

ODYSSEY

A Journey to Freedom

PABLO BETANCOURT

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PROLOGUE

WHEN I FIRST started writing this book, I thought about hiring someone to edit it and revise it. However, when I finished writing it, I decided to leave it just the way it was so the readers could hear the story and experience my accent as if I were speaking directly to them. Then I thought again, and decided to at least have some of my friends go over it for all those little things that somehow writers can never see as they go along.

It's been almost 27 years since I left Cuba and made it to America. I was 28 years old at that time. But no matter how long I have been living here in America, and no matter where I go, whenever I start talking to people I always get the same two questions;

First they ask, "Where are you from?" followed by the compliment, "You have a beautiful accent." In response, I usually smile, but my answer is always the same: "Thank you. I was born in Cuba, but I have been living in America for a long time."

Although I spoke English fluently before I came to the United States, I don't think I will ever be able to get rid of my accent. And besides, why should I get rid of it anyway, when it is something that makes me unique and people seem to like it, especially women. Sometimes I wonder if I write with an accent too. So for all of you who are reading this book, I leave it up to you to find out.

The second question people ask is, "How did you get here?" My answer is always the same: "I crossed the ocean from Havana to Miami in a homemade raft." And that's when, no matter how much I try to change the subject, people become very intrigued and want to know the story of my life.

Usually I would find it very difficult to tell them because it would take a long time to describe the sequence of events that brought me here to America; so I always tried to be brief;

"I escaped from Cuba on June 9, 1986, in a homemade raft made out of a truck's inner tire tubes, rope and canvas. I left with my brother Raúl and two friends. We spent five days in the middle of the ocean surrounded by sharks without food or fresh water. On June 14th, we were finally picked up by an American fishing boat 17 miles southeast of the Molasses Reef in the Florida Keys. Soon after, we were taken to a hospital in Miami where we spent 23 days recovering from sunburn and dehydration."

When I finish speaking, there is always silence followed by an exclamation something like;
“Wow! That’s an interesting story! You should write a book about it!”

Chapter One

MY CHILDHOOD

IF SOMEONE would have told me when I was younger that one day I would be writing a book about the story of my life, I would have never believed it. Why me? I had a normal life. I was a happy-go-lucky young boy like any other growing up in Havana, Cuba, a pristine island paradise on Earth. With the exception of a couple of life incidents which I will later describe in this book that were my early introduction to the harsh realities of life, everything went pretty smoothly during my first decade of life.

I was born on June 10, 1958, in Havana, Cuba, in a small town called San Miguel del Padron where we lived until I turned five. One could say that San Miguel del Padron is like one of the black ghettos of Cuba. Descendants of slaves have been living in towns like this for centuries. I was born into a family of six kids. I was the third after my brother Raúl and my oldest brother Daniel. Daniel actually was my first cousin, but my parents had

accepted responsibility for raising him as their own child after his real mother, aunt Ana Luisa, my mother's sister, committed suicide. That was an incident that, although I was a very young child, I still remember vividly; My aunt Esther had stormed into our house screaming that Ana Luisa had set herself on fire. I was only five years old; however, the memories are still etched very deeply in my mind as if it happened only yesterday.

That night I was left in the house with the rest of my siblings and my grandmother Margarita, and I almost killed myself accidentally after opening a drawer where a loaded gun that belonged to my father was kept. My father had left home in a hurry and forgot to lock up the drawer. In later years my mother explained to me that aunt Ana Luisa decided to kill herself after finding out that her husband was being unfaithful. She set herself on fire in front of him to make him feel guilty for his infidelities. However, Ana Luisa did not die instantly. She spent about a week in the hospital. Before dying, she whispered in my mother's ear and made her promise to take care of her son, Daniel.

My father worked as a longshoreman, and my mother was a full-time housewife. Working as a longshoreman in Havana in the late 1950s made it easy for him to get involved with the Cuban revolution. He was young, poor, full of revolutionary fervor, and his job placed him at the harbor where a lot of interesting activities would take place. One such activity was the importation of

illegal weapons that would help Castro overthrow the corrupt government of that time.

My father was right in the heart of the action. He fought for the revolution along with thousands of others who were fed up with Batista's government and helped Fidel Castro instill the onset of one of the world's most fierce dictatorships. But of course, as with all revolutions, there was always the chance that the outcome might be a worse state of affairs than the original problem ever was.

Castro's victory turned out to be the worst nightmare of the nation, the incarnation of the demons that had lurked over Cuba for so long. At the time, my father believed in Castro and in all of his good intentions for the future of Cuba. As a result of his work on behalf of the new government, we were able to move out of the ghetto and into a brand new neighborhood established for middle class families; it was called Havana del Este¹. It was a city being built by a famous developer named Pastorita Nuñez. The new house was great; everything was clean and new. We were right there by the ocean, in the same town where Ernest Hemingway was inspired to write his famous novel, *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Life was wonderful. I had my parents who gave me all the love in the world, my siblings who filled the house with even more love, and my friends who surrounded me every day as we had fun in the sun. What else could a little boy want!

Things were quite different however, as I turned nine. All of a sudden, my little idealistic, happy world had changed forever. It was about 8 a.m. on May 27, 1967. My brothers and I had all woken up as usual and were getting ready for school. There was my oldest brother, Daniel, who was 13; my brother Raúl, who was 11, Jose, who was seven, and Armando, almost four years old. My mother was in the kitchen preparing breakfast, and my little 11-month-old sister was probably in her cradle fast asleep.

My grandmother, Margarita, was helping my mother in the kitchen. My father had just returned the night before after being away for almost two months at some function or other related to post-revolutionary attacks and activities. The revolution did not end overnight. There was still a lot of fighting, a lot of counter-revolutions made by those who supported the old government and those who felt betrayed by Castro, who had already become a ruthless dictator turning Cuba into a communist country instead of instilling democracy as he had originally promised. So my father would be away a lot dealing with problems such as these, and on this day he had just gotten back. We were all sitting at the table full of excitement and mirth, ready and waiting for him to come join us at the breakfast table.

All of a sudden, there was a loud bang. We were all startled. *What was that? Was it thundering outside? Did something fall inside one of the other*

rooms? My mother ran towards their room where my father was getting ready. She tried to open the door but it was locked. She started banging on the door, screaming for him to come out. She kept on screaming his name but got no response from him. So she ran out to get one of the neighbors. My brothers and I were all confused. We had no idea what was going on.

The neighbor, Pedro, a friend of my father, came back with my mom and kicked the door open. My mother let out an agonizing scream. I immediately ran to the room to see what the matter was. There I witnessed this gory scene where my father was lying down on the bed with a 45mm handgun in his hand. Blood was gushing from his head and splashed all over the pillows. Someone yelled out, "Let's get a car!" It was our version of someone calling 911.

They carried my father out of the room, and a trail of blood followed his body. At that moment, I remember feeling that something really terrible had happened. Tragedy had struck our family again.

None of us made it to school that day, and a neighbor, Teresa, who lived next door, took care of us and fed us for the day until my mom came home from the hospital later that night. She was completely devastated and I could see from the look on her face that she had been crying a lot. The house was filled with turmoil. It was as if everyone we knew was there – family members, all of the

neighbors, and even the police – all coming and going.

I recall seeing the police wrap the gun and take it with them. That was the same gun I once held in my hand when I was left home alone. I also remember my mother and others mentioning that my father was dead, but I had no idea what that meant. It wasn't until the next day during his funeral that it finally dawned on me that my father was gone forever. He was laid to rest in a very cold room with people sitting along both sides. At the end of the room there was a casket. I could see that around the casket there were several wreaths with ribbons reading, "*To Raúl Betancourt, from [so and so].*" There was one that said "*To Raúl, from his sons;*" it really caught my attention because I did not remember making that for him. My mother encouraged us to go up to the casket. "Say goodbye to your father because you will never see him again," she said.

I finally made it to the casket, and I could only see his face; the rest of his body was not revealed. And I remember looking at him lying there, without any movement or emotion, and still I could not understand that he was dead. What caught my attention most was that I could see he had a hole in the right side of his face, and there was still a little bit of blood trickling out of that hole. I also remember seeing his mouth full of cotton and it aroused my curiosity. However, at that moment the situation was too solemn and I felt it was

inappropriate to ask questions. Later on I found out from someone that it was because of the autopsy.

Later that night we went back home, and it wasn't until the day after that my father's body was laid to rest. For some time after that, there were a lot of people coming to our house to offer my mother their condolences. I also remember that my mother went through a long period of sorrow and distress. She would often go inside her room and close the door. Even through the closed door I could still hear her sobbing and sniffing while repeating the words, "Why, Raúl? Why?"

