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Preface

"Our relationship with Spain needs to improve... fix it!" That was the main theme of my Oval Office meeting with President George W. Bush in June 2005, just three days before departing for my post in Madrid as the new US Ambassador to Spain and Andorra. The president had reviewed a draft of my list of priorities in Spain and agreed with its substance. He also underscored his priorities while sharing anecdotes and injecting a few salty words that, as a fellow Texan, I had no problem understanding.

President Bush considered Spain an important ally, but he was disappointed by the sudden withdrawal of Spanish troops during the Iraq war, which President José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero had ordered just days after being elected. It was understood that part of President Rodríguez Zapatero's campaign had been based on the Spanish military withdrawal from Iraq and that political campaign promises had to be honored. However, President Bush thought that the precipitous execution of this withdrawal was inexcusable. The overriding concern was that it effectively opened an ill-timed troop breach, which could potentially cause unnecessary military risks, possible casualties, and further place Coalition forces in harm's way.

That day, I walked out of the Oval Office with a clear purpose: to find ways to reduce tension, find common ground with the Spanish government and find a path to normalize our relationship. My primary strategy was to focus our attention on the two most prominent matters of strategic importance: security and economic cooperation.

In Madrid, a few weeks later, on my way to present my diplomatic credentials to King Juan Carlos I, I found myself sitting in a gilded seventeenth-century carriage drawn by six majestic horses and attended by a liveried coachman, footmen, postilions and a couple of dozen horse-mounted royal guards, wearing their splendid military regalia. I was formally dressed in tails, white tie, and gloves to match the regal occasion. Just as the cavalry escorted the carriage into the royal palace courtyard, the Royal Guard ceremoniously presented arms to me, and the king's military band struck up the "Star-Spangled Banner."

Overwhelmed with unexpected emotions and immense patriotic pride, for a brief moment, I recalled my recent meeting with President Bush at the White House. Then, in a flash, I was transported back to my childhood departure from Cuba, my early struggles in coming to the United States, and so much flooded my mind. Was all this a bizarre dream, or was it really happening? As I prepared to meet the King of Spain, Juan Carlos I, tears welled up in my eyes, and all I could think was, "God Bless America!"

Goodbye, Cuba

My brother and I were born into a loving family populated by our grandmother, a myriad of aunts, uncles and cousins. My parents were each among the youngest of twelve siblings. Through my mid-teens, my life in Cuba was blissfully sheltered and carefree, nurtured and watched over by our large family. Most of my aunts, uncles, cousins and relatives lived in Havana. It was our custom to get together on weekends to spend time with the family, gossip and enjoy each other's company.

On most Saturdays, we would gather at the home of my maternal grandmother, Matilde Pérez Leiva (Abuela Matilde). There, all family would come and go during the day, boisterously congregating under the roof of her spacious open-air terrace. The adults would occupy about a dozen rocking chairs in a U-shape formation, so they could face each other. The children around my age rambunctiously ran around and played games in the ample gardens surrounding the terrace, which was bordered with colorful flower beds and mature tropical fruit trees. It was a veritable Garden of Eden, at least to my young eyes, with coconut palms, mango, orange, lime, anón, mamey, papaya and avocado trees. When we got sweaty and tired of playing, we would gravitate back to the terrace and sit at the feet of our parents for a quick respite and a cold glass of

lemonade, until one of us was ready to play again. It was idyllic! These are the beautiful memories so many Cuban refugees of that era hold onto and savor even so many years later. The joy of family gatherings and the richness of our cultural traditions are the threads that bind us across distance and time.

On Sundays, we would go to the second-floor home of my father's four sisters, affectionately called *Las Muchachitas* (The Girls). My aunts lived there with a deaf-mute older cousin, Carmelina (Chiquitica). Tía Josefa and Tía Isabel (Nena) were widowed. Tía Caridad (Cacha) and Tía Lucrecia (Cuquita) were, as my brother and I used to say, "old maids." They held court while other uncles and cousins slowly arrived to join the weekly gathering in the softly lit living room. Every arrival and departure was greeted with a ceremonial standing and polite kissing of the cheeks. It was like being in church, up and down, up and down.

