer unit” gradually changed as I spent more time in the hospital and took care of the inpatients and avoided unnecessarily burdening the teaching hospitals.

The same thing was happening on Armando’s Internal Medicine service, to the relief of the other physician on the staff and the pride of the Director who was being commended by his supervisors for the good work. In the end it was all for the benefit of the patients, the only thing that really mattered. This was a step forward.

One of my greatest achievements was to implement a hydration chart in the Pediatric ward that the nurses could use without having to consult the doctors. One day I was writing orders to prepare an I.V. for a dehydrated baby and Esperanza asked me timidly: “Doctora, I notice that your patients never convulse when

they get intravenous. Why is that?” I explained to her that I prepared the solution according to the weight and age of the patient and added the elements that made it similar to the body fluids I was trying to replace (I didn’t mention that the only thing that had been used so far was glucose and water). “Just like cars,” I explained, “you need oil for the engine, water to cool it, gas to make it go...” She looked a little puzzled by this new concept and said: “Yes, I see, but how do you do that?”

It was the break I was looking for. We both agreed that if I made a hydration chart with the amounts related to the weight, she would introduce this system to the other doctors. Ultimately I called my previous Attending and mentor to help me organize a course on pediatric hydration. It was necessary to make it look like a direct invitation from the Pediatric University Hospital to avoid hurting feelings. The course took place once a week in the evening at the University Hospital in the city, and all three staff pediatricians plus a couple of other doctors attended faithfully. Most importantly, they accepted the need to adopt new methods and were ready to apply their new knowledge.

The next shock for the nurse was the day the emergency room admitted a baby with fever and seizures suspecting meningitis. I asked the nurse for a trocar, a special needle used to do a

spinal tap and obtain spinal fluid. “Doctora, we never had a trocar here. Only the anesthesiologist has one.”

“But what do you do if you if you have to diagnose a case of meningitis?” I asked

She remained silent for a while and said: “I guess we never had one. All those very sick babies used to be sent directly to the city.”

“Well, Esperanza, I am not so smart that I can look at a patient and know what he has. I need to do this test now so please go borrow the trocar from anesthesia.”

She returned after a long time with a trocar that looked as if it had never been used—it was even a little rusty at the edges and much too thick for a small baby. “That’s fine,” I lied, “just hold the baby in this position and don’t let him move until I tell you.” I said a little prayer to the local Virgin (“La Tutelar” meaning custody) and apparently She came through again for Her people: it was a perfect tap and the fluid came out thick and purulent as I had suspected. The baby was started on intravenous antibiotics and was soon discharged in perfect condition.

The story spread like wildfire and the next day I heard through the grapevine how my Chief of Service had reacted: “Well, when you’re inexperienced, you have to do those tests to make a diagnosis. I don’t need to do that. After all these years in practice, I just know.”

I like to believe that my time there made everybody more aware that there is always room for improvement. I know they were all sincerely sad to see us go in spite of our opposing political views and I also know that we were there for a purpose, perhaps beyond our comprehension in the scheme of things, but we accomplished what was expected. The staff was more inclined to take risks and use all the medical resources at their disposal, there were fewer transfers, and we all felt good about it.

The outpatient clinic was located in a different building separate from the Hospital. It was scheduled from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. Monday thru Friday and 20 to 25 patients were given appointments. My assistant nurse, Milta, was a beautiful young woman who shared my political opinions; we “clicked” right away and developed a great working and personal relationship. Armando also had clinic every morning and ended up seeing almost double the number of patients assigned. He could never say no to a last-minute patient who could not get an appointment because he had been doing Revolutionary duties all night, or to the poor old lady who lived far from the city and could not get to the morning bus on time. In the afternoons we returned to the hospital, had lunch in the dining room, and made in-patient rounds and took consults from the emergency room.

On my first day of work my very first patient was a child about 5 or 6 years old covered with chicken pox. I told the mother it was very contagious, thinking to myself: I will probably come down with it in 2 to 3 weeks. (I did, and mine was one of the worst cases of varicella I had ever seen. I had all the symptoms in the book and probably even a touch of encephalitis, as the headache was like nothing I had never experienced. But I recovered in a week.)

One morning I came into the consultation room and found a big green banner hanging on the wall. "What is that?" I asked the nurse.

"Oh, Doctora, you didn't know? You won the award of the 'Emulation' for this month!"

"Oh, is that good or bad?" I asked fearing the answer.

"Very good! It's the highest revolutionary award given to a worker!" It turns out this award was given to the doctor or staff worker who worked the hardest.

Jesus Christ, I said to myself, now I am in real trouble. They are not going to let me go. There was nothing to do but accept it graciously and gratefully. Still I couldn't wait until the next month when the accursed green banner would be removed and given to somebody else who could better appreciate it.

Every morning now there was a long line of people waiting at the door of the clinic, and as the day went on I noticed that their faces didn't

seem to match the patients I was seeing. I couldn't figure out what was going on so I went back to my trusted source—my nurse. “Doctora, they are holding places in line for people who want to see you. We can only see 25 patients per day. These people charge five dollars to stand in line all night, and then they sell their place.”

Oh my God, I thought. The *compañeros revolucionarios* are going to think I'm running a shady business with the clinic! “No, don't worry, Doctora. Everyone in the hospital knows and they don't care.”

I decided unilaterally to increase the number of appointments available for “emergencies” so that people who had no money could have access to the clinic and we could give as many extra appointments as necessary to dry up the “black market.” Fortunately my nurse didn't complain about having to work extra time and was a great help screening the patients that were really sick.

I was especially enthusiastic about my work because although Armando had worked for a year in the countryside all by himself and had two years of practice in a teaching hospital, for me it was the first time I was working on my own, diagnosing and treating my own patients. To my surprise my patients got better with my treatments, and were very grateful for the interest I took in them. After a few weeks the

word had spread: There is a new “Doctora” in the clinic and she is good! I was also the first woman pediatrician who had ever worked there so it was a double novelty. We both liked our work, there was no political pressure involved, and we were actually practicing medicine.

But sometimes a hint of the political reality pierced through the invisible walls of our world to remind us why we were there and didn’t want to stay. One day a little girl with a respiratory infection came to the clinic with her mother. As I wrote the prescription, the girl’s mother pulled me aside and said, “Doctora, I have relatives in the States. If she needs any medicine that we don’t have here, just tell me and they’ll send it to me.” I turned to her and said (truthfully) that we had everything we needed here. She broke into a big smile and said: “I knew it! I knew you were one of us! Someone had told me that you were a *gusana* [counterrevolutionary] planning to leave the country, but I knew you were one of us!”

I don’t remember what I said, but I remember thinking: *Here I am trying to help your daughter, and you come here to spy on me and give me away! Now that I know your kind, I have to be more careful.* On that day I realized it was very difficult to tell friend from enemy in this environment. The walls of our magic world could be pierced anytime.



There were other very appreciative patients who gave us valuable gifts such as eggs, coffee, chickens, or other food items from their own ration cards to show gratitude. At first I was reluctant to accept them but I understood later that they needed to preserve their pride and dignity, to know they could give as well as receive. This is the basis of self-esteem and I wanted to help them recover it after so many humiliations imposed on them by “the system.” I believe we helped patients in that respect too.

It was a great satisfaction for us to feel the silent and humble way they applauded our job. We were doing a good job as physicians and that was all that mattered.

Another advantage was that since we had lunch in the hospital, we could use our food ration allowance for our families. For example, we were allowed one pound of rice per person per month, but we didn't eat rice so we traded it for eggs, to a hospital employee who raised chickens in her backyard.

The hospital food was abundant but starchy, and I was watching my weight, so I said that I was allergic to a lot of foods (especially carbohydrates) and could only eat chicken or beef. Every day I got a “special meal” with the compliments of the cook: “Doctora, don't get sick, the Revolution needs you!”

Every day we traded stories and gossip with the employees and the staff at lunch time.

Cubans are always ready to enjoy a good joke, have a laugh, spread gossip or have a *cafecito*—it’s genetic. The best stories revolved around Santería. As I was told, there were two main sects in the area: The Palo Monte or Yoruba, and the Nãñigos. The Palo Monte meant no harm and tried to protect their followers from disgrace and misfortune by obtaining favors from the Gods (the orishas) by giving gifts or having parties in their honor. But the Nãñigos were bad news. They did “work” to kill or harm their enemies and throw evil on them. They were said to use human remains in their rituals, and more than once we heard stories in the hospital about cemeteries and tombs being raided and corpses found with their hands cut off. At first I thought these were just scary stories but one of our patients who was a santero told us that these rituals were followed by human sacrifices—mostly children. I don’t know if there was any truth to all this but parents kept their children well within eyesight.

The High Priest of the Yoruba-Palo Monte religion had his home near the hospital and his followers (*ahijados* or godchildren) always consulted him before filling the prescriptions they had gotten from the doctors in the hospital. Fortunately he was a smart and shrewd man: “Let the doctors take care of your body, and I will take care of your spirit.” Well said! This reassured his people and kept him

out of trouble. And apparently His Holiness had included us on his “approved doctors list” so our patients didn’t have to ask him anymore if it was OK to follow our instructions. A few months after we started in the Hospital we were invited to his house along with the other “approved” doctors and staff to join a celebration of one the Yoruba High Holidays. It was homage to all the deities on January 6th, the day of the Epiphany in the Catholic calendar. As a special gift, the High Priest was going to be possessed by the spirit of a physician who had lived in the 18th century.

Guanabacoa started out as just marking time until we could leave for Spain, but turned out to be an unforgettable experience. We spent our year there awaiting our “liberation” with a mixture of happiness and nostalgia. It was the ideal setting to make a difference in the practice of medicine, to feel that your efforts were helping an individual, a community. That was, and the reason for becoming a physician after all, to heal and to help. But the price to pay was our freedom and the future of our children. So we realized that all chapters must end, and as the end of our stay approached, it was time to start making serious preparations for our departure to Spain.