I remember her giving away all of his clothes to her brothers and to his friends. My father was a very well-dressed man who used to have very nice linen clothing. She gave them all away.

The untimely death of our father also had a devastating effect on my paternal grandmother, Margarita. After all, he was her only son. Soon after, she became insane and started walking around the house looking like a mumbling zombie. There were times she thought that my father was still alive and talking to her. She died a year later.

To this day, none of us really know why our father decided to take his own life and leave his young wife and children behind. His death has given rise to much speculation in the family. Perhaps he was disappointed by the course that the revolution was taking. A lot of people, my father

included, really believed in Castro and had strong faith that the fledgling revolution would usher in positive changes and bring democracy back to our country. But one thing I know now is that suicide runs in both sides of my family. Even my younger brother, Jose, tried to commit suicide right after my father's death by poisoning himself. He was lucky my mother found him and rushed him to the hospital before it was too late.

A few days later, I had a serious accident. Miraculously, however, I did not sustain any serious injuries. My brothers and I were roller skating and we were about to cross the street when we saw this car coming. Raúl and Jose were in front of me and crossed the street without any problem. I tried to beat the car too. However, I was not that lucky. I got hit by the car and the last thing I remember was the sound of the brakes followed by a deathly silence. Suddenly, I found myself on the other side of the street where I could witness the scene of people running toward the car and hear the driver screaming, "Oh my God, I killed him!"

It was a strange situation, a moment of intense bewilderment for me because there I was, standing next to my two brothers, who were crying, and strangely enough I could see them but they could not see me. I was split into two persons. I could see the *other* me lying on the street motionless, and I was befuddled by what was happening.

Suddenly, something very unusual happened. I began to travel at a high speed in what appeared to be a spiral-shaped black tunnel. I was being pulled by a vacuum, and at the end I could see a small light emanating that was growing bigger and brighter every moment I approached it. The faster I was moving, the wider the tunnel was becoming. I could also see flashing images of certain events that had happened when I was younger. It was like watching my life, retrospectively.

Finally, I found myself in a bright room. It was a different realm, another state of existence or consciousness, timeless and space less, and there were two very bright light beings that spoke to me in a way that made me feel very comfortable. It was very rare because these beings did not have human form, nor did they emit any sound, but they presciently knew what I was going to say and we communicated colloquially very well via resonance. They seemed to feel what I was feeling, and they always had the right answers to my questions. I could also see images of my mother and my brothers feeling very sad because I was dead. My perception was a combination of visual and bodily sensations. I felt the pain they felt. I could see myself as the driver too, and felt the terror and pain he felt for killing me. I knew I was in the presence of something divine, and I felt fine and wanted to stay there.

Then it was explained to me that I had to return because my mission on earth was not over

yet and that my family was going to need me. They also told me not to worry much because I would receive assistance and guidance at some juncture of my life during the most difficult times.

Then I woke up in the hospital. To everyone's surprise, after they put me through several tests, I was declared fine. I was unscathed. Later my mother told me that everybody thought I was dead, but I did not tell her everything I had witnessed. I was utterly bewildered about what had happened. A part of me thought that everything was real while another wondered whether I had just woken up from a dream or a nightmare. That was the first time I became consciously aware that there was life beyond death and from that moment on I had no fear of death whatsoever and could not wait to go back to that place again.

When I got out of the hospital, I do remember my mother telling me that she needed to talk to me. With tears welling up in her eyes, she told me that from that moment on I had to be more responsible and that she was going to have to rely on me. She said that she was going to need my help because my father wouldn't be around anymore. Although I wasn't the oldest one, she considered me as the most mature among all her children. I understood very well why she felt that way about me because I remember having this sense of responsibility and a deep urge to protect my family after my father's death. I felt that most of my fear and shyness were gone. She also said that she would

have to find a job to fend for the family and that we would all have to go to boarding school.

My father had left a written posthumous letter inside his pocket where he apologized to my mother for taking his own life. He stated his confidence that based on his merits; the government would take care of us. So we started visiting different government agencies and I could see my mother's frustration and disappointment increasing whenever we were turned down. As a result we had to design a new strategy.

From then on I was going to be in charge of explaining my family's situation to the social workers in order to convince them why my brothers and I needed to be accepted into boarding schools. My mother would now be working long days, would not be able to take care of us, prepare meals for us or such things, while she was working.

The crucial moment came when we were given an appointment with Celia Sanchez², who was Castro's assistant at that time and also the person in charge of the families of the martyrs of the revolution. There I was standing in front of her, dressed in white with my Mambi³ outfit and a plastic machete hanging on my belt. "Oh my God! Look at this little man - he is so cute!" she said. Her remark generated such a good feeling. I still don't know if it was the little man inside me who felt so flattered or my determination to help my mother. Yet I do know, from that moment on, I realized I

had the power to make an impression on women and people in general. She was so impressed by my performance that she accepted us into one of the finest boarding schools in Cuba. The school was called Jose Marti⁴, named after a Cuban national hero. It was located in a very exclusive area in Santa Maria del Mar⁵, which was a summer getaway by the ocean and a city where the very affluent Cubans had lived before the revolution. Many of these people fled to the United States at the onset of the revolution and Castro had converted many of their deserted mansions into student dormitories.

Even at just 9 years old, it didn't seem like too difficult a task for me to take on the responsibility of persuading those in charge to accept us into boarding school. All I could think of was helping my mother at this time of distress. I had already seen so much suffering by then, that asking me to represent my family in this matter was no big deal. I wanted to do anything I could to help ease my mother's pain. Now that I look back on this experience, I see that it really prepared me at a very young age for being responsible for myself and my family. It bestowed upon me a deep sense of personal independence. Yes, I had two brothers older than myself. One was two years older and the other four years older, yet henceforward, it gave me the official role of "head of household." But it also became a problem for me in days to come when we were all assigned different daily chores to help in the house, such as cleaning, doing the dishes and buying the groceries. I would end up doing most of

it because my brother Raúl was very lazy and was always complaining. I would step up to the plate and say, “Mom, don’t worry. I will do it.” So later, it became a habit that my mother would ask me first to do something instead of asking Raúl.

The death of our father was indelibly etched in our memories, causing some profound psychological difficulties for all of us, especially for my brother Raúl. Perhaps he carried a greater burden because he was older than the rest of us and had a better understanding of the magnitude of this tragedy. Sometimes he would disappear from the house and I would find him sitting downcast on the roof of our building, sobbing, full of gloom, and concerned over the death of our father. Raúl unfortunately never recovered from that blow, and his behavior started changing afterwards. After this incident, he bore the brunt of our father’s death and became very reclusive and insecure. Daniel was already a teenager and although he had grown up with our family, he always maintained a close relationship with his real father, who was still alive. He was studying in a military academy and would come home over the weekends.

My mother had just turned thirty six when she was bereaved, so a lot of guys still found her very attractive and were trying to take her out on dates. Any time a man would come to our house, I could see the disappointment in his face after seeing such a large brood. None of them wanted to take over the responsibility of raising such a big family.

Obviously, we were missing the presence of a father figure, and I always dreamed of having a new father one day, but it never happened. My mother still craved solace but had no choice but to raise our family on her own as a single parent; however, she carried on with grim determination. Sometimes she had to be very stern but she always gave us a lot of love and instilled in us the values of hard work, humility, honesty, fairness, courtesy, kindness and compassion.

Chapter Two

RACISM

ACCORDING TO the “Wikipedia,” the free online encyclopedia, “racism” is usually defined as views, practices and actions reflecting the belief that humanity is divided into distinct biological groups called races and that members of a certain race share certain attributes which make that group as a whole less desirable, more desirable, inferior, or superior. In the case of institutional racism, certain racial groups may be denied rights or benefits, or receive preferential treatment.

Consistent with this definition “racism” has existed in Cuba for over 500 years. Cuba’s specific brand of racism manifests itself as the general ideological conception among white Cubans that only white people have the legitimate and natural right to be in charge of the country, own most of the national resources, and therefore dominate the rest of the non-white population of the island, who

should be grateful to be controlled and coerced by any white elite regardless of their ideology.

Racism in Cuba is pathology, a disease that has been ignored for a long time with the hope that one day it will go away. It has received no treatment whatsoever so it has metastasized and penetrated the social fabric of Cuba in such a way that it has become a very sensitive subject of discussion. Institutional racism has been swept under the rug and been put on the back burner with the other social issues that plague Cuba.