While the adults visited, my brother and I—instead of playing as we did at Abuela Matilde's—were expected to sit quietly and politely. We were served delicious food and showered with trivial but always welcomed gifts. Some uncles discreetly gave us silver dollars to tuck away in our pockets. When we got home, I would zealously put those coins into a large pink piggy bank. It would turn out that, after all that saving, I would never get to enjoy that small personal treasure.

While growing up, I was particularly close to my cousin Mauro Fernández; he and I were born a few weeks apart. Our mothers were inseparable, like twin sisters, until they died months apart at the ripe old age of 103 and 101. Mauro's parents and his older brother Jesús Manuel "Chico" Fernández lived a comfortable life, and enjoyed some of the finer luxuries, such as chauffeured cars. Of special interest to me was that Tío José Manuel "Ché" Fernández and his wife, Tía Angelita, owned a spectacular beach mansion in Jibacoa Beach, a two-hour drive from Havana. It was a magnificent house in a

paradisiacal location on top of a bluff overlooking Cuba's northern shore of the Caribbean Sea. I was invited there often and have delightful memories of swimming in the pool and goofing around the posh grounds with Mauro. I watched from afar my older cousin Chico's devotion to fishing in the sea and the surrounding freshwater streams. Later in life, he became a world-renowned professional sports fisherman and was honored for his life-long excellence in the International Game Fish Association Hall of Fame.

Havana, like most Cuban coastal cities, has excellent beaches nearby. The middle and upper classes had the privilege of membership in various beach clubs, with the general public having access to a few public facilities with equally beautiful beaches. My parents were members of the modestly priced Club Náutico de Marianao, which offered a lovely white, sandy beach, an architecturally stunning clubhouse, picnic grounds, a baseball field and handball, racquetball, squash and tennis courts. The club's pool was Olympic size.

Next to Club Náutico were the upscale Casino Español and Havana Yacht Club, and down the road, was the public La Concha Beach. As a child, I could easily stroll or swim in any of them, joining friends there to enjoy each facility. Although Club Náutico was nearly a one-hour public bus trip (Ruta 69) from home, I went there often to swim and play squash. I would spend the entire day swimming in the crystal-clear beach, diving off the high pier, occasionally swimming in the pool and playing lots of squash on the outdoor courts. In Cuba, what we called "squash" was a fast and dynamic game, played with tennis racquets and tennis balls on a three-walled court, similar to a three-sided handball court. I have never seen Cuba's brand of squash anywhere else. The rules of the game had some similarities to those of Jai Alai—a lightning-fast Basque sport that bounces a rock-hard ball off a three-walled court using a hand-held wicker basket. Those daylong outdoor

activities, under Cuba's hot tropical sun, tanned my skin to a year-round deep brown.

Next to the club was a private residential area. For several summers, my parents rented a miniscule efficiency studio apartment built over a garage. We would vacation there while Papi commuted to work. The apartment was a few blocks from the club's rear entrance. My brother and I still fondly remember those wonderful, carefree times.

Our comfortable home was in a solidly middle-class neighborhood named Santo Suárez, where almost everyone knew each other. When I misbehaved outside our home, Mami would soon hear about it, and there would be consequences. The neighborhood kids—Sixto Almodóvar, Mario "Mayito" Toca Capote and Manny Gutiérrez—were also my classmates. They would later become part of our Pedro Pan exodus; to this day, we remain in touch with each other. In Cuba, we would spin wooden tops, play marbles, stick-in-the-mud and street stickball (with a broomstick and a bottle cork wrapped in electrician's tape). We would always be on the alert to quickly pick up our game whenever we saw kids from another neighborhood walking nearby, as they were prone to raiding our marbles and running away.