## ***Preparing to Leave—For Real***

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**D**uring our year in Guanabacoa Armando went every week to the Spanish Embassy to inquire about the progress of our scholarship. The consul received him patiently to tell him that maybe next week he would have good news. We had involved him so much in our struggle that he spontaneously offered to take out of the country any documents or jewelry that we could not take with us. We took him up on the offer and gave him a package of family jewelry to be picked up in Madrid.

In the summer of 1965 we received the confirmation of the second scholarship and started the procedure again, first to the Ministry of Internal affairs to request the permission to leave and the “liberation of the position.” This time the Spanish Embassy was

more involved because it was the second time the scholarship had been granted to the same person due to lack of cooperation from the government the first time around, and it would have been embarrassing to deny permission to leave a second time. The Minister received Armando and told him very politely: "Of course you have permission to leave. The Revolution fulfills its promises. Now, there are 30,000 people on the waiting list to fly to Spain, and there is only one weekly flight on Iberia that carries about two hundred passengers. It's your responsibility to get a seat on that flight. Good luck." If he had given us one of the open tickets he kept in his desk for special occasions, we could have left in 24 hours.

We were in despair. We didn't know where else to turn other than trying to escape illegally by boat. This was the last card to play; it could cost us our lives or 30 years in prison. Our parents knew we were capable of anything, however foolish. My mother was so depressed that she commented on the situation with one of her neighbors, an elderly man who lived alone a few blocks away. She had become friendly with him in the long lines of the grocery to purchase whatever was available in the rationing card. She offered to do his grocery shopping and visited him regularly to chat with him and keep him up to date on the neighborhood political events. This man was a

*Preparing to Leave—For Real*

prominent writer and former law professor of the University of Havana, Don José María Chacón y Calvo. He was also the President of the Institute of Spanish Culture in Cuba and very well known in the circle of international writers. When she told him the story he replied: “Señora Pilar, do not despair, I think I can help. The President of the Republic was a student in law school. I am going to write him a letter asking him to let your children go to their scholarship. It may work and we have nothing to lose.”

A few days later he gave her copy of the letter he had sent to the President. At the end of January 1966 a messenger knocked at our door early one morning. These were times in Cuba when a knock on the door was either your salvation or your condemnation. Armando opened the door to a smiling *miliciano* who handed him an envelope with the presidential seal. “Felicidades compañero, una carta del compañero Presidente!” (Congratulations, Comrade, it’s a letter from Comrade President!)

We gave the messenger a ballpoint pen as a tip—one of the most appreciated gifts—and looked at the letter in wonder, the blue ribbon and the presidential seal before our eyes. The letter stated simply that Drs. Armando Fernández Fox and María del Carmen Martorell were recipients of a scholarship from the Spanish Institute and should be given the

necessary assistance to leave as soon as possible.

From that point on all the doors to freedom started to open. Armando went to the Ministry and explained that he was leaving for Spain on a scholarship, and as soon as he showed the letter he was treated like a *compañero* and the “Responsible” (official in charge) came out to greet him. We received the letter on February 1<sup>st</sup>, and on February 9<sup>th</sup> we left Cuba.

Upon requesting to leave the country, the authorities took an inventory of the contents of your house, and this procedure was repeated at the time of your departure. If there was one item missing, you had to replace it or you were not allowed to leave. If you claimed something had broken, you had to keep the pieces to prove it. The scrutiny was such that our ration card showed that we had bought a Chinese fan, which we had given to one of our coworkers as a baby shower gift since he had no air conditioning. The *milicianos* were adamant about retrieving the fan—it was obvious they did not believe our story. Fine, I said, you call my friend and ask him if he has a fan and how he got it. Once he verified the story he signed the release and gave us the piece of paper we needed for the airport authorities. My cousin Cesar had come to visit a few times to take some of Armando’s clothes that fit him perfectly. He put on 2 or 3 shirts, several pieces



*Preparing to Leave—For Real*

of underwear, jackets and sweaters and filled his pockets with socks. This was the only way we could get things out of the house because the Defense Committee of the block was watching day and night and if anybody came out of the house with bags or packages we would be subject to investigation and called to explain our counterrevolutionary activities. The houses could be searched day or night without a warrant or previous notice to make it more difficult to hide anything from the authorities.

Finally the day of our departure arrived. This was the big day to run for your life. Our parents and relatives were there to wave goodbye or to pick up the pieces of our dreams and take us home again. Two of the nurses of the hospital were there too. They were very much against the regime and had lived through our struggle during the time we worked in the hospital. They saw us off not only as a show of solidarity but also as if they were leaving in spirit as well. Later we learned through our parents that they had been fired from their jobs and placed on political “repudio” (repudiated) for being there and showing their support. Probably somebody from the hospital was at the airport as a spy and had reported them to the Director.

At the airport passengers were called to a glass enclosed room called “la pecera” (the fishbowl) where you could be watched while waiting to be called for a body search. Our

parents and relatives waited outside until we were released to another room. Some people had been turned back at the last minute, so getting to this stage did not guarantee your departure.

Armando was called to check his documents. "So, you are a physician." Then I was called. "You are also a physician. And you are leaving together. I have to check this out."

We went back to our seats in a cold sweat. Our family had witnessed the whole scene through the glass wall and was prepared for the worst. After what seemed like an eternity we were called back and told that we were cleared to go. Later we learned that the secretary of the Minister of Public Health had received the call from the airport; the secretary later told one of her friends, who also knew my mother-in-law, that she reported to her boss: "Dr. Machado, the call says that Dr. Fernández Fox and his wife are at the airport waiting to leave. What do we do?"

"Let them go to hell," he answered, "I'm sick and tired of hearing from those people." Fortunately, the next day we landed not in hell but in Madrid. It was the early morning of February 10<sup>th</sup>, 1966, the first day of our new lives of freedom.

## ***A Year In Spain***

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**O**nly as the plane was leaving the Azores, where it had stopped for refueling, were we sure that it was really true that we were out of Cuba.

We began to wonder what was ahead for us and how we would meet the challenges of our new life. We had literally no money, but we hoped that upon arriving in Madrid we could contact Armando's family in Asturias and retrieve the money that my father had exchanged at the rate of 10 Cuban pesos to one US dollar—about \$500, which seemed like a fortune then. We looked at each other with a mixture of relief and fear and I whispered: "What are we going to do when we arrive?"

He looked at me and answered: "I don't know, but all the people on this plane are asking themselves the same question, so

wherever they go, we'll go." That seemed reasonable enough for the time being and we concentrated on the food that was being served.

I had not seen a real piece of cheese in a long time so I decided to wrap it in the paper napkin and keep it in my bag for later—like a squirrel saving up food for the winter, I wasn't sure when my next meal would be. As it turned out I kept the cheese for about a week, and every time I felt it in my bag I felt comforted: I'll never go hungry as long as I have this cheese.

We arrived in Madrid at 1 AM local time. We got off the plane in the middle of the tarmac and were bussed to the terminal. The building was only about 400 feet away but we wrapped ourselves in woolen scarves and hats, as if braving the winds of the Arctic. It was not as cold as we had anticipated but nevertheless we were fully equipped with wool underwear, hats, gloves, heavy coats...and of course we were sweating bullets. Clearly the Cubans overestimated the Spanish winters—we were prepared for bitter cold, but not for the rain. We had no appropriate clothing but at the moment it was not important: We were there! We were out and we were Free with a capital F!

At the airport lobby was a group of representatives of the International Rescue Committee to receive the 300 or so refugees arriving without anywhere to turn. In 1966 the exodus had barely begun and there were no

Cubans established in Spain or in the USA who could assist newly-arrived refugees. We all depended on the International Rescue and the Catholic Charities to help us, and they did a very good job channeling and assisting people to reach their destinations.

We were bussed to a beautiful building in the center of the city, the offices of Catholic Charities in Spain. A group of volunteers was waiting and asked us to provide information about relatives or friends who might be able to help us. One line was for those who had arranged for someone to pick them up, and the other line was for poor souls like us who were at the mercy of their destinies. This is where Catholic Charities came and in really solved the problems of people who had nowhere to turn. They lodged the refugees in boarding houses all over the city and provided one meal a day in a dining room conveniently located within walking distance from the *pension* (rooming house) so refugees would not need to spend money commuting. There was also a clothing “depot” called *el ropero*, like a thrift shop only for free, where clothes were distributed to refugees without restriction on the number of pieces. I found a two-piece suit in perfect condition and added it to my meager wardrobe that consisted of two winter suits, the only pieces the travelers (or rather, deserters) were allowed to take out of the country. The *ropero*

clothing were good quality pieces donated by wealthy families who had sentimental connections to Cuba; most had relatives who had migrated to the island looking for a better life and had returned to their homeland with their fortunes to establish themselves and their families and enjoy their wealth. It was payback time for all.

Our situation was different. We did not want to declare ourselves refugees; we were exchange students with special visas, expected to return to Cuba within a year. We had left our homes, cars, and all our possessions in the government's care pending our return. If we requested political asylum, the Cuban government might retaliate against our parents and make their lives difficult or even prevent them from leaving the country or force us to return. There were not enough physicians at the time because most of the established doctors had left at the beginning of the Revolution. So we knew they wanted us back and we had to be careful to let enough time go by that we would be forgotten.

As we stood in a corner wondering what to do, a nice-looking gentleman approached us. "You look different from the rest, you don't look like refugees. Can I help you?" We explained our situation and he agreed that we should not write our names in the sign-in book, which would most likely be checked by the Cuban

consulate in Madrid. “Do you know anyone in Madrid?” he asked.

Armando replied, “Yes, we have a friend we will contact tomorrow, and my uncle in Asturias has some money that we sent from Cuba.”

The man pulled two bills out of his pocket and said: “Here—it’s not much, 200 pesetas, but it’s a start. Take it as a loan. I’ll take you to a *pension* where you can stay tonight, and tomorrow you can contact your friend.” He hailed a cab, gave an address to the driver, and we all sped away into the Spanish night through the beautiful city I had dreamt about for so long. The lights, the storefronts, the people still out at that late hour, the sounds of cars, buses, delivery trucks...that was my world.