When I was about seven years old and in second grade, I experienced my first episode of racism. At the end of every school year, the best all-around student from each grade in my elementary school would be selected and given a prize. That year, the winner would get to dress up as Zorro! Zorro was one of the most popular television shows at that time. The role of Zorro was played by a Spanish actor named Julito Martinez, and he was every little kid's hero. He was like Superman in the United States. I knew that I had it. I knew the criteria they had to judge us by, and I knew that I was the winner this year. I had the highest grades of all the kids in my class, the best athletic abilities, and I was the best-behaved. I was bursting with excitement about the idea of becoming el Zorro, and I ran around my entire class, school, and neighborhood announcing it to everyone who could hear me: "I am going to be Zorro!!!"

I clearly remember the day before they were to officially announce the winner of this contest to the entire school. At the end of classes that day, my teacher pulled me aside and asked to speak to me in private once all the other kids had left. I thought she was going to congratulate me in advance for winning the contest in my grade, so I waited for all the kids to leave and went up to see her. She told me, "Pablo, I know that you have been going around and telling all your classmates that you are going to be Zorro this year. And yes, Pablo, you were the best student of all this year. But unfortunately you can't be chosen for Zorro because Zorro is a white character and you are black."

I was so shocked and disappointed that I just ran home and locked myself in my room. My mother noticed that something was wrong. Normally, once I returned home from school I would go into my room to change clothes and get ready to play outside. But on this day, I refused to leave my room. So my mother came in to see what was wrong. I was keenly baffled and muddled. Why couldn't I be Zorro? I just didn't get it. She asked me to tell her what was wrong with me and I did. I will never forget her reaction. Instead of being upset at the injustice of the situation, she told me that in life, problems like this were always going to pop up, particularly in my life since I didn't fit the stereotype. There would always be people telling me that I couldn't do this, or I couldn't do that. She told me how special I was and advised me to not be bothered by the fact that I wasn't going to be Zorro.

What really mattered was that I was the best in my class. Zorro was just a fictional character, but in reality, I was the one who had won the contest. Now when I look back on this incident, I doubt that my mother ever went to my school and confronted my teacher about her snide remarks. Back then, that's just the way things were. The revolution was still in its infancy stage and people embraced the hope that one day, everything was going to get better. Of course I couldn't dress up like Zorro; I was black!

That Christmas, in Cuba the emerging communist revolution was so recent that religious holidays were still being celebrated, and my mother surprised me with a present. When I opened my gift and saw that it was a Mambi costume, my mother explained that she wanted to give me an outfit that I could be proud of. Her grandfather, Abelino Faez, had been a Mambi and she was very proud of it. She said that being a Mambi was better than Zorro because Zorro was an invented Spanish hero, but the Mambises were real Cuban heroes who transcended race and color.

Mambi is an African word from Congo and the Mambises were the heroes of the Cuban war of independence from Spain. Their team was comprised of former black slaves and their master who decided to free them for the purpose of joining forces against the Spanish to free Cuba from being a colony. The Mambi Army was the National Army of Liberation that defeated the Spanish through two

wars; 1868 to 1878, and again, 1895 to 1898. Their leader was Antonio Maceo, a black man and one of the principal figures of the Cuban struggle for independence. Maceo participated in more than 500 battles. However, his humble origin and the color of his skin delayed his rising to the rank of major general, due principally to the racist and class exclusive tendencies of several other patriots of an aristocratic or bourgeois origin. Because of his exceptional physical strength and resistance to bullet or sword injuries, people began to call him “The Bronze Titan.” He recovered from more than 25 war injuries over the course of some 500 military battles, and none of Maceo's wounds diminished his willingness to lead his troops into combat. On Dec 7, 1896, Maceo was ambushed in what was called “The Battle of Punta Brava” and like his father and brothers, died in combat fighting for the independence of Cuba.

Three years after his death, Maceo's body was exhumed to be studied by Cuban scientists who could not believe a black man could be so strong and brilliant. They were astounded to see that his physique was incredible and his skull was almost perfect. Then a campaign (that is still in place) to whiten his image was put in motion by the white Cuban elite. When you see images of Maceo now, you might think you are looking at the face of a European.

The War of Independence finished in 1898; on August 7, 1908, ten years after the Spanish-

American War, a group of black Cubans decided their dream could not be allowed to die and created the first Independent Black Political Party in the Western hemisphere. This party was made up of former members of the Mambi Army, which was mainly black. The Mambises had won the war against the Spaniards. However, they felt marginalized and left out. When the new government was created, many of these loyal patriots ended up either unemployed or doing menial jobs. In most cases they were lucky to obtain employment at all.

The creation of the Black Independent Party really angered the white establishment in Cuba that had always believed blacks were not capable of controlling their own destiny and lived in fear at that time of a second “Haitian Revolution⁶.”

Just the thought of a group of blacks organizing themselves terrified the white Cuban establishment, so they made the Black Independent Party illegal. A major public campaign was set in motion by the white media to demonize the party, labeling its members as “Black Separatists,” smearing and portraying them as racists, rapists and traitors.

Soon the government created the “Morua Amendment⁷.” which was named after Martin Morua Delgado⁸. This law prohibited the creation of a party based on race or skin color. So in 1912, when members of the Black Independent Party revolted, the Cuban army responded by killing thousands of Black Cubans, including their main

leaders Pedro Ivonet and Evaristo Estenoz, in what is known as The Massacre of 1912 ⁹.. This remains one of the saddest events in the history of race relations in Cuba.

The Massacre of 1912 is one of the most heinous racial massacres in the western hemisphere. Second only to the Haitian Massacre of 1937 also known as the “Parsley Massacre¹⁰.” Under the order of President Rafael Trujillo¹¹ from October 2 to October 4, 15,000 to 20,000 Haitian immigrant workers, including women and children, were massacred in the Dominican Republic.

Rafael Trujillo, also known as “The Chief,” became president of the Dominican Republic through electoral fraud, tortures and intimidation for a period of almost 30 years. His government was rife with corruption, malfeasance and moral turpitude. During his tenure, he and his henchmen committed many crimes and dishonest practices. As a result, they amassed great fortunes at the expense of their own citizens by plundering the public treasury.

Trujillo is considered the most racist, corrupt, ruthless and bloodthirsty dictator throughout the history of the Dominican Republic. His unparalleled lack of respect for human life, combined with his insatiable thirst for power, caused the deaths of thousands of Dominicans and Haitians. Ironically, Trujillo had Haitian roots. It is said he was a lecherous womanizer who lived a

licentious life and had an unbridled lust and sexual penchant for black women.

On May 30, 1961, Trujillo was ambushed and executed by a group of armed men, thus closing one of the darkest pages in the history of the Dominican Republic. Trujillo's death was a blessing for the nation, a step out the shadow that had loomed over the country for a long time.

Chapter Three

BOARDING SCHOOL

AND SO, on the first day of boarding school, I could think of no better outfit to wear than my white Mambi costume with its plastic machete. And I remember receiving so many compliments from my new classmates, especially the older girls in the school who found me so cute and adorable. I do remember a particular incident where there was a group of five young girls, whose ages were probably between 12 and 14 years old, sitting on a bench just hanging out, and one of them spotted me and shouted: “Look at that kid” He is so cute!” I felt so proud in my new armor.

If people only knew the effect that a positive remark has on a child they would think twice before making a negative statements to one who believes everything he is told. Everyone who comes in contact with a child is a teacher and every experience that child has is a lesson. That outfit bolstered my confidence and helped me put my own mark on my new school. From that day on I was

known in school as “El Mambi.” The Zorro incident was quickly forgotten!

Since my brothers and I were all in different grades, they placed us in different dorms. However, Raúl, who was older than I, was crying so much they decided to transfer me into his dorm in order to quiet him down. I liked my original dorm much better. The kids there were my own age and the living situation was a bit more comfortable. Raúl’s dorm, which became my new dorm, was building #17.

The person in charge of running the house was an old short woman from Spain named Claudia. We all called her “La Abuela,” which means “grandmother” in Spanish. She had a very thick Spanish accent, and she did not hide her racist attitude at all. She was constantly reminding us that we should be grateful to the Revolution for being there.

Classes were held in a different building from the sleeping corridors, which were on two different floors. It was no accident that all the white students got to sleep upstairs, which was very beautiful and had a terrace where you could see the view of the valley and the mountains. All of us black kids, along with the white kids who misbehaved, were stuck downstairs in the basement.

I had a white friend, Donato, who we used to call Kiko. He was from my hometown. He was

always getting into fights because he was very skinny and the other kids would pick on him. So Kiko got to sleep downstairs with the black kids. However, Claudia was more lenient toward him and always told him that if he behaved properly, one day he would be allowed to sleep upstairs. The black kids had no choice, no matter how well they behaved.