Growing up, during my free time I watched US western shows on TV with Spanish subtitles such as *Roy Rogers*, *Hopalong Cassidy*, *The Lone Ranger* and *The Cisco Kid*. We would listen to action-themed radio programs. Some of my favorites centered around heroes and villains in the Amazon jungle or Cuban countryside settings, similar to Cowboys and Indians but with a Cuban twist. After dinner, invariably the family retired to the TV room and watched programing that mimicked whatever variety show was being watched in the United States. Lively Cuban music and Spanish versions of the popular US tunes were ubiquitous, but not on our home record player. We never played contemporary music. Instead, we

always listened to classical music. I did not pay attention to the labels, realizing now that we often listened to Rachmaninoff's "Piano Concerto No. 2," Lehar's "Merry Widow," Strauss' "Emperor Waltz," Offenbach's "Barcarolle" from "The Tales of Hoffman," Pestalozza's "Ciribiribin," among many others. As a family, we occasionally went to movie theaters to see typical Hollywood musicals, such as *Singing in the Rain*, *Gigi* and *Can-Can*, plus movies starring stars of the day like Doris Day, Lucille Ball and John Wayne. I enjoyed reading *Selecciones*, the translated Spanish version of *Reader's Digest* and, of course, illustrated comic books.

In my early teens, Joaquín Delgado, one of my dear school friends who lived a couple of neighborhoods away, received the gift of a green moped scooter from his widowed mom. I would ride on the back down the streets of Havana. Although the scooter did not go too fast, riding around in the city's heavy traffic was somewhat dangerous. Fortunately, except for one spill where I scraped my knee, we had no major accidents, but did have a lot a fun. Joaquín is also a Pedro Pan, and we have stayed in touch; he still loves to ride motorcycles. I, on the other hand, developed a healthy respect for the associated risks and decided to lay off riding motorcycles for the rest of my life.

My father was relatively quiet and laconic. On the other hand, my mom was outgoing and self-assured, not one to take slights or disrespect from anyone. Papi's full name was Eduardo Lino Aguirre León. He was loving but not demonstrably so. Mami's name was Altagracia Estrella Reyes Pérez. She was as quick to praise as to discipline me and my brother. I never heard cussing words or raised voices at home. My brother Luis Gustavo and I enjoyed growing up in a loving and secure environment. I don't remember Papi ever hitting us; that said, he could occasionally inflict punishment with a well-placed quiet pinch on the upper arm or thigh.

Even in Cuba's tropical humidity and heat, our high-ceilinged, one-story house seemed pleasantly cool, especially at night with the windows open to let in the Caribbean breeze. The house resembled a double-barreled shotgun; the rooms were separated by a middle hallway. My brother and I enjoyed the luxury of our own bedrooms. The house had a small front porch with a wooden swing for four with two seats facing each other. The porch was adorned on the side by a large areca plant. We would often sit there and strike up a conversation with neighbors strolling by. Now that I am so used to air-conditioned environments, I often wonder if my memory of the comforts of home is accurate. The open-air back patio had a ceramic-tiled floor and was enclosed by a stucco fence. The patio was big enough for my brother and me to run around, kick a soccer ball and do silly experiments, such as how the sunlight amplified through a magnifying glass could evaporate ants or burn a hole through a tree leaf. A narrow walkway and stucco wall separated the houses on each side of ours, which were all very close to each other.

I was skinny and full of energy but a finicky eater. If I did not finish what was on my plate, I would be scolded or punished, so lunch time usually became a tug of wills between Mami and me. One time, I pretended to finish my meal by showing a clean plate; while no one was looking I had thrown the meat on my plate out the window, hoping that it would be eaten by the dog next door. My aim was terrible. To my surprise, the neighbor came knocking on our front door, dangling a piece of meat from his fingers, wondering why it had landed on his bed. He left after Mami offered profuse apologies; then she tanned my hide with my own belt. Lesson learned! Don't throw things on the neighbor's property!

Papi was the co-owner of Fresneda y Aguirre, a small import business of soft goods, such as whole cloth, ladies' lingerie and swimwear and Vat 69 scotch whiskey. I remember

him being so proud to sell the "famous" Janzen ladies' swimwear. He and his partner, José A. Fresneda, were "jobbers" who marketed wholesale to retail stores primarily located in Old Havana's busy business center. Every morning, Papi would take the bus to his one-room, two-desk office in Old Havana and administer the day's business.

Papi was a paragon of good manners, absolute honesty and strong ethics. Family lore often repeated how he had turned down unsavory offers from corrupt government officials. Before striking out on his own, he worked as Special Assistant to Cuba's Minister of Finance. During his tenure, he was invited to participate in a lucrative corruption scheme; he refused and was thereafter ostracized and ridiculed by some in those circles for not playing along and lining his pockets with the ill-earned money.