The taxi maneuvered through narrow streets at incredible speed—you could almost touch the walls of the houses on either side of the car as it swerved through the crooked streets. We came to a stop in front of an old building several stories high with a massive door that looked as if it had never been opened. Our benefactor wished us luck and sped away in the taxi. He had never even given us his name. Later, when we learned more about the politics of Cuban issues, we assumed he must have been an agent from the counterrevolutionary faction looking out for Castro’s spies disguised as refugees. We never saw him again and to

this day his identity remains a mystery...maybe he was an angel.

On the front of the house were several doorbells with names next to them. The boarding house was on the third floor: "Pension Chinchilla." We rang, were buzzed in, climbed the narrow stairs dragging our only suitcase, and knocked softly on the door at the top of the landing. An old woman with curlers on her yellowish dyed hair and an unfriendly face waved us inside. "That's your room," she said, indicating a door to the right. "I'll talk to you in the morning." She turned her back on us and disappeared down the dark hallway.

The room was about 6 by 8 feet. The only furniture consisted of two narrow beds on each side with a mattress covering a wire mesh *bastidor*, and a dilapidated armoire. By now it was almost three in the morning and we had not slept in over 20 hours, but we were so excited that not even the exhaustion could induce us to sleep.

There was a window overlooking an inner courtyard barely covered by a ruffled drape, but no matter how hard I tried I could not see beyond the dark shadows of the wall across. I moved to Armando's bed snuggling against him to make room for both of us. I was cold, I was scared, and I could not believe that we were no longer in Cuba. I had this feeling that someone



would suddenly open the door and find us...and make us go back to Cuba!

The rest of the night passed quickly—only three hours really. At daybreak we heard noises. I looked out the window and saw a man perched on scaffolding looking straight at me. Apparently he was doing some repair work in the building, and although I was only in my underwear neither of us could care less about what the other was up to. He continued his work and I pulled the raggedy curtains together—I was *out*. (When we were still in Cuba, I remember saying once that I wanted to leave so badly that even if I had to leave naked I would. I still felt the same way!)

Armando went out to find the bathroom. There was only one bathroom for seven guest rooms. An old woman wearing a flannel house robe and curlers in her hair emerged from the kitchen holding a frying pan with two fried eggs in it. She yelled at somebody across the room and proceeded to the dining room with her breakfast, not even noticing Armando standing in the middle of the room. He returned to our guest room and said, “Don’t even open the suitcase. We’re not sleeping here tonight. I don’t care if I have to sleep in the park, but I’m not coming back here.” The vision of the woman and the smell of fried food was enough to give him a preview of what to expect in that environment—a big change coming from our

clean, modern, beautiful apartment where the smells were washed away by the cool breeze of the sea...

We got dressed and went looking for the curler woman. She was sitting in the kitchen drinking Cuban coffee. "Well, are you staying another night?"

We told her we weren't, and paid her for the previous night, about a dollar and change, and asked if we could leave our suitcase until later. With the money our mysterious friend had given us, we went out looking for a pay phone to call my girlfriend's brother Mickey, who was living in Madrid at the time. Mickey had offered to loan us some money until we got in touch with Armando's family. He received an allowance from his father, a physician working in the US, and was living comfortably while attending medical school. He came right away and brought a newspaper so we could search room listings.

"You should live near the clinic where you're going to work," he advised. "It's a nice neighborhood and you can save money by walking to work." After checking and underlining a few ads he found a promising room. "It's better if I call. I sound more local than you. If they suspect you are foreigners they will want to charge more..."

He said the landlord sounded like a young woman, and that the room was available and

that we should come over immediately. We retrieved our suitcase from the *pension*, taking for granted that our luck had turned, and took a taxi (that Mickey paid for) to a small apartment building in a wide, clean street near the main drag, Calle Princesa. A good looking woman in her 40s (but trying to look like she was in her 20s) opened the door and let us into the living room. “Here is your room. The bathroom is at the other end of the hall. There’s only one bathroom, but it’s just my younger sister and me living here, so you would be the only guests.”

Great! How long could one person stay in the bathroom, after all? (Very long indeed when that person is a teenage girl, as we would soon discover.) Mickey paid a three-day deposit and we went straight to the Instituto de Cultura Hispánica to register for our scholarships. Armando was entitled to a monthly stipend, but my student package did not include any stipend. We had to figure out how to live on \$80 a month.

We were assigned to start work at the Clinic the following week, but they informed us that the stipend wouldn’t be available for a few days. Once again Mickey came to the rescue and lent us enough money to tide us over until our finances improved. We called Armando’s family in Asturias and arranged for his uncle Pepe to place the money in a local bank in Madrid so

we could collect it. It was only about \$500, which was earmarked to buy our plane tickets to the US after our stay in Spain, but at least it was an emergency fund we could count on.

The next step was to have our Cuban diplomas co-validated by the Ministry of Education in Spain. This was a precautionary step that all Cuban doctors followed in case the diplomas issued by the now-Communist University of Havana were not recognized in the US, our final destination. Unfortunately, there had been a recent scandal in which Cubans living in exile in Miami had falsified Cuban educational credentials to pass themselves off as graduates. The Spanish ministry had discovered the forgery and had temporarily suspended co-validation, which was a huge blow for me: whereas my diploma had been signed by the first Communist dean of the University of Havana, Armando's had been signed by the outgoing dean, so it was "safe." This black cloud would hang over me until co-validation resumed in September. Co-validation also required taking courses about Spanish health policy, but we could study at home and simply take the test.

It was the rainy season in Spain, and although the song goes "the rain in Spain falls mainly in the plain," it should say "falls mainly in Madrid." It rained continuously for three days. My only pair of shoes—Italian leather, soft

as butter, high heels, thin soles—was drenched in water and when we returned to our room I had the great idea of setting them on the heater to dry. By morning they looked like two raisins, shriveled and hard. With great difficulty I got my feet into them to walk to a local shoe store to get something I could walk in: the least expensive shoes they had were a pair of think pink-mauve suede pumps with flat heels for \$1.99. I had never had pink shoes, but I figured, *hey, you're in Madrid now, baby!*

So next morning we returned to the Instituto Cultural to get our credentials and start work. Our friends Alberto and Cecilia were already in Madrid as exchange students. They had applied to the same program as us with the same plan, and were now residing in an apartment near the center of the city. They both were Armando's classmates and we had all been very close friends since our student years at the University, facing similar problems and hoping for better times.

They had left before us because Alberto had preferential status since his family had been involved with the government and were hardcore Communists. Cecilia was the one who had orchestrated the whole affair; her family was in the US and she was the anti-Communist *par excellence*. This made their situation very difficult on a political and personal level and the struggled to decide what to do continued

until they finally returned to Cuba. In that respect, Armando and I were very fortunate: our parents had always told us, “We want you to leave even if we never see you again.” That is generous love, unlimited devotion, and unconditional support. They had always been that way, but in this case their support was crucial.

We had gotten Alberto and Cecilia’s address from the registry and that same evening we showed up at their apartment. They almost collapsed when they saw us, as if we were ghosts from another life. Nobody in Cuba believed that Armando and I would ever be allowed to leave. We hugged and kissed and laughed and I think I even cried a little, about this wonderful opportunity that life was giving us to start all over again. We chatted for awhile and then it occurred to all of us at the same time—why didn’t we move in with them? The apartment had 2 bedrooms and 1½ bathrooms, and we could share the rent and utilities and be together.

So the next day we moved into the second bedroom, which was only large enough for a double bed. Roberto, a friend from Cuba, was working in a furniture factory loading trucks, and he got us a bed with a wire mesh frame and cloth mattress. It wasn’t the greatest bed, but it was free, and it just barely fit in the room—we had to jump in from the foot of the

bed because there was no clearance between the bed and the wall to walk around the side. The only closet was mostly full of our friends' clothes (because of Alberto's preferential status, they were allowed to take more items out of the country), but we didn't have more than a few items anyway, since ordinary Cubans could only take one change of clothes and one change of underwear when leaving the country. Under the bed went our duffel bag with our carefully arranged possessions—we pulled it out when needed, referring to it as our chest of drawers. One of the smallest tables I have ever seen stood against the wall at the entrance to the room; I used it for my cosmetics (allowance: one lipstick, one comb, and a powder box). I don't remember where the blanket came from, but it was certainly not enough to keep warm, so I went around the corner to a little shop running an end-of-season sale and bought a pair of "skijamas," the latest fashion in intimate apparel. The pants were green and the top was orange with green geometric designs. It looked awful, but the soft, thick flannel promised to do the job. I also bought a thick green hairnet to protect my teased hairdo and make it last the week.

That night I jumped into bed in my new pajamas, and Armando started laughing hysterically until tears rolled down his cheeks. "My God, you look like a baseball player from El

Marianao,” he said—that was a Cuban baseball team that always lost—“I feel like I’m sleeping with the pitcher!” This was certainly different from the satin and lace lingerie I’d had in Cuba. I ignored him and slept warm and comfortable in my outlandish new outfit.

To get to work we had to take two buses or a bus and metro ride. We tried to catch the bus before 9:30am to take advantage of the special discounted fare for working people; sometimes we argued with the bus driver over a few *pesetas* just to save money. We would work from 9:30 to 1:30 seeing patients and making rounds in the ward. At 2pm, lunch was provided in the staff dining room—sparkling silverware, linen napkins, white-gloved waiters, everything drenched in olive oil, the national food of Spain—for just 10 *pesetas* (less than 20 cents). The residents and students would exchange gossip and comments about interesting cases, and after lunch they went to a small coffee shop for espresso, which they took turns paying for. But as tempting as the smell of fresh espresso was to us, we declined the invitation since we couldn’t afford to pay even if our turn came only once a week. The fear of running out of money was more powerful than the temptation, and kept us strong to the end.