Claudia would wake us up first every morning to let the white kids upstairs get a few more minutes of sleep, although somehow they always got served breakfast first. Our school was run military style, and in order for us to get to our classes from where we slept, we had to march outside while chanting some slogans. There is one which stands out in particular. As we would march down the road, we would pass some grape fields on both sides.

The people working those fields were those who were anti-Castro, who were condemned by the regime and punished with two to three years of hard labor before they could leave the country. As we would pass them by, we were ordered to recite: “Paredon a los gusanos¹².” The exact translation is; “fire at those worms.” This slogan was a reference to that which was shouted out by the firing squad leader just before his detail fired on those who were about to be executed.

It is amazing how hatred was instilled into young children without them even realizing it. At

the time, I did what I was instructed to do. Now when I look back I can feel the humiliation of those who were on the receiving end of our slurs, some of whom were probably the same people who used to live in those mansions plundered by the revolution.

During my time in this school, I also took the responsibility of protecting my brothers from bullies, so I was always getting into fights. My brother Jose was almost two years younger than I but he was very skinny so I always felt the need to protect him. I even protected him from my brother Raúl who used to pick on him all the time. My brother Armando, although he was only five years old and was in kindergarten, was already strong and had a very bad temper. Nobody would mess with Armando. His bad temper would eventually get him in trouble years later.

The student leader of House #17 was a rather large black man named Ovidio. He was much older and bigger than the rest of the students. He had flunked so many times he had to repeat the same grade on several occasions. His presence caused fear. The other students were terrified and called him the "Bachimono" or the "gorilla," referring to his age, presumably because he should have already been a freshman and his appearance resembled that of an ape.

One day my brother Raúl engaged in a squabble with Bachimono and I went out in his defense. I did not fear this guy at all, so gradually

the argument was heating up and became a fight. All the students were instigating what appeared to be a very uneven fight; a modern battle between David and Goliath. At first, the Bachimono was giving us a tremendous beating. Everything changed when Kiko suddenly appeared out of nowhere and joined the fight. As Bachimono was on top of me, Kiko came from behind and grabbed his neck while Bachimono stood around trying to shake it off. Kiko was a skinny wimp and it seemed that at any time he would fly away, but he had the determination of a pit bull. Kiko never let go and almost choked him. At the end of the brawl, Kiko stood there breathing heavily while Bachimono was grunting. We received a standing ovation from the other students in recognition of our valiant effort.

Nowadays, Kiko lives in Miami, Florida and we are still very good friends. The Bachimono, on the other hand, still lives in Cuba and works as a goon for the secret police.

This school was quite educational. They even offered us the opportunity to learn a foreign language. The choice was between French and Russian. Most of the kids would choose French. Even those who at first chose Russian would change their minds because Russian was so difficult and the teacher was a tough cookie. She was very strict and even had the kids learning revolutionary hymns. She definitely ran her class military style and was quite a contrast compared to the French teacher, who was more beautiful and a lot more pleasant.

I chose French, although in the second year Russian became mandatory and we did not have a choice anymore. It must have been for political reasons since at that time Russian presence in Cuba started becoming more and more apparent.

In this school there were also some students we used to call “repatriated kids” because many of them had lived in or were born in the United States and had returned to Cuba after Castro’s revolution. I remember the case of Rene Gonzalez, a boy who was very popular in the school because he spoke English perfectly. He would translate American cartoons for us when all the kids were watching TV. I still remember a song Rene taught us that was the theme for a cartoon called “The Adventures of Pow Wow¹³ the Indian Boy:”

*Pow Wow, the Indian boy
Loved all the animals and the woods
Pow Wow, the Indian boy
Loved all the animals and the woods
Pow Wow was a friend
Of all the animals in the woods
If there was any trouble
He would help them if he could
If Pow Wow couldn't help them
He would go to the Medicine Man
And he would tell them stories
Of just how it all began
All began, all began*

When we graduated from elementary school, René was recruited and trained by the Cuban Government to work as a spy. He would eventually be arrested by the FBI in Miami and became one of the "Cuban Five"¹⁴ the five men convicted of the "Wasp Network"¹⁵. René was sentenced to 15 years to life in a U.S. prison for espionage.

Overall, I have some great memories of the elementary boarding school where we lived as a family and practiced a lot of sports, mainly baseball.

Since we had to spend so much time together I created a very strong bond with some of my childhood friends that continues to this day. I remember going to birthday parties on the weekend and dancing to the music of Los Formulas Quinta, Los Mustang, Julio Iglesias, Nino Bravo and others.

As a young kid in the school I was always surrounded by girls who wanted to sit next to me because I was very good in Math. Most of the girls loathed Math and they found it very convoluted, so I would help them with their homework. During exams they would fight among themselves over who would get to sit closer to me so I could help them with their studies. However, when it came to dating, I was terrified just at the thought of kissing. That would change later when I became older and was transferred to another school.

One of the hardest things for me while I was in the boarding school was that I only got to visit my mother on the weekends. During summer vacations,

my mother had to work so she would send us to spend some time with her family who lived on the eastern part of the island in the countryside. I must admit though, that this family made me work very, very hard while I was staying with them. Sometimes I was bothered by some of their racial remarks. Even though black runs in both sides of our family, my mother comes from a mixed family. So my maternal uncles and cousins would make fun of us, reminding us that our paternal grandmother, Margarita, was African. In Cuba, sometimes racial prejudices were very common among back families as well. I grew up listening to statements about good hair, bad hair, light skin, and so forth.

Despite all that, I really enjoyed those little trips to the countryside because they lived on a big farm where they raised a lot of animals like chickens, pigs, goats and horses. There was a lot of good food that included fruits, fresh vegetables and meat. At night we used to fall asleep listening to the insects chirping and we would wake up to the sounds of the roosters crowing, the hens clucking, the sheep bleating and the cows mooing. My uncle's farm was so big that it felt like a jungle. Sometimes the chickens would run wild and escape deep inside the wilderness. They would multiply, so we had to hunt them down by running after them in order to catch them, or by throwing rocks at them. I used to marvel at how good my uncle was at this art. He was a sharpshooter and he used to move with so much grace and skill that it was a delight just to see him hunting.

My brother Raúl, however, did not have it so easy. Every time we would go away to stay with my uncles, the idea was for each one of us to stay with a different family. That way the responsibility of taking care of us would be split between them. This arrangement did not work out too well for Raúl as he would become unruly and cry out for me. He insisted on being with me all the time in the same place, so he always ended up staying with me.

Those times were also when I was introduced to Church and Christianity because all of my uncles were evangelical ministers. I remember this American lady who was staying near where my mother's relatives lived working as a missionary. She sticks out in my memory because she was the very first American person I had ever met and because all of my aunts and uncles would worship her. She looked very pale compared to the white Cubans I knew and she had an unforgettable heavy accent when she would speak broken Spanish. For the first time, I was confronted with the fear of not going to church. She made me feel implicitly guilty and told me that I was a bad boy and that God would punish me if I didn't go to church, which I hated.

I've always had a very inquisitive mind; I remember one day during Bible study asking who created God, and my uncle got very upset with me. "You ask too many questions," he said. They also wanted me to pray before eating, which was something very new to me and not very enjoyable.

The next summer I was transferred to a completely different location for secondary school, which consisted of grades seven through nine. At that time they had created a new type of school system known as “Escuelas en el campo” meaning schools in the countryside. This new school was on a different island located in the south of Havana called the Isle of Youth. It was separated from the mainland but still belonged to Cuba.

The Isle of Youth is the town where the Presidio Modelo¹⁶ is located, the same place where Castro and other rebels were incarcerated after their attack on the Moncada Barracks¹⁷ on July 26, 1953.

Unlike my first school, there were about 500 students ranging in age from 12 to 15, coming from different types of social backgrounds, all living in the same building. There were dormitories for the boys and the girls separated only by one door. We would be away at this school for 45 days straight, and were allowed to visit our families only for five days.

In this brutally hardscrabble school, we would take classes during the morning and have to work extremely hard in the afternoon in various citrus fields. We would be picking up oranges or taking care of the lemon fields, working with chemicals and pesticides in agriculture, and operating dangerous machinery for hours. All without getting paid and this all while Castro claimed that education in Cuba was free. Our daily

chores were definitely something that would be considered as child labor and exploitation in the United States. But Castro called it something else.