Papi was handsome, too, and he knew it. He was always well groomed and fastidiously well dressed. He loathed standing out in a crowd and would quietly shrink to the background. He expected honesty and good behavior from his boys and would quietly reprimand us if we had poor table manners or made a public spectacle of ourselves. Those lessons and his living examples became part of my inner core. Papi was not into sports, not even as a spectator. He was not a typical Cuban in that respect. Unfortunately, he never took me to a professional baseball game, and I never learned to play baseball well. For a Cuban, that was sacrilegious!

Mami was a busy homemaker and oversaw all things related to home. She was sometimes assisted by a live-in maid. I recall the maids were typically young girls from the countryside, looking for room and board, some modest money, in order to save money to move on to other better-paying jobs in Havana.

Mami was as comfortable wearing drab clothing around the house as she was wearing a fancy evening dress. She doted

over my brother and me, and her word was the law. She was a gifted seamstress and was the go-to person in the family when someone needed anything sewn. Her magic hands and humming Singer sewing machine created wedding dresses from scratch. She altered my aunts' blouses and skirts and did just about everything professional tailors could do. And she never charged family or friends for her artistry. She would have been offended if anyone offered to pay her. Who would have thought those skills would come in handy in her future as a refugee in New Orleans?

From my perspective, Mami was in charge of everything related to our home. Papi was the wage earner, not too involved in day-to-day home matters, and always to be respected and not to be talked back to. Whenever my parents disagreed, they would go to their bedroom and resolve the issue out of earshot. While I never saw my parents showing any public discord, I always understood the unwritten rule that Mami was the lead parent in our family. If I wanted something that Papi was not too keen on granting, Mami was the sympathetic ear that could later advocate to Papi on my behalf.

Despite my dad's lack of interest in sports, I loved spending time with him. On some Saturdays, he would take my brother and me on a public bus to the bustling wharves of Havana Bay. From there, we would board a public transport boat, locally known as *Lanchita de Regla* to cross Havana Bay. On the other side, we would transfer to a quaint streetcar for a short ride to the town center of Regla. After seeing the colonial sites in Regla, we would retrace our short journey, finishing with a light lunch somewhere in Old Havana before returning home. My brother and I cherished those simple times with Papi, just the three of us.

I attended private Catholic schools from kindergarten to high school. My kindergarten, Colegio Pilar, was run by nuns, and from first grade until the middle of my third year in high

school, called *bachillerato*, I attended the Escolapios de la Víbora, run by Piarist Escolapio Fathers. My brother and I walked together, unattended, the two blocks to and from home to school.

I regret to say that I have never been a good student. In Cuba, I developed poor study habits and chose to be the class clown to compensate. I was adequate in language, arts and history but did poorly in the sciences. After completing the 6th grade, I barely passed from one year to the next. In some cases, I even had to carry forward into the next year some failing subjects like algebra, geometry or physics. My parents were disappointed with my lackluster academics and hired after-school tutors to help me with failing subjects... to no avail. I pretended diligently to do my homework but surreptitiously read comic books instead. If memory serves me right, I did summer school remedial work every year after completing the 5th grade.

During my first year of high school, I had to deal with school bullies. There was a small cadre of "bad boys" who liked to harass me and others. They were physically larger, boisterous and aggressive. One in particular, a kid named Orlando García, bothered me often, calling me names and slapping the back of my head as I walked by. I was embarrassed, but I tolerated the abuse. I hoped that it would stop on its own. However, my silence seemed to embolden Orlando to torment me daily, culminating one day with an open-handed slap across my face in front of my classmates. My cheeks were on fire, and my pride was deeply wounded. That was the last straw! I had had enough!

In frustration I chased him around the school yard, threatening him with a small box cutter I had borrowed from a street vendor. That did the trick: he ran away from me in fear. Unfortunately, one of the priests saw my aggression and took me to the principal's office, where I was promptly sent home to

return with my mother. I knew what I had done was a serious transgression and feared being expelled.