At the end of the day we went home to dine on baby formula (courtesy of the



pharmaceutical reps) and Solsona, the Spanish version of tea crackers. Other days we went to the city center where all the tapas bars were booming with activity and treated ourselves to a *bocadillo de calamares* (fried calamari sandwich) and a glass of wine for less than a dollar. On Saturdays and Sundays we were on our own and discovered small places away from the main drags that were not only cheaper but full of local flavor. (And we even treated ourselves to an espresso after lunch on Sundays.) Our favorite restaurant was Capri, in a small street named Calle del Barco near Gran Vía, Madrid's main artery. When we visited in 2001, it was still there and only the prices had changed. In 1967 for \$2 and change you could enjoy a three-course meal with dishes as sophisticated as "chicken a la Villa Roy" and sautéed spinach. The highlight of our week was combining dinner at Capri with a movie dubbed in Spanish. It was the funniest thing to hear Peter O'Toole in Lawrence of Arabia saying «Hala, chicos, que os teneis que levantar.»

Madrid is beautiful in all seasons. Spring is splendid when the trees start budding, birds tend their nests, and nannies are taking newborns out for their first strolls. It's a city full of life but that life has a pace of its own, not rushed or desperate but arrogant and self-assured, like a well-rehearsed minuet repeating the same movements with grace and dignity.

The Spaniards take time to look around and enjoy their surroundings. It's never too late to get to work—if you can sit and have a vermouth or coffee with a friend, that takes priority. The sidewalk cafés, the parks, the plazas brim with excitement after dark. One of our favorite activities was going for tapas in the old city center. People wandered the narrow cobblestone streets stopping at the many *taperías* to order a *chato*—a small glass of wine—and some tapas for a few pesetas, and listening to the strolling troubadour groups, La Tuna, usually groups of students singing traditional Spanish songs for fun.

On Sundays we visited the Museo del Prado at our own pace, each time choosing a particular painter or period and trying to sneak into the guided tours. Students had free access to all cultural institutions and events (the Patrimony of the State), giving us a great opportunity to enjoy the country's cultural treasures. We took full advantage of our student standing for these free visits and for free meals at University cafeterias all over the country.

Our schedule changed when I started to work part time in a different job later. Before we left Cuba, Armando's uncle Manolo had asked him to visit some friends in Madrid to bring news of the family and update them about what was really happening in Cuba. One of Manolo's

childhood friends, Don Ramon Acere, was the owner of El Corte Inglés, the biggest chain of department stores in Spain, like Macy's or Bloomingdale's in the US. At Manolo's encouragement, we called to request an interview with Don Ramon. His secretary was very discouraging and kept making up excuses why he could not see us until we mentioned the name "Manolin, from Gra'o." That was the magic word: the secretary led us into the office and Don Ramon greeted us from his imposing desk with open arms and a big smile.

"Hala, o'me, si tu pareces de Gra'o, no puedes negar la pinta!" He apparently saw Armando's resemblance to the family back in Asturias: they all have the same aquiline nose, a powerful gene from several generations back. Don Ramon asked us about the political situation in Havana and told us about his friends there who could not write freely about their problems. "They were all crazy," he said. "They should all come back here, this is their homeland, we'll look after them here and they have nothing to hold onto in Cuba but their own lives."

We told him we couldn't agree more, and that was the reason we were here.

"What are you living on?" he inquired. We told him about Armando's monthly stipend of 5,000 pesetas (about \$80). "You can't live on that!" (As if we didn't know.) "You need at least

15,000 pesetas a month to survive. Let's see. What do you do other than medicine?"

"Well, I can type, I speak French and German and I did translation and taught languages in Cuba..."

"Perfect! We just received some textile-making machinery from Germany for our clothing factory, and we need to translate the instructions into Spanish. Could you do that?"

Could I! (Besides, whenever anyone asked me if I could do something, I said yes and then learned what it was and figured out how to do it, and that approach usually worked.)

He picked up the phone, spoke briefly and with great authority to someone in the factory, and hung up. "You start tomorrow. Punch the clock whenever you get there, work for four hours, and you'll be paid as a full time employee." So starting the next day, after lunch at the hospital I left for my second job to work from 4 to 8. Since all the regular full time employees were leaving the factory by then, I had the office all to myself and could work undisturbed. This wasn't like translating medical literature, where I knew all about the subject. The technical translations were new to me because I didn't know how the machine was supposed to work—even with the help of a technical dictionary I had bought, I frequently needed to ask the mechanics. Sometimes I felt I was writing jargon that made no sense at all,

but the mechanics were happy to read it and even offered to explain to me what it all meant. “No thanks,” was my reaction, “as long as it makes sense to you, that’s enough for me.”

This other job was nearly an hour away at the opposite end of the city, but my salary made up the difference between Armando’s stipend and what we needed to survive. So that’s how I became part of the Spanish workforce, an employee from Induico, the clothing factory supplying El Corte Inglés, thanks to the generosity of Don Ramon—and, of course, to Armando’s Asturian heritage.



## ***Semana Santa in Grado***

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**T**hat year Easter fell in the month of March. In Spain, Easter and Christmas seasons are the two most important celebrations in the Catholic calendar. The fervor and reverence of the people, at least in the 60s, was expressed in many ways, from processions, masses, penitence, praying rosaries or *novenas* every day, and various mortifications to cleanse the soul. This seemed to be a satisfactory way to deal with the sins and experience a “rebirth” that would hopefully last until the next year.

Some cities are famous for the display of the sacred processions: lavish floats with banners of religious orders surrounding the figures of the Virgin holding Jesus on her lap, slowly progressing to the beating of solemn drums through streets covered with fresh flowers, lined with silent crowds bowing their heads and praying as a sign of respect and devotion. Even small children remain quiet and silent during these moments of profound faith feeling the spirit of solemnity around them.

One of these world famous celebrations takes place in Sevilla. Our friends and housemates Alberto and Cecilia had been invited to attend by a friend of theirs, a Cuban priest who was living in a monastery and had offered them free lodging there during Holy Week. He extended the invitation to us as fellow Cubans, and our friends were very excited at the prospect of taking the trip together with us and doing some sightseeing in the south. I told Armando this would be a great opportunity, and it would even be free!

“We can’t go,” he said dryly. “We must spend Easter with my family in Grado or they will be offended. We’ll go to Sevilla some other time.”

We declined, wished them a good trip and prepared our suitcase with the few pieces of clothing that we owned and the next day bought bus tickets for “el ALSA”, the equivalent of Greyhound buses in the US, and left Madrid on a rainy morning with anticipation and excitement, this being our first trip outside of Cuba. For once, we could choose where we were going and for how long; no one was following us and we didn’t need permission from the authorities. This was a symbol of what we expected from our new life in a free world: self determination. The trip was a small step in the right direction.

Armando had traveled extensively with his godmother all through Europe before the



*Semana Santa in Grado*

Revolution eliminated the freedom to travel (and the money to do it). But for me, traveling through Spain would be like reliving the stories told by my grandparents remembering the old country. This time would be different for Armando too: we were traveling together for the first time—and with very little money.

We boarded the bus in Madrid and as soon as we drove out of the city small cottages surrounded by gardens of multicolored flowerbeds replaced the crowded apartment buildings and backyards where children played and dogs ran about freely. After a few miles of his bucolic settings the landscape changed to barren dry land for as far as the eye can see. We were crossing the brown, rocky Castilian plain, dotted with ruins of medieval castles, the remains of an era of heroic battles and lifelong feuds among families. I remembered the epic poems and stories we learned in high school about noblemen on horseback rescuing captive princesses to take them to their own castles and the romantic adventures of Don Quixote de la Mancha, which I had read in its entirety many years before. As I daydreamed in my medieval fantasy as if watching a movie, it seemed to me that in a few hours we had traversed two different countries. The morning mist was lifting, and the profile of a mountain range with snow capped peaks appeared distinctly on the horizon and seemed to get

closer very rapidly. Not expecting another change so soon I turned to Armando: “What are those mountains?”

“That’s the mountain range of Picos de Europa; we have to cross to the other side to get to Asturias.”

The pass is called Puerto Pajares, and at that time the only way over the mountains was a very narrow road. Armando said it was often closed for days at a time in winter due to avalanches or in summer due to meltwater floods. Great, I thought, so we could be stuck here for days. I decided not to think about it: the sun was shining, everything would be OK. I didn’t say anything to Armando. I didn’t want him to think I was afraid—at least not too much. Maybe a little. Everything was so new, so different, and so wonderful...

The bus continued through the narrow road carved into the heart of the mountain, as we came out of the short tunnel the mountains seemed to have grown in size to a majestic incredible height, snow covered the top and the sides were spotted by pine trees that looked like toothpicks on a cake, looking so small you felt you could blow them out like candles with one breath. The rugged terrain descended into bottomless precipices and I did not realize how close to the edge of the road we were traveling until I saw few white bearded goats down below that looked like busy ants going up and down

*Semana Santa in Grado*

the cliffs. At some points the road narrowed to one lane and the drivers got off the vehicles to stop the traffic and allow the cars coming from the other side to pass safely. I thought, if other buses had made it, so will ours. And if we had to go...better to go in this imposing landscape than in some insignificant location.

We arrived in Oviedo after six long hours of traveling through this amazing scenery. Tio Pepe was waiting for us in the bus station to take us to the paternal family home, where he had apparently left his welcoming smile. It was another hour driving through the green mountain range, on a winding and dangerous road that Pepe had traveled so many times he said he could drive with his eyes closed. It was raining, and would continue raining the whole week—not normal rain where you hear the drops of water falling and then it stops. This was a different kind the Asturians call “urbayo”—it is like a floating mist that collects on the ground without making any noise and forms small pools of water that become rivulets through the cobblestone streets. This can go on for days and people get so used to it they hardly notice when it stops; it becomes second nature to wear raincoats and “madrenas,” a special type of wooden clog about an inch high that insulates the feet and prevents slipping on the shiny worn down cobblestones and the silky sidewalk surface.

The family home was located in the center of the town facing a Plaza flanked by similar houses two or three stories high. *Plaza La Blanca 7, Grado, Asturias*. I remembered the address from the many letters we had written to the family in the last few months to inform them of the progress of our efforts to leave Cuba and later on our arrival in Madrid. It meant home, roots, family, people who cared and supported you. This had been the family home for three generations of the Quililos and Fernandez where people had been born, lived, quarreled, and died, often in the same room.