I remember the case of Cosme, a hometown friend who lost almost his entire leg while trying to kick a Russian fertilizer bag inside a machine that crushed these bags. That was one of the most gruesome scenes I'd ever witnessed in my life. We all watched helplessly while this machine was grinding his leg. We all stood by in shock not knowing what to do. We were trying to pull him out when someone finally figured out how to turn the machine off. After this terrible incident Cosme was handicapped for the rest of his life and was never compensated by the Cuban government.

Beside this lifestyle of toil, this school was also rife with promiscuity and violence. There were countless cases of bullying and rape. Although improper or immoral, most of the school workers, including teachers, were having sex with students because it was convenient and practical.

Consequently, there were many relationships that ended in pregnancy. We also worked with very dangerous tools like sharp machetes, hoes, picks and shovels. Therefore, a lot of fights between the students resulted in serious injuries and bloodshed.

This school was also where I had my first real introduction to sex. Unlike at the other school,

these new dorms were coed, and being children between the age of 12 and 15 now made things a lot easier because we were all going through puberty. Fernando, a good friend of mine, had a crush on this girl named Martha, so I was trying to hook them up. I couldn't understand why she refused to become his girlfriend until one day she told me that it was *me* who truly was the object of her affection. Martha was of mixed ethnicity and looked Hispanic; Fernando was white. Back then it was a rarity to see a mixed couple walking around, so I was very surprised that she picked me.

During those days, it was a common practice for parents to take their daughters to the doctor for checkups to make sure that they were still virgins, so it was very common for young couples to experiment with different things. They would do pretty much everything except for intercourse so that the girl would still technically remain a virgin. It was my friend Renecito who suggested that I try oral sex with Martha. Renecito was not a good-looking guy and we used to call him "the fish" because his eyes would pop out, which accounted for his nickname. He was two years older than I, and somehow he always managed to get the most beautiful girls. I was always curious and leery of how he managed to do that, until one day when he finally decided to reveal his secret to me. His secret was oral sex. My first reaction was, "Oh, you've got to be crazy!"

I knew from my biology classes that women had something called “periods” and that blood plus urine emanated from that area, so just the thought of putting my tongue in there was not only preposterous, but very disgusting as well. So it wasn’t until one night that I was alone with Martha that I decided to give it a try, and the rest is history. I finally discovered the taste of life.

It was also during those years that I became more conscious of being black. My oldest brother, Daniel, had given me a book, the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*.¹⁸ “You’ve got to read this book,” he told me. That book influenced my life a lot because not only was I able to relate to the life of Malcolm X, but it gave me a sense of dignity as well. I remember reading about the Egyptians building the pyramids, Cleopatra and the Queen of Sheba, and the teachings of Marcus Garvey¹⁹.

Finally, I had information enough to have a discussion about Black history with some of my white classmates who always claimed black people had created nothing. Before, whenever that subject was brought up, I was put in an untenable position, unable to defend myself against any attack or objection. I had no choice but to remain silent. Now I was able to hold my ground. For the first time, I started feeling proud of being black. The teachings and lives of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Rosa Parks and other African American leaders eventually became our instruction manual for how to deal with racism and bigotry in Cuba.

It was also during this time that I started becoming familiar with and listening to American music. Thanks to Daniel, who was a teenager at that time, I was introduced to music by the Jackson Five (*Maria, I'll be there*), Aretha Franklin (*Respect*), Jimmy Hendrix (*Foxy Lady, Hey Voodoo Child*), James Brown (*Sex Machine*), and the Temptations (*Papa Was a Rolling Stone, Masterpiece*). I will never forget the time when I first saw the album of the Jackson Five — their music was always being played on Cuban radio stations, especially a song called “Maria“ but I never thought they were black!

During those years, Cuba was completely isolated from the United States. The only images of black people that they would show on television were those being bitten by dogs or being sprayed by water hoses outside while demonstrating. So in my mind, I never thought that such a popular band could be composed of black musicians. The Cuban government has always used what happened to black people in America and their struggle during the American Civil Rights Movement as a weapon to show that the best place for black people to live is Cuba.

It was as if black Cubans were forever indebted to the government and owed something to the revolution, because according to Castro, the fight for equality had already been won and it had been the revolution that eliminated racism in Cuba. Of course, such a claim was far from the truth. But how could black Cubans complain about a

condition which was supposedly nonexistent? They couldn't. And that was exactly the problem because it was the trend of the time that racism was no longer alive in Cuba. Therefore, black Cubans had to suffer in silence.

Listening to American music also instilled in me the desire to learn English because I wanted to understand the lyrics. My English teacher, Rogelio Letuse and I became good friends and he loaned me some of the books he had used himself to learn English. Letuse was one of the coolest teachers in the school. He was young, liked to play sports and loved American music too, so I was not only his student but his friend as well. I tried to speak with him in English all the time in order to practice it. I made the commitment to try to learn at least one new English word every day and use it during our conversations.

Letuse still presently lives in Cuba. However, due to his hard work and dedication to the English language he is allowed to teach English courses at some university in England and has already written and published several books such as *"Elsevier's Dictionary of Eponyms and Dictionary of Communicative Abbreviations."*

We had a shortwave radio in our house where I could tune in to radio stations WQAM from Miami and KAAY from Little Rock, Arkansas. Sometimes we were even able to watch some American TV (*Soul Train*). Of course this had to be

done secretly since any contact with the American culture was frowned upon and forbidden. There were even instances when young people would get together in certain areas of Havana to listen to American music, and the police would barge in and arrest everybody. Their crime was having long hair and listening to American music, which the government referred to as Capitalist propaganda.

It was also while I was at this school that I met two of my best friends, Feliciano Bravet and Esteban Goitizolo. They were both from an area very similar to the poor town where I was born. During school breaks, I used to visit their houses and it sort of reminded me of how I used to live. They offered me my first cigarette and my first drink. Esteban had some great leadership skills and was the captain of our school. His family had kept the tradition of practicing the Afro-Cuban religion Santeria²⁰. He was one of the descendants of a famous Santeria priest named Vicente Goitizolo, who was also a high ranking official during the war of independence in Cuba. Like me, Esteban and Feliciano had dreams of becoming somebody and helping our families. Esteban wanted to become a doctor and combine modern medicine with the ancient wisdom (that was kept alive in his family) about the power of healing associated with the spirit world, medicinal plants and the animal kingdom.

I remember one day Esteban and I went to the doctor together, and the doctor “a very light-skinned black woman who looked almost white “

started asking us questions about what we wanted to do in the future. So Esteban told her he wanted to be a doctor and I said I wanted to be an ambassador. She chuckled awkwardly. “You guys are crazy!” Look at your bodies and your noses, you should become boxers like Teofilo Stevenson,” she blurted out.

Stevenson was a Cuban boxer who had won the Olympic gold medal in the Heavyweight division at the Olympic Games in Munich in 1972 and in Montreal, Canada in 1976. He was revered by every Cuban, whites and blacks alike. He was considered a national hero. We had no doubt we could have been very good boxers and kick some butt because we were both very athletic. However, that wasn't what we had in mind. We both laughed at her inane remark as we were leaving the clinic. Nowadays, Esteban and Feliciano are still both my friends and Esteban is right now one of the best surgeons in Cuba.

Usually at the beginning of the school year when people were getting to know each other, it was also the time when they would choose the leaders of the students, so kids were pitted against one another in some sort of battle testing each other's strengths and weaknesses. As a kid, I had always been very athletic, which made the others want to challenge me to see if I was as tough as I physically appeared. I practiced judo until I became blue belt, but my dream was to become a baseball player and eventually join the Cuban national team.

The new school had a very nice baseball field. Students, teachers and school workers would play together and share the same sports field.

There was this big black dude that was the school's cook and he wanted to play baseball but didn't have the skills. During a baseball game where I had been the pitcher, I struck him out three times and his team was clobbered. All the kids were laughing at him and I was having a lot of fun. When the game was over he confronted me and we got into a big fight. He was older and bigger than me, and although I held my own, he got the best of me. I was so angry that I wanted immediate revenge. So Esteban, Feliciano and I designed a plan to teach him a lesson. The plan was that I would take him to an isolated location, and once there, the three of us would jump on him and whip his butt.

That Friday night we were supposed to come back to Havana in a ferry that took the students from the Isle of Youth to the main island of Cuba. What was supposed to be a plain ass-whipping was turning into a plan to murder a human being. I would take him to the deck of the ship and either Feliciano or Esteban would hit him in the head with a baseball bat and we would throw him in the ocean.

In the end I came to my senses and decided it was a crazy idea. I convinced my friends to abandon it. But when I think about it, I sadly realize how close I was once to committing murder. It

seemed no matter how much I tried to avoid confrontation; I would get involved in countless fights which eventually earned me a lot of respect because by then I was very good in judo and had some knowledge of boxing.