Mami was surprised to see me back at home in the middle of a school day. She asked what was wrong, and I burst out crying, unable to speak. She sat me down in the living room and brought me a glass of water, asking me to take deep breaths as she sat beside me on the sofa. After a brief silence, I hurriedly told her about the bullies in school and the humiliation that I had endured for quite some time. I recounted in detail the events of that day and being instructed to bring her back to the principal's office. Mami was curious to know every detail about the bully's actions, how I came to have the box cutter, and my intentions if I ever caught up with García. I responded that I had acted impulsively and never considered the consequences of my actions.

She sat quietly while I spoke. After I finished, she sat pensively for a few minutes before telling me that, while she understood my anger and frustration, violence was at best a last resort. She stressed that threatening anyone with a blade was loathsome, beneath our family's sense of honor and decency. She was mainly disappointed that I had not shared my problem with her or Papi before things had gotten out of hand. At the end of our conversation, I made her a solemn promise to never do anything like that again in my life. Then she marched with me back to school and into the principal's office.

Once we arrived at the school, I was instructed to sit in the outer office while my mother talked to the principal in private. After ten minutes, their meeting ended. I'll never forget how the principal stepped out, scowling and towering over me for a moment, before ushering me into his office. He said that he and my parents were disappointed in my actions and that such behavior would not be tolerated in the future. He also told me that I should consider repenting for my behavior in my next

confession. Finally, he said that García would also be warned to cease bothering me and that I was to report any further bullying to him. Then he thanked my mother for coming and retreated into his office. Thus ended my encounter with the principal, with no further consequence or punishment meted out to me.

Mami later told me that when she entered the principal's office, he asked her if I had told her about the seriousness of the situation. In response, she shared my version of events with him and proceeded to lodge a complaint, questioning how the school allowed such bullying to take place in such a brazen manner. Before the principal responded, she said that the school's lackadaisical hands-off attitude toward verbal and physical abuse, not surprisingly, drove me to this type of defensive, albeit unacceptable behavior. She then recounted how the principal sympathized with her comments and offered an apology.

I was never again bothered by García or by any in his band of reprobates. Over the years, I have brooded often over that incident, promising myself that in the future, I would deal with bullies and other adversaries quickly and not let things fester and get out of hand. I am still mortified by my behavior on that day in the schoolyard, and the memory of being reported to the principal. Disappointing my mother continues to burn in my mind.

In 1959, the last days of Dictator Fulgencio Batista's corrupt regime and the beginning of the Castro Revolution, Cuba was in what seemed to me to be in constant disarray, particularly in the field of education. At the time, I was ending my second year and entering my third year of high school. In Cuba, the high school cycle consists of five years, so I was

between my sophomore and junior years, according to American standards. Unfortunately, I never completed my third year because of the disruptions caused by political unrest. In those days, upper classmen, university student agitators and labor unions constantly called for general school strikes, threatening violence if schools did not close down. Schools, fearing reprisals, allowed those threats to be mostly successful.

On December 31, 1958, Cuba's corrupt dictator, President Fulgencio Batista Zaldívar, under pressure from various active revolutionary military fronts, fled the island to the Dominican Republic. His sudden departure left a power vacuum. For almost a week, after several competing revolutionary movements vied for power, Fidel Castro's "26 of July Movement" gained the upper hand in controlling power and, as it turned out, Cuba's future for the next six decades and beyond. Barely a week after Batista had fled, on January 8, 1959, Castro and his bearded troops, perched on top of tanks, jeeps and trucks entered Havana triumphantly to the cheers of citizens. Like most of the population, my parents and I were euphoric about Castro's rise to power, believing his lofty rhetoric and expecting the prospect of Cuba's new government transforming us into an honest and promising future.

However, it did not take long before Castro began to move away from democracy, toward socialism and eventually to openly embrace communism. He aligned Cuba with the Soviet Union, away from the United States. An early corollary of Castro's strategy was when he identified "imperialist" USA as the enemy of Cuba and the root of all Cuban problems. It was a fairy tale cause-and-effect that has remained constant for over six decades. The Cold War era and the Soviet Union have faded into history; nevertheless, Cuba still perpetuates that mentality to this day.