As the old wooden door opened with a squeaking sound, Maruchi appeared at the top of the polished wooden staircase. She opened her arms wide, smiling and holding back tears of emotion, at the same time as her beloved nephew (“El Favorito”) waded up the few steps that separated them from the loving embrace that kept them glued to each other for more than a minute. Juana, the older aunt, was standing in the foyer visibly moved to see us—they had not seen Armando for more than eight years and had given up hope of seeing any of their Cuban relatives ever again. Pepe brought up our small suitcase and placed it in the living room, retiring promptly to his bedroom having accomplished what was expected of him and not inclined to witnessing emotional outbursts from his sisters.

*Semana Santa in Grado*

After exchanging hugs and kisses and news from the family Maruchi took us to the second floor where the bedrooms were located. There were four bedrooms and a full bath on the first floor Maruchi and Juana occupied one of them, Two of them had been the parents' and the aunt's bedrooms and were now empty though still fully furnished. The other, the biggest one facing the street, was Manolo's bedroom, the oldest brother, the surrogate father, and the beloved patriarch of the family. With a grand gesture Maruchi opened the door and showed us in to the "presidential suite." "Here," she said, "You are staying in Manolo's room. He gave us instructions that you should sleep in his room and use all his things while you were here. You know, to us this room is sacred—I only come in to clean it and nobody is allowed here." We understood that it was a great honor to use this room and looked around respectfully as if her words had suddenly changed the appearance of the things around us. The room was clear and spacious, a large window overlooked the Plaza and beyond there was a view of the green mountains we had just passed. It was simply furnished, a double bed with three layers of blankets, an antique armoire occupying almost all the length of one of the walls, a small armchair and a round table covered with a damask cloth down to the floor where a series of small frames with the

picture of the family ancestors were carefully arranged. Maruchi pointed at them with a sad look and said: “Esos son los mis muertos”—Those are my beloved dead. It felt like home to me from the moment I stepped into the house. I am going to like it here, I thought.

Shortly thereafter the rest of the family started to appear. First the girls Maria Digna and Conchita, the daughters of the eldest sister Concha who lived a few blocks down with her husband Paco and their three children. Alvarin, the youngest one, showed up a little later, curious and shy to see what the “americanos” looked like. Concha had to wait until they closed the shop—a men’s clothing store that also served as a tailor shop for Paco—to come and greet us. All through our stay in Grado they showered us with affection and gifts, and made me feel part of the family. To this day the family has grown, their children have married and started new families and we have always stayed close to them.

The ground floor of the house was a grocery store (“la tienda”) where Pepe conducted business with the help of his sisters. This store, scarcely stocked, was more a way to keep Pepe busy and away from the house rather than a real source of income. In reality the upkeep of the house was Manolo’s responsibility. He provided generously for his family by sending money from Cuba until Castro took power and

*Semana Santa in Grado*

the funds were cut. Hard times started when the stream of money ran dry and the three of them—Pepe, Maruchi and Juana—had to live on what was left of Manolo's money and the meager income from the store.

Spring can be very cold in Asturias and it is difficult to warm a large wooden house. In spite of the heavy storm shutters, which Armando closed very tightly, our room was very cold; it faced the Plaza and the wind from the mountains hit it straight on. We got into bed and the sheets felt like ice, and the blankets did not help warm up the bed. We looked in the armoire and found two terry cloth bathrobes, belonging to Manolo and his wife Eloisa. We put them on and added an extra pair of woolen socks we found in the drawer and snuggled on one third of the bed to keep warm. Later we found out that the aunts warmed their beds by heating a brick in the kitchen coals, wrapping it in flannel, and putting it between the sheets before going to bed. This is apparently the practice in homes where the heating is provided only by a fireplace. Meticulously knit colorful wool sheaths are made to fit the exact shape of the brick; these sheaths are given as Christmas gifts. Juana's was a powder blue knit cover tied with a ribbon and Maruchi's was multicolored as a result of using the remnants of different knit works.

We went to bed and huddled under the covers ready to take our first night's rest after the long trip and exhausted by the emotions of the day when we were startled by a deep loud moaning coming from downstairs. It sounded like a pre mortem guttural scream repeated rhythmically. Armando jumped up and said; "Pepe is dying, I am coming down." He dashed down to the main floor. I followed him but stayed on the landing awaiting news. After all, I thought, if he were really dying he wouldn't want to have me near his deathbed; I was not a blood relative. I heard Armando opening the door without knocking and talking to Pepe in a loud voice: "Que pasa, que pasa?"

"Nada, hombre, nada," came the answer.

"What do you mean nothing, you were screaming!"

"No, I was not. Leave me alone, I'm sleeping."

Armando came upstairs puzzled and told me he had found Pepe lying in bed, eyes closed, straight and stiff like a marble statue. "I don't understand," he said "but let's try to go back to sleep."

The moaning continued for a good while until it finally stopped. An eerie silence filled the house but I had the feeling he would start again at any moment. The next morning we told the aunts about it, but they said not to worry, that he did that every night and we'd get used to it. We would end up getting used to many



*Semana Santa in Grado*

eccentricities of our illustrious uncle during our stay in Grado, since as it turns out we would be returning there to spend the next summer.

But for the time being, we returned to Madrid at the end of the week to swap stories with Alberto and Cecilia, who had been in Sevilla for the religious celebrations, happy to return to our routine and continue the struggle to co-validate our medical degrees.



## ***Toledo and Salamanca***

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During our visit to Grado, the aunts had introduced us to some of their longtime friends, who came from all over Spain to spend the holiday with their families in Grado. Among them was a very nice widower nicknamed “Pepe Toledo,” because he had lived in that city for many years after leaving Grado. His son was a young man about our age, very pleasant and always smiling. We took a liking to them right away, and I guess it went both ways because they invited us to visit Toledo for the festivities of “el Corpus Christi” in June, and we were more than delighted to accept. This was a great opportunity to visit Toledo and eat real food instead of the University cafeteria food, and it was the first time we tried the scrumptious *jamón serrano*, to which Pepe T. treated us.

Pepe's generosity impressed us very much. He and his son lived in an apartment in the center of the city right along the route of the religious procession. Pepe Jr. gave us an insiders' tour of the town—it's easy to walk everywhere and take in the views from the top of the city down to the Tajo River, which meanders lazily around the ramparts of the old town. The first evening we spent there, the city was getting ready for the procession of the Sacred Monument. This is a traditional celebration of the Corpus Christi (body of Christ). The streets are covered from side to side to make a roof under which the huge *Custodia* (the cup that contains the Host) can be carried on the shoulders of the privileged, and paraded around town before being taken back at the Cathedral to celebrate High Mass. Only the best tapestries, Spanish shawls, and lace and silk covers are used to build these awnings. The garments are stretched from balcony to balcony across the narrow streets, forming a tunnel of multicolor embroideries and lace, filtering the light like a prism on the cobblestone streets, as if ghosts from another time were descending from above to pay homage to the Host. The night before, the streets are spread with thyme and rose petals, and people walk on them to crush them and release their fragrance into the air. These promenades last until the wee hours of the

## *Toledo and Salamanca*

morning, young people arm in arm and singing, older people sitting against the walls of their houses, and the lucky ones who live on the parade route sipping their vermouth and exchanging stories from previous *verbenas*.

The parade, or *procesión* as it is called, was an amazing event. The different religious fraternities, wearing their silk and velvet garments embroidered with the emblems of their orders, march in front of the Custodia that was carried under a yellow *palio*, fringed and richly embroidered. These are volunteers who donate their time to care for church affairs and maintain the altars and precious treasures in the churches. Preceding the Host are the Bishop and priests of the Cathedral, carrying big censers that impregnate the air with the sweet smell of burning herbs, singing hymns in a monotonous rhythmic voice; as they pass the crowd, they kneeled and bowed their heads in respect and humility. As the procession passed, people joined it and streamed towards the Cathedral, one of the most beautiful in Spain, to attend Mass. This is the highlight of the festivities and all the priests participate, singing and spreading incense around the massive golden altar built with the first gold that Columbus brought back from America to offer to the Catholic Kings. After Mass the celebration continues with meals served in restaurants and taverns all over town. Pepe and

his son invited us to the most exclusive restaurant, across the Tajo River. These country restaurants are called *cigarrales* and were the residences of rich landowners, commanding spectacular views of the rugged landscape. We crossed the bridge back to town after 10 p.m. as the sun was setting behind the hills with orange and red streaks of light—an unforgettable visit and experience, thanks to our friends.

We took another trip based on an invitation from a former freelance anatomy instructor from Cuba, Isidro Pérez, whom we had first met at the University registration center where he was guiding a group of refugees that he had taken under his wing to help them with the process of co-validating their degrees and with other legal matters. This service wasn't free, but it was well worth it to people pressed for time. Isidro had very good connections with the Spanish Ministry of Education and was established in Salamanca, reviewing anatomy for current students at the University there, just as he had done in Cuba for many years where he was well known to all the medical students who had studied under him. He had developed modern teaching methods to make the boring and long anatomy books more palatable, such as audiovisual systems with projections synchronized to a tape recorded explanation, playing 24 hours a day. Students

## *Toledo and Salamanca*

could walk in and out at their convenience to listen to the parts they were interested in. He reproduced this system in Salamanca with great success. We were all very happy to see each other again and he invited us to spend the weekend with him and his son—once again we were hosted by friends whose hospitality seemed limitless.

We walked the town up and down with his son Isidrito, who had become a very good tour guide. We didn't see much of Isidro Sr. because he was busy with classes, but at dinnertime he had always prepared a delicious meal for all of us and even gave us the best room in the house to stay in. How else would we have been able to visit Salamanca?

Experiences like these made our year in Spain even more memorable, since we could enjoy the flavor and energy of Madrid but also experience the traditions and slower pace of the small cities.