Soon enough the time came when I had to relocate again, this time to attend prep school. In Cuba, we call it pre-university since it is one step before the university and the place where one's major is chosen. It was also during this time that I met my two other friends, Mulo and Sixto, who—unlike Feliciano and Esteban—came from nicer neighborhoods in Havana.

Mulo's parents had been members of the Communist Party for a long time, and after the triumph of the revolution they were also given a nicer home in a better neighborhood called "Miramar." Mulo would eventually become my best friend through all of the years at the university. He lives now in Madrid, Spain, and we are still very good friends.

Mulo and I would talk about politics, and we both dreamed of one day going to study in Russia or East Germany where some of his older siblings were studying already. It was very common at that time for a lot of black youngsters to dream about going to one of the Eastern European countries, marrying one of their women and coming back to Cuba, not only with a degree but also with a white woman on their arm as a trophy.

Sixto was of Spanish descent and his father was a political prisoner who spent a long time in jail after he was caught trying to flee Cuba on a boat. Sixto lived in a nice neighborhood called “El Cotorro” in the countryside. We both loved the English language and American music. We would spend a lot of time together listening to music, reading books in English and playing chess.

That was the time when the Cuban government started sending troops to fight in Africa. My brother Daniel was sent. It really devastated my mother since, at the beginning, the Cuban government wanted to keep it so secret that they not only hid it from the Cuban people, but only sent the blacks so that it would be more difficult to tell that they were Cubans who were present in Angola.

My brother was very lucky to come back alive. However, some of my friends were not so lucky. I remember one friend in particular named Eusebio who got killed when he stepped on a landmine. A group of military officials came to his house to deliver the news to his mother, who became insane after hearing the about her son's fate. He was only 19 years old.

Since at that time there were very few Cubans who were allowed to travel outside the country, it was considered a real privilege for those who could take advantage of this opportunity to visit another country. It was a way for them to be

able to acquire new items such as clothing, electronics, jewelry, music, and the like, which were extremely difficult to find back home in Cuba.

Sailors and government officials were the only people allowed to travel outside the island. All food and clothing was rationed for each family and the quality of the clothing that was available was extremely poor and in bad taste. Even if it meant going to fight and risk losing their lives, people were excited to be able to leave. Even if they were not hurt at war, a lot of Cubans died in duels, which was how they settled personal disputes among themselves. Since Castro had taken away from individuals the right to keep and bear arms in Cuba, it was very tempting for those who now had such powerful weapons in their hands outside of Cuba to use them.

The Russians also had interests in Africa but they couldn't openly go there and support communism, so they used Castro as their hatchet man and black Cuban troops were sent to spread communism there. Whenever the Russian government wanted to support a communist party or regime, there would go the Cuban troops. That was a way for Cubans to return the favor for all the economic aid they were receiving from the Russians.

In 1977, Jimmy Carter was elected president of the United States, and for the first time since the revolution began, those Cubans who were exiled

were allowed to return home. This was due to a change in American policy towards Cuba. We had always been told back home that those who were exiled were struggling in America. There was no way for us to prove otherwise since Castro had total control over all the media. Once those people were allowed to come back to Cuba for the first time, bringing all their wealth and possessions they had acquired with them, only then did Cubans at home start to question whether Castro had been telling the truth for all those years. They realized they had been indoctrinated and lied to by Castro.

Those people who had emigrated to the U.S. had not only survived but had thrived. So it became very common for people to joke about how those exiles left as “worms” and came back to the island as “butterflies!” Those who were lucky enough to have family members in the U.S. never dared to communicate with them because they were so afraid of becoming suspects. In the eyes of the Cuban government, all the exiles were traitors, and nobody wanted to take the risk of getting caught communicating with a traitor. Many had no communication with their loved ones for almost 20 years.

The visits of those Cuban-Americans became grist for Castro’s mill. Castro, being a smart businessman, and seeing those Cuban-Americans coming back with all that money and personal belongings that were not available in Cuba, opened up stores where people could purchase luxury items

with U.S. dollars. TV sets, sneakers, and jeans. Boom-boxes were particularly popular.

What Castro never anticipated was the consequences of the opening up this type of relationship with the U.S. Just a few years later, a group of Cubans went so far as to drive a bus right into the Peruvian embassy. This was one of the most guarded embassies due to the fact that the Peruvian and Venezuelan embassies were the only ones granting Cubans political asylum at that time.

They drove right through the fences as guards were shooting at the bus, and one of the bullets went through the bus, killing a guard that was standing on the other side. Of course, the Cuban government was very upset over this incident and demanded the Peruvian government turn all those people over who got into the embassy illegally.

When the Peruvian government refused to comply, the Cuban government responded by removing all the guards providing protection for the embassy. As news of this traveled around Havana, people started showing up at the embassy in bundles, asking for political asylum. In less than 48 hours, over 10,000 people had thronged the embassy. Of course, neither the Peruvian authorities nor the Cuban authorities were prepared for this avalanche of people, and soon all the streets leading to the embassy were blocked off by the police.

Castro was now very aware of the extent of his opposition and wanted to find a way to get rid of these people. In Castro's style, he used his guile and designed a plan where Cuban Americans in Miami, Florida, were allowed to come in boats to Cuba and pick up their relatives. He not only got rid of the opposition, but he also got rid of what he called the "scum." Thousands of criminals, mentally ill people, prostitutes, homosexuals and anyone who had been in jail, were rounded up and forced to leave the island.

So those who came from Miami to pick up their family members instead got to go back to Miami with their boats loaded with prisoners and other "scum" that Castro was eager to get rid of. This was later known as the "Exodus of Mariel." Mariel Harbor was where the boats of those coming from Miami were stationed. Since it took them several days before they could go back, Castro turned this harbor into a market where he could sell outrageously expensive items, like Cuban rum and cigars that you could not find in the US because of the embargo.

Cuba also experienced a period of high political polarization and violence. During this time patriotism transformed into jingoism as the state became an accomplice and promoter of the most heinous human rights violations committed by and against its own citizens. Usually Cuban authorities led by the political police alerted the "Committees of Defense of the Revolution"²¹ about the departure

clearance of any citizen, so those loyal to the establishment would organize "acts of repudiation" against the homes of those who planned to emigrate.

This type of organized violence and cruelty toward these innocent people had the silent approval of the state. This was characterized by the stifling of dissent, as the physical and moral integrity of these poor individuals was violated. Hordes of rabble-rousers, lemmings, looters and moochers ran amok, armed with all they could lay their hands on. They acted with impunity, assaulting their victims, behaving like human beasts, bellowing and hurling all kinds of insults and obscenities at those who simply wanted to immigrate freely to the United States.

Among the prospective emigrants were those who appeared to staunchly support Castro's government and previously committed violent acts, in Castro's name against unknowing dissenters. These supposed loyalists were now showing their true colors. This of course resulted in numerous incidents where those who were once victims of these false loyalists, seized the opportunity to carry out their vendettas against the very people who brought them so much suffering.

Chapter Four

THE UNIVERSITY OF HAVANA

I WAS now at the age when it was time for me to choose my career path. Since I always wanted to visit other countries and spoke English fluently, I decided to study foreign trade. There were only two openings in this category on the entire island. Luckily, because I had some of the best grades, I was granted one of those openings, which were usually reserved for the sons of government officials.

This was one of the happiest moments of my life. I was chosen among so many people to be able to study that career. I was not only very proud of myself but I also made my entire family very proud. I was admitted into the University of Havana.

This was also the time when my oldest brother, Daniel, the one who had been fighting in Africa, became Castro's bodyguard. His service to Cuba in the war in Angola, gave him the credentials he needed to qualify for this position. My brother

was eventually promoted to be the personal bodyguard of the President of Congo, Denis Sassou²² and he moved to the Congo with a new identity created for him to make it appear as if he were from the Congo. They also taught him French.

My brother's position worked out very well for me because it made it very probable that I would be able to get a good job working for the Cuban government in Africa. Being fluent in English and French, and being black also helped considerably. However, when I first started studying at the university, I was very disappointed because I could see how differently students of different social classes were treated.

The foreign trade class was divided into two groups. Group A was composed of the most beautiful girls, sons of the government officials and the foreign students. Group B was composed of the poor and students from the countryside who were scholarship holders and considered upstart peasants belonging to other provinces outside the capital of Havana. It seemed unjust to me that merit played no role in determining student class assignments.