Another foil for Castro was the Catholic Church. In his early years in power, Castro saw and portrayed the Church as

an enemy. Angered by its denunciation of communism, he nationalized Catholic schools, muzzled Church publications and expelled most foreign-born priests, brothers and nuns. About 130 religious were rounded up in just one night in 1961 and bundled onto the transatlantic ship *Covadonga* bound for Spain, sailing on September 13.

As a student at a Catholic school, I was aware of the tug-of-war going on between Castro and the Catholic Church hierarchy. My antipathy toward Castro and his creeping communism grew rapidly in its intensity. With the school doors shut and idle time on my hands, I started gravitating toward a counterrevolutionary youth movement—*Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil* (DRE). A friend of a friend had introduced me to another student, a couple of years older, who tentatively recruited me informally into the ranks of a DRE cell. I attended various clandestine meetings, where most of the attendees were other students unknown to me, and where everyone spoke in hushed tones, identifying ourselves with aliases, never with our real names. The unspoken assumption was that the leader of our cell, who I remember always had a lit cigarette dangling from the corner of his lips, was a covert CIA operative who was well-versed in these counterrevolutionary activities. Looking back, I cringe at my gullibility.

Our overall aim was to be ready to support what we believed to be an impending American invasion, which would defeat Castro and set Cuba on the path to democracy, away from communism. I naïvely reveled in the secrecy and cloak-and-dagger atmosphere of our meetings. Once, I traveled by public bus to a farm on the outskirts of Havana, where our cell supposedly was going to undergo firearm training; our strict instructions were not to acknowledge each other while riding the bus. We expected to learn how to be urban guerrillas, supporting the expected American invasion. Instead of guns or rifles, we were given shopping bags filled with anti-Castro

propaganda to distribute covertly at bathrooms in our respective schools or in movie theaters. I was crestfallen on my ride back home. However, even after that letdown, I felt a player in an inspiring and exciting time!

Soon reality set in. Some of the kids on that trip were arrested, held for several days and reportedly roughed up during police questioning. When, by chance, I saw one of those boys on the street, he was visibly shaken, walking in a daze like a zombie and did not acknowledge my greeting. After that alarming encounter, I became paranoid and felt threatened. Fortunately, I was never questioned or approached by the authorities. But it was clear to me that eventually, I would get in trouble with the government, endangering my life and possibly my family's safety.

Fearing the worst turn of events, I had a conversation with my parents and asked to be sent away to the United States, for my safety. One day after lunch, I asked my parents for a private moment of conversation. They looked at each other with mild apprehension, trying to guess what mischief I had gotten myself into that required an unusual request. As I blurted out an itemized list of my activities with the DRE and the capture of some of my cohorts, they were in disbelief, suspecting that I was telling tall tales and imagining things. Papi took a more active role in the conversation than usual and proceeded to put me through a lengthy and testy interrogation of what, who and when. Soon, Mami was tearing up as she expressed her fear for my safety and the well-being of our family. After accepting my story and the reality of imminent danger, we collectively concluded that leaving Cuba was indeed best for my safety. Also, I agreed to stop my association with the DRE, cease to engage in any political activities and stop expressing my political opinions outside of our home.

Then, uncharacteristically, as if I was not sitting there, Papi and Mami wondered aloud if it was time for our family unit to

leave Cuba as well. It was no secret that after Castro had eliminated high-end imports, my dad's business had quickly dried up, evaporating our family's income stream and draining our financial reserves. I never knew the extent of our monetary difficulties, but it was obvious that our family's economic future in Castro's Cuba was uncertain, at best. Something changed after that heart-to-heart conversation. My parents started treating me as if I had grown older and more mature from one day to the next.

On a later day, during an after-dinner conversation, Papi commented on his recollection of what Basque communists did during the Spanish Civil War. He remembered hearing at his childhood home stories about how approximately three thousand Basque children were evacuated to the Soviet Union under a program dubbed *Niños de Rusia* (Children of Russia). Mami had not heard that story. As she hung onto Papi's every word, she expressed her fear about the possibility of a similar action in Cuba. In particular, she wondered if my brother and I, among other Cuban teenagers, could likewise be forcibly seized and involuntarily relocated to Russia for education and indoctrination. I overheard this theory repeated among my aunts and uncles at our weekly family gatherings.