Sooner than expected the semester was coming to a close, and it was time to move on again. Alberto and Cecilia, our roommates, had to make a decision about their future, and after a tear-jerker letter from Alberto's mother, he decided abruptly to return. Cecilia, faced with the dilemma of choosing between her marriage and her future alone, went back with him. We said our goodbyes in Madrid's Gran Vía as they boarded a taxi to the airport; we choked up

with emotion as the taxi sped away. Would we see them again? But we realized that was the situation with our own parents too—this was going to be the pattern from now on, parting and not knowing what the future will bring. We were together, and that was our only safe haven.

For us, moving on meant moving to the closest place to home we could think of at the time: Grado. We packed our books and sent them by mail to Grado and filled our duffel bag with our clothes. By this time our wardrobe had acquired a few new pieces—I had brought two winter suits from Cuba and availed myself of another at the *ropero*, but as the weather became warmer I needed something cooler to wear. Inventiveness as always: in Cuba our friend and neighbor Mercedes had taught me about sewing, and that came in handy. We went to an end-of-season sale and bought three pieces of fabric and a Simplicity pattern. I cut and prepared the fabric for three dresses at home, and went to a friend of Roberto's—a Cuban couple who were living in Madrid permanently and had established themselves comfortably there—to borrow their sewing machine for a couple of hours to do the main seams. The rest I did at home by hand. I was so proud of my summer dresses! Never underestimate anything you learn—you never know when it can save the day.



## *Summer in Grado*

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**I**n September we had to take the foreign graduate examination, a prerequisite to apply for a residency position in an American hospital. This was a three-day exam covering all aspects of medicine, and our future depended on the results. Grado had become like a second home to us, so in June we moved there for the summer, since we could live free of charge and study full time without worrying about food or rent. Once more we were indebted to the family for this great opportunity, saving us precious time and energy—and the aunts especially were delighted to have us back. Even Pepe gave Armando a big hug when we came down from the bus and kissed me on the cheek like a real uncle. In the short time we had spent with them during Easter they had gotten used to Armando's jokes and easy laughter, as if the sunshine had suddenly illuminated the dusty and faded furniture and revived the colors in that silent and gloomy house. Juana smiled again with a twinkle in her otherwise somber

green eyes and Maruchi was sounding stronger and more assertive instead of just timidly awaiting Juana's reprimands. The only one who had not changed was Tio Pepe who, after his initial warm reception, went back to his closed and reserved demeanor and remained oblivious in his bitterness to Armando's efforts to engage him in normal conversation. He answered with grunts or monosyllables that could be interpreted as either pleasure or annoyance. But when Juana and Maruchi were not present, Pepe would talk to Armando about his son and his achievements in school or the gossip of the town, and seemed really happy to spend time with us when we visited him in the store.

After unpacking our few possessions, mostly books, we established our study time around the schedule of the house. Their day started early, seven in the morning, and we got up as soon as we heard Maruchi going down to the kitchen. Juana stayed in bed a little longer ("because she is not well", claimed Maruchi). Pepe who occupied the bedroom on the first floor appeared next through the door a short while after Maruchi had been in the kitchen preparing his breakfast. Then he had breakfast by himself and went down to open the store on the ground floor. As soon as we heard the front door close after him, we came down for breakfast and a little chat with Maruchi who was getting ready to go out on her daily food

shopping and her *cafecito* with her friends. Juana came down a little later and had breakfast by herself in the small dining room while giving Maruchi instructions about the daily chores.

We had breakfast in “el comedorín” (the little dining room), as they called the small room adjacent to the kitchen. The coffee was kept warm on the coal stove, the milk delivered daily was boiled and salted to the taste of the aunts and the fresh local bread baked daily in a small shop near the house smeared with hand whipped heavy cream, a soft yellow color and the consistency of silk that melted in your mouth. I am not sure which grains were used in baking this bread but I have never tasted anything like it: when the soft, warm bun was cut, a sweet aroma of wood and herbs filled the room and the soft inside sponged up as it were still in the oven.

After this hearty breakfast we went to the second floor to start the morning session of our studying. Each of us chose a favorite room. Mine faced the back wall of the house, so I would not be distracted by street noise; it overlooked the kitchen window of the house behind ours and early in the morning the maid kept busy cleaning and preparing the noon meal, but then she disappeared and it was total silence all day. Armando chose a very small room facing the street flanked by the only two

bedrooms in use in the house: the aunt's and ours. According to him the room was insulated from outdoor as well as indoor noises. We were both happy with the arrangement and kept our own pace and style of studying. He read aloud and I didn't. It would have been impossible for us to study in the same area but fortunately we had so much space it was never a problem, thanks to the size of "the paternal home."

We would study starting at about nine o'clock and took a break for lunch and a short nap, continuing from 2 o'clock until dinner time. Dinner was a relaxing time for all of us. Juana said Grace, Maruchi bowed her head in respect and said Amen, and Pepe sat still as a sphinx looking at his plate, motionless and stiff. We tried to make small talk with the aunts, mostly with Maruchi who had been all over town during the day and was bringing fresh news from the neighborhood; she was social and would talk to anyone who would listen. With Pepe one could never tell, but he sat and listened to the stories about Cuba, the Spanish war, the relatives and other local events. Juana interjected admonitions about the stories and Pepe interrupted once or twice to ask Maruchi for his special treats: "Maruchi, bring me a can of artichokes from the store."

"But Pepe, you know the doctor said it's too much salt for you, it's not good for your blood pressure," she would whisper.

“Ala, go. That’s my business. GO!”

Juana gave him a killer look and turned to Maruchi: “Ala, go and bring it, let him kill himself if that’s what he wants, what do we care? Go.” So down she went and brought the artichokes and both of them watched him eat as if he was committing suicide and they couldn’t help. Armando once tried to explain the consequences of salt overload and heart failure, and Pepe cut him off with “Ya.” (“That’s enough.”) and continued eating. We got the message and let things be regarding Pepe.

Maruchi prepared the meals—delicious typical Asturian dishes—using fresh produce, potatoes, beans and pork sausages, tasty and fattening. I tried to control my weight as much as I could and sitting all day didn’t help. All I could do was to eat foods that were low in calories and high in protein, exactly the opposite of what Maruchi served. I took only a small portion of the food and a large portion of anything green on the table. Juana observed me for a few days and commented: “Mucho ti gustan las vainillas” (you like string beans very much). I could have said, “I hate them but I will hate myself more for all the weight I am going to put on here.” I could have reminded them of their comment about Cuban women having big butts because they were lazy and sat all day. But I let it go with “Yes, I love string beans.”

We put in two more hours before bedtime following a carefully prepared schedule to cover all the material we needed to review, and after getting the blessings from Juana and Maruchi, went to sleep to be ready for the next day.

Juana was obviously the boss, telling Pepe off when it was necessary while Maruchi squirmed and trembled. In matters of finance she was in control of the household and the business, and obviously did a very good job allowing them to live on a limited budget even with non-paying guests like us. Her intelligence and strong character would have made a very good business woman in another time and place, but in Grado she was confined to her simple life of going to church and looking out the window to the Plaza. Her physical appearance was never acknowledged but played a very important role in the family life making her the “special one,” different from the others and the object of pity and respect at the same time. She suffered tuberculosis of the spine at a very young age and her back was severely deformed with a deep curvature that prevented her from sitting straight and caused her a lot of pain throughout her life. She never left the house other than to go to church every day or to work for short times at the store helping Pepe.

On the other hand Maruchi was always looking for an opportunity to go out and talk to

anyone who would listen to her. Maruchi divided her loyalty and her time between Pepe and Juana resulting in a constant running back and forth from the store to the house upstairs trying to please them both and avoid confrontations. It worked most of the time and they kept out of each others' way, testing their wills in different areas and making for very interesting family dynamics to watch. We were spectators and took no sides, listening to all with the same attentiveness and empathy.

Sundays we studied only half a day, went to 12 o'clock mass and strolled around town for the rest of the afternoon. It was market day and the Plaza was bustling with activity. The farmers brought their produce to sell in the open market, a display of cheeses of all shapes and colors, each one typical of a region in the mountains, so many and so different that the province's Department of Agriculture sponsored the publication of a 160 page book about the cheeses and the regions where they were produced. The cattle market was at the end of the town, but the oinks and moos and baaas could be heard as the animals came down the mountain road accompanied by the clapping of the wooden shoes (madrenas) worn by the farmers to walk in the fields. At the entrance of every house in Asturian towns there is an area for the family clogs lined up and ready.

Early in the morning on market day, Wednesdays and Sundays, the town was awakening –and so were we! - By the sound of the clogs pounding on the paved road approaching the center of the town, clapping on the cobblestones streets flanked by two or three story houses and resounding like an army of beasts and humans invading the peaceful morning slumber. By mid afternoon all was quiet again. The Plaza strewn with wrappings, cigarette butts, pieces of vegetables and bird droppings from the pigeons attracted by the free meal offered by the market garbage. Then the town returned to its usual rhythm of activity. The farmers and buyers gathered in the cafes to discuss the deals of the day, have a glass of wine or a drink of local cider (*un culín de sidra*) and prepare for the next session three days later. The market was the systole and diastole of the town, keeping the town alive just as a beating heart keeps a person alive.

There was another branch of the family in the town, a forbidden subject for the aunts. It was Pepe's former wife and his two children, Jose and Cynthia. Pepe was the only one of the brothers who married a local girl and the only one who divorced. The other four brothers—Manolo, Armando (my husband's father), Alvaro and Emilio—married Cuban women and were happily married until their death. It was an irony of fate that the only one who met with



instant approval from the family did not succeed. From the bits I could put together, it had been an ugly split leaving wounded pride on both sides. The aunts swore “those people” would never set foot in the family home, and of course they would never speak to any of them, not even to their children, who could not understand why their aunt crossed to the other side of the street when she saw them and would not even say hello or look them in the eye. Eventually they got used to this status quo and ignored them as well. When we came to town we were removed from this dynastic feud and Pepe introduced us to his only son Jose Manuel, good looking, very much resembling the Quililo branch of the family, intelligent, likable, and affectionate. What harm could it do if we talked to him on the street or got together for a cup of coffee? Well, news travels fast in a small town. On a Sunday afternoon stroll we ran into Jose Manuel, and he invited us to sit with him for a cup of coffee. We sat and talked for a good while in one of the local cafés—in full view of Maruchi’s friends and spies. When we returned home in the early evening we found the aunts sitting in the armchairs in the foyer. Juana was red in the face—as she turned when she was really angry—and Maruchi was sitting on the edge of the chair, hands folded on her lap and a stern look in her usually smiling face.