The sons of government officials were unbearably arrogant. They were very racist and insulting and did not hide their contempt for black people. The way they dressed and the way they carried themselves made me realize they belonged to a different class and I was obviously not one of them. I felt like one of the poorest kids in my class.

My friend Sixto also made it into my class due to his high grades. Even though he was not the son of a government official, he was still better off than I was because his father was a Cuban exile who would send him money and clothing from the U.S.

I also met my other friend, Virgilio Villanueva (we used to call him Villy). Although Villy was also coming from one of the best schools, La Lenin²³ and even though his father was somehow a powerful person in Cuba, Villy was very humble and had a great sense of humor. We would spend our time making fun of the rest of the class and listening to American music in our spare time. That was during the late _70s and the era of "*Saturday Night Fever*" with John Travolta and Olivia Newton John, The Bee Gees, Player "*Baby Come Back*," Eagles' "*Hotel California*" and more. Villy is also one of the most intelligent people I have ever met. Sixto and I used to make fun of him and tell him he owed his intelligence to his big head. Only a head as big as his could accommodate his brain, which was larger than the average person's and therefore could store more information.

Despite the egalitarian rhetoric of the Cuban Government, it was very clear there were two distinct categories among us; the kids of the elite and the children of the underprivileged, who got in because of their good grades and dreams to make something of themselves. The differences were not only illustrated in the way people dressed, but also in the way people acted and treated each other. The

kids of the elite were very snobby and racist as well. It was very clear to me at that time that there was definitely an upper class in Cuba, despite the fact that Castro claimed to have eliminated it when he instituted communism as our form of government.

Each time we had a break from school and it was time to go on vacation, the rich kids had reservations at some of the best resorts in Cuba. They used to talk about unknown places like “La Cueva del Pirata,” The International Hotel in Varadero Beach, and come back with great stories and sun tans.

Also in our class there were some poor white students who wished to climb socially and adhered to the ideology of white supremacy or selection of the species as something natural. Sometimes they had an attitude worse than the privileged. I viewed their conduct as a kind of mimicry combined with that of a sycophant. Such was the case of a white girl, who came from a very poor neighborhood in Havana. This girl was always courting favor from our teachers and the rich kids used to make fun of her because of the way she acted. She would do anything to climb socially even if it meant stepping on her classmates. She played an important role and was very instrumental in the separation of my friend Sixto from the Young Communist Union by constantly criticizing his behavior in the classroom.

Mulo and I were inseparable friends. They used to call us “the two magpies” in reference to “Heckle and Jeckle,” the two cartoon characters created by Paul Terry, a pair of identical magpies that were very popular in Cuba along with Woody Woodpecker²⁴ Betty Boop²⁵ and Porky Pig²⁶ American cartoons were very popular in Cuba along with American movies. Although there was an attempt to get rid of American programs in Cuba and replace them with Russian television, people still preferred American television. I grew up watching movies like “*Key Largo*” with Edward G. Robinson²⁷ and “*Captain Blood*” with Errol Flynn²⁸ But my favorites were “*Casablanca*,” “*The Maltese Falcon*,” and “*The Treasure of Sierra Madre*,” by my favorite actor, Humphrey Bogart²⁹ I used to go to the theater and watch on the big screen movies like *Fantomas*³⁰ starring French actor Jean Marais as the arch villain of the same name opposite Louis de Funès as the earnest but outclassed commissar Paul Juve.

Sometimes I would spend the weekend with Mulo’s family and vice versa. Mulo had a beautiful girlfriend who lived in my town. Her name was Esther. She was studying Chemistry at the University of Havana too. Mulo was the youngest member of a family of three brothers and three sisters, so he was a little bit spoiled. Mulo’s family was very well educated and almost all of them had gone to college. His brother Francisco was studying nuclear engineering in the Soviet Union. Victoria was a Math teacher. Isabel taught Chemistry in a

high school and Ophelia was a doctor working at the Cuban Embassy in Jamaica. His sisters were the three most beautiful black women I have ever seen. They were older than me and married, but I had a big crush on Ophelia. Mulo used to get really mad at me whenever I would tell him how much I liked his sister.

Like my parents, Mulo's parents benefited from the revolution and were given a beautiful house in Playa close to the ocean. This was one of the areas where the middle class used to live before the Cuban revolution. Mulo's family adopted me as one of their own. His mother, Delia, treated me like a son. During our conversations we would be talking about Black History in America, the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S., Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Alex Haley's "Roots," etc.

I also had another black female friend I had met at the university through Villy. They had gone to the same high school, La Lenin, and were now on the same faculty. Her name was Cheryl. Mulo and I used to make fun of her because she was so proud to be married to a white guy from Guyana. Although Guyana was a former Dutch colony, all the students from Guyana we knew were blacks.

Cheryl always wanted to let everybody know her husband was Guyanese but white. She insisted her mother wanted to meet me and Mulo to share some wisdom and give us some advice.

Cheryl happened to live very close to Mulo's house and we were eager to meet her mother too. So finally one day we decided to visit Cheryl's house and join her family for dinner. Cheryl's mother was a black woman who was married to a white Cuban, so Cheryl was mixed. Her mother was very soft-spoken and was very polite. I remember we had a nice dinner that night and the whole conversation centered on how grateful we had to be to the revolution for helping black people. At the end she said, "Let me give you a little piece of advice. You guys are very handsome and very well educated, so you ought to marry white women -you have to advance the race. Look at me. I have already done it and Cheryl is following in my footsteps." That was the first and last time we went to her house.

During slavery, it was very common in Cuba for the slave master, his sons and his friends to have sex with their female slaves. Of course, since there was no contraception at that time, many of these sexual encounters would result in pregnancy. Consequently, the offspring would carry half of the genetic code of the white father and a mulatto would be born.

Usually the slave master would not recognize this child as his own. He would forfeit his paternal rights and the child would not have any inheritance or the right to own land. Being the offspring of a slave master did have its benefits though. For example, sometimes the mulattoes

would be working inside the house as domestic slaves instead of in the field.

The mulattoes would get an education from the slave master and that's where this concept of "advance the race" came from. Whites created their own concepts wherein anything associated with dark skin would mean primitive, savage, bad, ugly, grotesque and uneducated. While anything associated with white was the opposite; progressive, civilized, good, beautiful, refined, noble and even divine. Sometimes at the university my white classmates would tell me I was a black man with a white brain and I would get very upset. They could not understand why I would get upset at what I considered to be, such a blatant display of racism. They thought they were just trying to give me a compliment.

Once during literature class, I told the teacher that Alexander Dumas, author of "*The Count of Monte Cristo*" and "*The Three Musketeers*" was a black man and the son of Haitian descendants who were slaves. The entire class including the teacher sniggered at me. In their prejudiced minds, they did not think it possible that such a prolific writer could be black and create such classic masterpieces. I would not be surprised, if still today, some reading this book might also be astonished by this fact.

I recognized this as such a sad state of affairs that white and black students alike could

develop such an inaccurate and closed-minded view of the potential of any people, let alone black people. They were blindly led to believe that knowledge was esoteric and reserved for whites only. In their perverted minds, they believed black people were not supposed to excel intellectually.

Some people think the term mulatto originates from the Spanish word “mula,” meaning mule, the hybrid offspring between a horse and a donkey. The mule is an animal that cannot reproduce. The word “mulatto” is a Cuban euphemism that has a sexual connotation as well. Mulattoes are still considered to be sexual symbols. Quite often the word is used in popular songs and a lot of tourists go to Cuba hoping to have some sexual adventure with a mulatto.

Our university was in downtown Havana close to many tourist attractions. It was often rather common that after class, Sixto, Mulo and I would run into some foreigners who were taking pictures and hanging out. Among those foreigners there were often Americans who had traveled to Cuba through cultural exchange programs. They were very anxious to meet with us, the ordinary Cubans, and learn more about our lives.

These encounters gave me the chance not only to practice my English but also to learn more about life in America. What started out as mere curiosity eventually became a hobby and later, a way of making a living. Meeting these tourists was

a milestone and they had a huge influence on our lives. From that point forward, we were not only able to obtain exclusive information straight from the source, but we also managed to acquire some of the items that were not available to ordinary Cubans, such as shampoo, music, clothing, and the like. Many of these tourists would eventually become our friends, and seeing how much we were in need of basic necessities, would help us out.