During this time, the government was using all media outlets to actively hammer into the population's consciousness Marxist-Leninist indoctrination. Hearing those repetitive messages only added fuel to the fire, giving my parents' misgivings a reasonable foundation. As I listened day in and day out to their hushed conversations, as well as those of my grandmother, aunts and uncles, I could see their growing anguish as they witnessed their world spinning out of control. Their despair soon turned into real existential fears, which demanded quick action.

Furthermore, in an escalating turn of events, my parents' fears were buttressed by a recent Cuban government crusade to

educate (alphabetize) the rural illiterate population. Through casual conversations, we learned of thousands of teenage urban boys and girls, unprepared as educators, being lured or coerced to leave their families and deploy to the countryside to teach reading and writing to their fellow unschooled young Cubans. The typical conclusion of those family conversations was that that social experiment would yield dubious results.

Concurrently, the government was recruiting kids turning fifteen into communist quasi-military brigades to practice marching drills and learn military skills to theoretically fight the next wave of invaders. At home, my parents mentioned families whose children were being encouraged to join the government-sponsored militia groups. Daily, we were seeing the gradual militarization of Cubans of all ages and backgrounds. That new reality was very unsettling to our family.

All those threatening preambles were shaping my family's evolving thoughts. What began as the need for me to leave Cuba to avoid punishment for DRE activities was escalating into a momentous decision, reluctantly reached, for our family to leave our homeland. Thus, one late spring day in 1961, after updating our passports, the four of us walked with trepidation into the nearest police station authorized to issue permits to travel abroad. In those days, the government granted departure permits in random order and dates, with a telegram advisory delivered two or three days prior to departure. Arbitrarily, the father, mother or child, was given the exit permit, creating an emotional and logistic nightmare. Then, a few days after we requested an exit permit, a government official showed up at our front door to take a complete and detailed inventory of our household possessions. They counted how many shirts and shoes were in the closet, how many forks, knives, plates and water glasses were in the kitchen, the number of chairs, tables, refrigerators, TVs, record players, radios and so on, down to linen and wall hangings.

After completing the exhaustive inventory, the official informed my parents that if they did not return to Cuba in 90 days, their house and all its contents would be seized by the government and forfeited to the state. I surmise that the government's draconian strategy was to make it difficult for disgruntled Cubans to leave, discouraging the growing number of unhappy citizens wanting to flee Cuba and perhaps to prevent the corresponding disruption of Cuba's declining economy. If that was the government's intent, it proved to be a deeply flawed strategy, as decades later, with the fundamental problems firmly in place, Cubans have not stopped fleeing their country.

I felt lucky to be the one who got the first permit in our family on December 4, 1961. Three days later, I left Cuba as an "unaccompanied minor," never to return to the country of my birth. It was a traumatic and yet liberating experience.

Somehow my parents became aware of a program for unaccompanied Cuban kids, later dubbed *Operación Pedro Pan*. I, on the other hand, was blissfully unaware about the program or the details of what I was about to enter. Fortunately, the organization was under the direct auspices of Miami's Catholic Welfare Bureau, run by Msgr. Bryan O. Walsh and supported by the US government. It included facilitating legal entry into the United States without a visa, legally known as a "visa waiver."

For our family, the three days after the telegram arrived were a whirlpool of frantic activities. Papi and I were busy running around the city, securing last-minute travel permits, copies of birth certificates, notarized powers of attorney, Pan American Airlines flight tickets and other documents.

Meanwhile, conscious of a strict 66-pound-luggage limitation, Mami meticulously stuffed my clothes into a sturdy canvas sack she had sown for the occasion. She had to comply with a list provided by authorities of what I could and could

not take on the trip. Money, jewelry and other valuables were forbidden. When I arrived in Miami, I had exactly one thin dime in my pocket, in case I had to make an emergency phone call; I never had to use it and lost it later.