“You have been with *those people*,” said Juana accusingly while Maruchi nodded emphatically. “The whole town has seen you, I can’t believe you would do this to us!”

“Do what?”

“You know very well we don’t speak to *those people* after all they have done to us,” said Maruchi.

“Well,” he answered, “first of all *those people* are my cousins, children of your beloved brother who lives in your house. And second, I don’t know what he has done to you because you never told me, but he hasn’t done anything to me, and I intend to continue talking to him. You tell me what you want to do about it but that’s the way it’s going to be.”

I was surprised to hear Armando talk to his aunts so firmly and defiantly. We are guests here, I thought, what if they throw us out?

I guess they heard the voice of the young male of the clan backed up by Manolo’s clear wishes of having us stay there, and that was enough to bring them down from their accusing throne and take a deep breath before they uttered the next statement.

“Well,” said Juana, “Do as you please. Maruchi, let’s go to bed. Enough of this.”

Slowly and with dignity they ascended the two flight of stairs. We heard the door close and hushed voices talking for a good half hour. Once the house was in total silence we dared go

up to our room. All this time Pepe had been in his room next to the foyer, and I have no doubt he overheard the conversation. I know because next morning when we came down for breakfast he smiled at me for the first time since we met.

This childish and stubborn situation has extended to the second generation—José Manuel's two children Joséchu and Cynthia, as good looking and nice as their father, and his wife Concepción. We have kept a very close relationship with all of them, and Concha's children living in Grado or nearby also keep a cordial relationship with them. I hope that through the years after the older generation has passed, the reasons for this separation will be forgotten and buried.

We adapted very well to their daily routine and gradually learned to deal with their habits, likes and dislikes. On our side we also had habits that took some getting used to from the aunts. I say the aunts because Pepe was always removed from the events of the house—he went down to the store in the morning and around eleven o'clock called one of his sisters to mind the shop while he went out for a walk and a brandy. He then reappeared for lunch and a nap and went down to the store again until 6 pm. Before the church bell rang vespers at exactly 6 pm, the aunts were getting ready to go to mass, and Pepe closed the store and went again for a walk.

We remained in the house alone for the next 45 minutes or so and it was the opportunity Armando used to put more coal in the furnace. It was June but still the temperature went down to the 40s in the evening and the house was always cold all night. The aunts complained of the cold but did not want to use more coals than their budget would allow. Armando ignored the rules and fed the furnace to make the house toasty. When they returned from church Juana used to remark how warm the house was (“¡Que calorín mas guapo!”) and what good coal they were getting—until the supply ran out before the end of the month. They blamed it on the delivery boy cutting them short. I don’t know if this is a burden in Armando’s conscience but he never told them the truth about it. “Nobody ever asked me,” he recalls.

On July 26 and 27, the feasts of Santiago (St. James) and Santa Ana, the patron saints of the town of Grado, are observed and the whole town takes the week off. The opening of the festivities is High Mass in the local church and from there the procession carrying the images of both saints goes around the town and out to the cemetery, in reverence to the two or three generations of town residents buried there. The traffic is stopped for miles but no one seems to mind because it was in honor of the Saints, in the name of God. At least in the sixties.

## *Summer in Grado*

Nowadays I doubt the younger generation would be as patient and forgiving.

After this pious start the real party begins. And what a party it is. Day and night the bars are open, there is live music in the park, people dance on the streets with total strangers coming from other towns to join the fun, vendors of Asturian food spread out their tempting merchandise. It's a constant eating-drinking-dancing-singing party where nobody seems to need any sleep. The stores close, the banks post phone numbers at the doors for desperate customers, and even the physician's offices give an emergency number to call, but it's easier to find the physician in the park before he passes out on wine or cider.

For weeks thereafter people exchange anecdotes and comments about the good time they had, especially the older people who count their years by remembering how many people are missing each celebration and how lucky they are to have seen one more "romería". The closing ceremony is a display of fireworks to enhance the pride of the Gradenses.

Once Paco and Concha rented a car with chauffeur and invited us for a ride to the countryside of Asturias. We stopped at vantage points with spectacular views of the Cordillera Cantabrica mountain range, and had lunch at a restaurant situated on the edge of a cliff enjoying the magnificent view of the many

shades of green of the mountains and the most delicious food we had eaten in a very long time.

Summer was coming to an end and we prepared for the second part of our project. Our examination was scheduled for the middle of September and we reserved our train tickets well in advance to assure we could get a berth and sleep all night, arriving in Madrid well rested to start the first day of the three-day exam. Our intensive studying had made us confident and we expected to pass, so we planned a few days of vacation in the south of Spain after the exam to reward ourselves for the hard work.

As we waved goodbye to the aunts who stood at the front window wishing us luck, Pepe drove us to Oviedo in his car. We planned to return to Grado in a few weeks and they were already looking forward to see us again. We arrived in Madrid as planned and went directly to the building where the examination was scheduled to take place—and started another chapter of our interesting experience.

## ***Vignette: How I Learned German***

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**D**uring the unstable times right after the Revolution, while Armando was restricted to the countryside doing 24 hour tours of duty in a polyclinic, I was teaching German. I taught at the German Community Center and had a few private students at home, including the daughter of the Chargé d’Affaires of the French Embassy, a lieder singer who was polishing his accent, and the German Ambassador and his secretary who were taking Spanish lessons. This was a way to have contact with people from the outside world, as well as an opportunity to eat real food and drink Champagne and Scotch once in a while. One of our best friends was Annelise Veith, secretary to the German Ambassador, with

whom we developed a very friendly relationship. She invited us to her house to celebrate a birthday (I don't remember if it was mine or hers) to have drinks before going out to dinner. (We never did go out; after Scotch and hors d'oeuvres we continued with champagne and at the end of the evening we were all so happy that we did not even care for dinner.) She loaded us with shopping bags full of toothpaste, soap, shampoo, toilet paper, and other treasures and waved us goodbye at her doorstep. We were so loaded (in every sense) that walking down the hall I stumbled and fell (gracefully!) on the polished marble floor. I was laughing myself silly and could not get up and Armando was not much help because he could not lift me up or pick up the spilled treasure. We stayed there laughing until we sobered up enough to get to the elevator. Miraculously, we somehow made it home safely. Eventually the German embassy in Havana was shut down and all the staff left. We managed to keep in touch with them for only a few months before we lost track of them, but we never forgot their help and generosity.

How did I end up teaching German? My German professor took me as his assistant for the beginners course of the German Club sponsored by the embassy as a way to promote the interest in the culture of their country. I had been his student for several years, first in French and then at his insistence in German.



*Vignette: How I Learned German*

He introduced me to the Ambassador and recommended my translation services for medical documents and medical literature to the pharmaceutical companies doing business in Cuba. This was a very good source of income and led to a very interesting social life with people from another culture. One night at about 2 in the morning his wife, Leonie, called us crying and desperate, saying that her husband was not breathing and his face was purple. When we got there he was dying and a few minutes later when his Doctor arrived confirmed that he had had a massive heart attack. This left a vacuum in the German curriculum that the Embassy was so intent on developing. A few days later the Ambassador's wife asked me if *I* would continue teaching the courses. She was a professor of languages herself and offered to help me prepare the programs and provide me with teaching materials and guidance. I jumped at the opportunity and the courses were continued until the German embassy closed in Cuba a few years later due to political tensions. This was a very diverse group of people from all walks of life very motivated and a lot of fun to work with.

What I didn't realize at the time was how my German ability would not only help us get out of the country, but would help us survive financially in Spain!



## ***Vignette: The Boat***

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**W**hen we got married we moved into an apartment in my mother-in-law's building (or what used to be her building before the Urban Reform law transferred all the property to the government). It was ocean front with a terrace overlooking the sea and a private beach that had been built by carving out the rocky coast line and adding steps and a ramp to launch boats. My husband's uncle Martin had built four apartment buildings adjacent to his house and gave one to each of his sisters and brothers so that the family could live close together—a very generous gift indeed that served its purpose until the political situation in Cuba changed everything.

On the ground floor was a big terrace where the family got together for parties and storage

space for a boat that belonged to my brother in law. This was 1962 and his two brothers had left the country for different reasons. We decided to stay thinking that if we practiced our profession and stayed out of politics we could live under the system even if it was incompatible with our ideas in every way. Middle brother Álvaro's wife and children moved in with my mother in law after Álvaro had to leave to avoid being arrested. So we kept a small nucleus of the family together at least for a while. The little girl Maura Isis was three and the baby Álvaro Martín one year old, and their mother took them down to the terrace every morning to play with other children of the neighborhood.

One day one of the other children's mothers said to my mother in law, "I see your son the doctor is getting ready to leave by boat." "Oh, no," she replied, "he's not leaving, he's very happy with his work , he just got married... no, certainly not." "Well," the neighbor said, "I understand, you don't have to tell me, but... why is this boat full of tanks of gas and oil and even a few gallons of water?" She didn't know what to answer but she immediately went downstairs to check the boat, which indeed was ready to go anytime. Only the motor was missing, but that was conveniently stored in our apartment. She could only imagine the consequences if by accident somebody found

*Vignette: The Boat*

out and alerted the police! A boat ready to go, sitting on our terrace, the motor stored in our maid's room, and two counterrevolutionary doctors living upstairs—a clear arrest. To make matters worse the house next door, which used to be Martin's, was separated from ours only by a mesh fence and was now occupied by some revolutionary personality and guarded by *milicianos* posted all around it.

We had a family council and came up with a plan. The next day we prepared a “cleaning party”. All of us women and children went down to the terrace with brooms, buckets, mops and the monthly quota of detergent and proceeded to empty out the containers inside the boat. We managed to open an outlet in the bottom of the boat and gradually the thick fluids starting pouring onto the marble floor. We kept sweeping water, detergent and gasoline to the grass while playing with the children who were laughing and sliding barefoot on the greasy floor, pretending not to notice the *milicianos* with machine guns standing guard next door,

We kept at it until most of the smell was gone. But we still had to get rid of the motor. Again my father came to the rescue and dismantled it piece by piece to take it to his locksmith shop. He even used some of the parts for other repairs. We got lucky again, but I can imagine the disappointment of whoever was preparing their escape. This must have taken

months of saving small amounts of gas or oil at a time when they were strictly rationed, and now all his work was gone in a flash. We had a pretty good idea of who it was: Across the street lived a young family—a couple and two small children—who had been talking to other neighbors about the idea of leaving by boat. This man had been in prison as a political dissenter and his chances of leaving the country legally were very slim. A few weeks later they disappeared. For several months we heard nothing; then one of our neighbors told us that they had left by boat with a group of about 30 people including women and children. The boat capsized during a storm in the gulf of Mexico and he was the only survivor. He was picked up by a fishing boat and taken to the Mexican authorities for interrogation. We never heard from him again but the memories of the children playing and laughing in the terrace are still with us.

*Vignette:  
The Picasso Museum*

## **Vignette: The Picasso Museum**

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**I**n the fall of 1972 we took a tour to London and Barcelona with our son Armando, who was 4 years old at the time. I was four months pregnant with Alex and we wanted to have some special time to prepare him for the impact of the arrival of the new baby. As time went by we realized he had enjoyed his baby brother from the beginning and may not have needed preparation, but it was a good excuse to travel and taking him along was a pleasure. He observed everything around him, drew maps of the places we visited and rolled his little Matchbox and Corgi cars on all the monuments and cathedrals we visited; at the end of the day

he was still energetic and ready to go out for dinner and a show until the late hours of the night. I think the fact he didn't eat much and lived on Coca-Cola had something to do with it. He was an A-plus traveler and never complained or asked for anything and never knew that the word tantrum existed in the dictionary. (He probably suspected it was not in our parental dictionary either.)

We took a city tour in Barcelona and one of the stops was the Picasso Museum. The bus took us to the closest point near the museum but there was a walk of a few short blocks to reach it. As we got off the bus a feeling of emptiness in the stomach hit me. I told my husband I had to eat something. "OK, we'll stop somewhere after the visit," he said. "Let's go, we'll miss the tour!" "No, you don't understand," I said, "I mean *now*. If I don't eat something *now* I am going to faint!" He must have seen the look on my face or felt the impact of my words—I had never talked to him like that. I kept saying, "now, now..." We passed a *tasca* (a local bar) on the way, and I went in, sat at the counter and asked the waiter for a glass of wine and some cheese. He came up with two paper-thin sices of cheese. "More," I said. The man looked at me like I was possessed and kept bringing cheese. "OK, enough, thank you." My husband paid the bill and we continued to catch up with the tour.



*Vignette:*  
*The Picasso Museum*

When we entered the museum the tour was just winding down. We walked in the opposite direction to the line of visitors to catch a glimpse of at least one of the paintings. A woman in the line hit Armando Jr. on the nose as she was swinging her pocketbook, and he began to bleed profusely. We got out all the Kleenex and handkerchiefs we were carrying, but to no avail, the blood was gushing out of his little nose. We laid him down on a bench pressing the bloody tissues against his nose trying not to step on the bloody drippings on the floor. My husband went down to the rest rooms and brought some more tissue paper and wet paper towels and after about fifteen minutes it finally stopped. Armandito behaved like a pro—no crying, he took it all in stride, probably because he was used to these episodes of nosebleeds.

The visit was over and the guide was waiting for us at the door. So much for the museum. We didn't see a thing. I overheard my husband talking to himself: that's what happens when you travel with a pregnant woman and a four-year-old!

Recently we had a second chance to visit the museum when we went to Barcelona. The bench where we had placed Armandito was still in the same place. We stood in front of it and recalled the incident very amused. We have

visited many museums after that trip and forgotten much of what we had seen, but this day in the Picasso Museum we will never forget. It was part of our lives relived.

## ***Vignette: Sailing in Cancún***

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**F**amily vacations have been a very important part of our lives. They are a time to be together, build lifetime memories, and develop other skills—such as sports. That’s why Armando and I learned to ski in our forties—to have one more thing we could do without children after they grew up.

Since 1977 we had been spending a two-week family vacation each summer in Cancún. Our resort provided sailboats and a free one-hour sailing class. It seemed easy enough, so after I took my crash course I invited Alex to go sailing and try my new skill. It seemed so easy! Just move the sail or the rudder or both...We took off on a calm sea with a soft north breeze pushing us swiftly away from shore. The water was azure blue close to the shore, but it got darker as we sailed further from shore. Alex

said: “Mom, I think we’ve sailed far enough, let’s go back to shore.” “All right,” I said, “turn the rudder.” He did so, but as the boat started to turn towards the shore, a gust of wind turned it back toward the open sea. I tried the same maneuver again with the same results. The wind had changed and now we had a tail wind that made us spin in circles. I didn’t want to concede defeat and tried to reassure Alex that I was in control. Brave kid that he is, he didn’t say anything but his eyes were getting progressively bigger and shinier. “Don’t worry Alex, we’ll make it. Next time we are close to shore let’s jump out of the boat and swim to the beach.” He is a strong swimmer and we were both wearing life vests...

A figure appeared on a surfboard sailing towards us and gesturing violently. It was Felipe, the sailing instructor who had been watching us through binoculars and realized that we were in trouble. It turned out that a sudden change of wind had caused all the boats to have the same problem and only a few had returned on their own. He sailed on his surfboard behind us giving me instructions on how to handle the sail and we finally made it safely to shore.

I don’t think I did such a bad job but to this day no other members of my family have ever wanted to sail with me.

*Vignette:  
My Father's Citizenship*

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**M**y father was a proud character. He never believed that anybody was better or worse than anybody else. “We’re all different,” he said, “but in the end we’re all alike—human beings. That’s all. It’s like bread,” he would say, “it doesn’t matter what shape you bake it in: in the end it’s all just bread.”

When he came to the United States he found the freedom he had lost in Cuba and the big world that he had always dreamed of visiting. He spoke some English, mostly self-taught, and his worst problem with the language was understanding what was said when he was spoken to. “Because,” he said, “these Americans don’t pronounce it the way I do!”

After living in New York for a few years he decided he wanted to become an American citizen. "I want to be an American, I want to have an American flag on my coffin," he said. "*I want to die a free man.*" It bothered him very much that whenever we returned to the USA from traveling abroad, he had to stand in a different line in US Immigration, for non-citizens. "I am not a foreigner here. I want to be an American."

So be it. I got him the book containing the mandatory reading for the citizenship exam. "Do you want the Spanish version?" I asked. "No, I have to learn it in English, now that I am going to be an American like my grandchildren."

He sat every night with the book, reciting the answers and twisting his tongue to match the pronunciation of "these Americans." When he declared he was ready for the test, we got an appointment and I went with him as his



*Vignette:*  
*My Father's Citizenship*

witness. I was mentally prepared to comfort him if he did not pass the test, but I think this possibility never crossed his mind. We arrived early and sat in the waiting area, watching people come and go with portfolios of paper. Finally his name came up: "Salvador Martorell!" He got up and entered the room in high spirits and with a big smile. This was it! The officer was very polite and started asking the routine questions: How old are you? "84." And why do you want to become a citizen? "*I want to die a free man,*" he answered in his heavy accent. The officer then asked him some standard questions about the Constitution, to which he responded correctly.

Knowing my father was Cuban by birth, he asked him: Do you know anything about the sinking of the *Maine*? This was a famous incident that happened in the bay of Havana, in which a ship was sabotaged and blown up during the Cuban-American conflict.

My father's eyes suddenly lit up: "Yes, sir! I was just a kid, and my father took me to see the wreckage of the *Maine*..." All of a sudden his speech became fluent and he related the incident, and all of the related political and historical facts. The officer looked at him in awe, stood up and shook his hand. "Sir," he said, "I congratulate you. Nobody deserves better than you to be a citizen of this country."

My father beamed with pride, and as we walked out, clutching his certificate, he said: “Now I am really an American!”

He kept that document very carefully, and once in a while he would take it out of his safe to look at it. Just a piece of paper, with his picture, his signature, and the symbol of America, an eagle—like him.

My father is buried in Maple Grove Cemetery in Queens, New York, where he died a free man at the age of 86.





## **Afterword**

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**T**he first edition of this book was done in time for Mother's Day 2016. I flew out to Miami to deliver it in person. The book had been a complete secret so my mom was surprised and delighted, and we had organized a lovely lunch as a family get-together and to present the book.

A couple of weeks later, my brother Alex forwarded a whole stack of printed documents consisting of other material my mom had written for the book but whose digital copies were lost when her laptop crashed a few years ago. I manually transcribed and edited that new material, resulting in the new chapters on Madrid, Grado, Guanabacoa, Santiago de Cuba, and Toledo & Salamanca. I visited Miami again on December 2 to show my mom the galleys of the new version, for which she had a couple of

corrections. My goal was to have a new bound version in time for Christmas as a present; because of my work obligations, I missed that goal, but I felt sure I'd finish it by New Years.



On December 29, my mom suddenly (and painlessly) passed away. She didn't get to see this revised edition bound and packaged, but I'm sure she would be pleased at how it turned out. And if you're reading this and parts of it

## *Afterword*

made you smile or even brought a tear of fondness, she would be pleased at that too. Mom was very clear that she didn't want a funeral or a wake, with people spending an afternoon weeping and wearing black. She wanted to be remembered as a strong, independent woman who was both a devoted family member and a professional role model, especially for young women interested in the sciences or in healthcare. She wanted her friends and family to focus not on mourning her passing, but on celebrating her life. I hope this collection of essays, speaking in her own inimitable voice, will help you do that.

*Armando Fox  
San Francisco  
January 2, 2017*