The evening before my departure on December 7, 1961, Mami spoon-fed me poached eggs while Papi gave me last-minute general advice, none of which was memorable. The next morning, the four of us took a taxi to the airport. As soon as we arrived and unloaded my one piece of luggage, we went to the Pan American Airways (Pan Am) counter to check in for the flight. Since we were early, we milled around the airport lobby for an uncomfortable number of minutes. I remember the deafening din of conversations all around us, of families similarly apprehensive about the upcoming experience.

Mami, Papi and my brother Luis Gustavo were dressed like they were going to church. I wore my best clothes: a brand-new charcoal gray sports coat, white dress shirt, blue tie and gray dress pants, as if attending a wedding. Mami had a bandana-like handkerchief covering her hair and dark glasses to hide her tears. Papi was fidgety, and his voice trembled with emotion whenever he spoke. Luis Gustavo was fascinated by the surroundings and seemed unaware of the gravity of the moment. When my flight was announced over the loudspeakers, my parents gently shepherded me toward a glass-enclosed travelers-only room that people called "The Fish Tank" (*La Pecera*). Right before I passed through the door, they hugged me so hard it hurt.

I found a place to stand next to the glass wall, startled to realize that although I could see my parents and brother from inches away, we could not hear each other speak. So, we communicated with hand signals and body language. It was a surreal experience. I could see that my parents, like all those outside of the Fish Tank, seemed despondent, hopelessly seeing me about to depart. I, however, stopped gazing out of the Fish

Tank and focused my attention on my surroundings. I grew apprehensive, seeing soldiers everywhere around us, with dour faces, carrying short machine guns (*metralletas*) hanging from their necks or shoulders. Would they let us through? Would they body-search us? As I lined up for my turn to see the emigration officer, I saw a young boy, who looked no more than eight years old, being pulled aside and shoved behind a poorly closed curtain. The soldiers searched him for contraband, patting him down and making him strip. I was afraid I would suffer the same fate. The entire process was terrifying and gave me a lot of mental stress and anxiety. Fortunately, nothing untoward happened to me, but the ordeal left a lasting impression.

Finally, I was told to step onto the tarmac, where a neatly uniformed Pan Am stewardess took me by the hand and led me to the plane. Before climbing the stairs to board, I looked back to the open-air, second-floor terrace of the terminal, where I spotted Mami, Papi and Luis Gustavo waving frantically toward me. I waved back and blew them a kiss. As I climbed the stairs, I heard a ruckus from the terrace and noticed that my motorcycle friends were boisterously sending me off.

Once on board the airplane, I was instructed to sit on the left side of the last row aisle seat. As soon as I sat down, I unexpectedly vomited my breakfast all over the lapel of my sports coat. I felt embarrassed, but fortunately, the nice lady sitting beside me in the window seat kindly attended to me. Despite her best efforts, I could not remove the stain, and the acrid-smelling vomit lingered the rest of the day. In retrospect, I realize how nervous, anxious and scared I must have been to have had such a visceral reaction.

As the plane gathered speed down the runway and took off, all the passengers cheered and applauded our departure. I tried to peek out the window, but being in the aisle seat, I really could not see much. Then the stewardess passed around some

soft drinks, finger sandwiches, chewing gum and cotton balls. The latter two were supposed to help with the change of pressurization and possible earaches. My very first airplane ride was a short 30- or 45-minute flight to Miami, so I had no time to brood about what came next, nor did I fully realize that I had just left my beloved homeland forever.

Two months later, my brother Luis Gustavo arrived in Miami. Shortly after our happy reunion, he recounted how they left the airport after seeing the plane take off, went straight home and said the taxi ride was eerily silent. My parents fell into a funk-like mourning after that. Mami cried inconsolably and wore dark eyeglasses to hide her red, swollen eyes. The entire household was in mourning as if a close family member had died. There was no music on the radio or record player or TV viewing, and Mami began wearing black mourning dresses. Mami later told me that she felt a vacuum in her soul as if I had died. Papi would try but could do little to assuage her despair.

Fortunately, my brother's departure telegram arrived in early February. Luis Gustavo left Cuba on February 6, 1962. In contrast with Mami's response to my leaving, she later told me that her spirits lifted when Luis left for Miami, feeling comforted that her two sons would be reunited.