I remember once we met with this group of teachers and students from the University of Boston and among them was a man of color. We had decided to go to a Cuban club that night and have some drinks. We were having a good time but this brother seemed to be very uneasy and wanted to talk to us in private. He kept badgering me and when I decided to use the restroom he immediately swigged his drink and followed me. Once we were alone, he revealed to me the reason why those women were so crazy about us. It seemed that in America, they wouldn't be able to act that way. They had been so repressed for such a long time in their own country that once in Cuba; they felt free to act kind of crazy. He was warning us that all they were doing was using us for sex. At that moment, I was having a good time and I didn't pay much attention to his advice. All I wanted to do was have some fun. Although what he was saying made a lot of sense, I was still too young and more interested in listening to my hormones than my conscience.

That particular night when we went back to the hotel, I took the elevator with the African-American guy and the rest of the group. The guy complained of a headache, and one of the girls offered him a Tylenol. He refused it and said that he would never take anything from a white person because he didn't trust them.

I will never forget the incident in the elevator that night because not only did I feel sorry for the girl but I started wondering if racism was really that bad in the U.S. My thought was, "Are all white people really that racist?" I had experienced my own share of racism in Cuba, but it never took me to the point of not being able to trust another human being just because he or she was white.

Chapter Five

THE UNDERGROUND WORLD

Those were the times when I started hanging out with a lot of tourists and meeting them became not only a source of pleasure but a source of information and knowledge as well. The Cuban government has always had total control of all the information being broadcast to the public and did not want the average citizen to interact with these tourists.

In the beginning we were just running into them when their tour buses came around our university and other areas where tourists would hang out like bookstores, museums, historical and cultural centers. Later on instead of waiting to run into them by chance, we were forced to become more creative and started developing more sophisticated ways to get in touch with them. We became more proactive and started seeking information about their schedules and dates of

arrival in Cuba. We would sometimes even go to the airport to wait for them.

We also discovered an underground world in which there were other people interested in meeting the tourists. We ran into prostitutes, hustlers and even undercover police who also made it their business to pursue tourists. Generally tourists were taken around the island on tour buses. Once they were dropped off in the city, they were encouraged by the tour guides to stay together in groups and follow proper instructions.

The tour guides were working undercover for the secret police and were supposed to let the authorities know about the whereabouts of the tourists; where they would go, with whom they would talk, etc. Tourists were always told where to go, which restaurants to visit, and so on. This way they were kept too busy to interact with the Cuban people. I remember this particular area in Old Havana where the tour buses used to come and drop the tourists off so they could walk around and see attractions and historical sites. We used to wait for these buses to see if we could somehow take some of these tourists to other areas where the government wouldn't want them to go.

Many tourists had the desire to see an uncensored picture of Cuba. We always tried to give these tourists a favorable impression about Cuba and represented our country in a very positive light. We would talk about the different

achievements of the Cuban revolution and share local stories. But after enduring constant harassment by the police, we realized that no matter how good our intentions, they did not want us to talk to tourists. Many times I was arrested by the police, taken to their headquarters and would spend several nights in the dungeon, just for talking with someone from another country. They were very careful, of course, and did not want the tourists to notice this. They did not want to give the impression that in Cuba you could get in trouble just for talking to someone visiting from another country. The police used sophisticated methods to conceal their activity. For example, if you were sitting at a table in a restaurant with tourists, they would beckon you to follow them or wait until you went to the bathroom to approach you. Then they would identify themselves as Secret Police and ask you to follow them. Sometimes they would tell you that you have to leave the place without even saying goodbye to the tourists at your table. You would then be arrested, photographed and asked not to come to that area again.

Usually there were two types of policemen; the honest cop who was just doing his job and the opportunistic rogue cop who hid behind the law to commit his crimes. The latter type usually would arrest you, take your money and sometimes acted as a pimp between prostitutes and foreigners in return for such things as clothing, dollars, or sexual favors.

Little by little, my friends and I started developing our own street language regarding the tourists and everything that was happening in the underground world. Since at that time it was illegal and punishable under law for Cubans to carry U.S. dollars, we started calling the dollars “Fula,” which in the Cuban culture means something that can get you in trouble; something that is not good. We also started calling ourselves and all those who would hang out with the tourists, “jinetes.” Jinete means cowboy, like the person on the horse who leads the cattle. Eventually, this word that my friends and I created became very, very popular in Cuba and evolved into “jineteros.” We had no idea that what we were doing would become a social phenomenon. We were not only mavericks but trendsetters and pioneers as well!

Our encounters with these valuable tourists were very meaningful for us, and for them as well; it was a relationship of mutual benefit because they too were very hungry to hear our side of the story. They wanted to hear from us real local Cubans, and the fact that we were university students made it a lot easier to communicate because most of us were well educated and spoke at least one foreign language, such as English, Italian or French.

Our group was composed mainly of black University students of Economics, Foreign Languages, Philosophy and Sociology. I remember once we were having an amazing dialogue on the beach with Henry, a black friend of mine and a

professor of philosophy at the University of Havana, whom we jokingly called "Philosopher." When it came to dialogue, Henry was a brilliant and eloquent speaker and a literary savant. Henry was a man of great learning who spoke of the history of the Roman Empire and the ancient Mesopotamian city of Babylon. We were all fascinated by his wisdom. He was also quite epicurean and well versed in the arts. He liked to talk about any manifestation of art, such as theater, cinema or ballet. We would often meet at the home of the University Student Federation to play dominoes, discuss politics and have a couple of drinks or we would go to the beach near my house. That particular day, we were accompanied by a group of Spanish girls, who were basking in the sun at this time, completely captivated by listening to the Philosopher's lecture on politics, world history and philosophy.

A few days later, I came to the university and ran into Mulo. "Did you hear the news?" he asked. "What happened? I replied. "The 'Philosopher' got busted," he answered.

Henry had already raised too many red flags and had been blacklisted by the Cuban government. The authorities had been seeking some kind of excuse or subterfuge to get rid of him.

One of the last things Henry did to defy the government had to do with a student who just happened to be the son of a high ranking

government official of the ruling elite. He had suspended this student who was very arrogant and believed he could do as he wished without facing any consequences. This student's mother, upon hearing the news, reacted in a very arrogant way and demanded a meeting with the "Philosopher." The "Philosopher" explained to this woman that her son might be the son of a government official but he was not a good student. Therefore, he refused to schedule a meeting. In one of the biggest cases of injustice and abuses of power, the "Philosopher" was ambushed at his house by the secret police and arrested. Without due process, the "Philosopher" was finally ousted from his position as professor of philosophy at the University of Havana and relegated to a position as an elementary teacher in a small village outside of Havana.

Like most of our group, the "Philosopher" was banished from Cuba for his political ideas and is now a Cuban exile in Miami. He works as a professor and political analyst on a television program where he is known by his real name, Enrique Patterson.

Our relationship with these tourists was symbiotic. We fed each other. We were both hungry for what we could learn from the other. Not only was there an exchange of precious information but there were other things to gain from our interactions as well. They wanted to acquire some Cuban goods like Cuban cigars, rum and handcrafts that the Cuban government would sell to them at very high

prices. We would be able to get these items a lot cheaper, or even just trade those things for things like shampoo, skin lotion, sneakers, jeans, and T-shirts. The items we received from these tourists were very difficult for us to find in Cuba.

Obviously, there was a change in the way I was dressing and smelling, and my classmates started noticing. There were times when some of my friends would ask me where I got that pair of jeans. I would just respond by saying that my brother sent them to me from Africa. The only people I would speak to freely about this were my best friends and my family. My mother was a bit worried because she knew that I was involved in activities that could eventually get me in trouble, but I still felt comfortable to share my stories with her.

A change in the nature of Cuba's relationship with the U.S. opened the floodgates for an exchange of cultural between both countries. In March of 1979 some of Columbia's top recording artists paid a surprise visit to Cuba where they performed at the Karl Marx Theater and recorded a series of concerts with some of the top Cuban groups. This festival was dubbed "Havana Jam" and grew out of an idea of several executives of CBS records who had visited Cuba before and were very impressed by the rich culture and talent on the island.

Some participants in this festival included some American, artists the likes of; Billy Joel, Rita Coolidge, Kris Kristopherson, Weather Report, Billy Swan, The CBS Jazz All Stars composed of Dexter Gordon, Stan Getz, Jimmy Heath, Arthur Blythe, Woody Shaw, Hubert Laws, Bobby Hutcherson, Willie Bobo, Cedar Walton, and Percy Heath. Other participants also included; Tony Williams, and the Fania All Stars, which consisted of a group of the leading exponents of salsa music in the United States, including names like Ruben Blades, Johnny Pacheco, Hector Lavoe, Wilfrido Vargas, Santos Colon, Pete Rodriguez, and Paco Lucas.

Cuban participants included; the group Irakere, Orquesta Aragon, Pachito Alonso, Los Papines, Tata Guines, Manguare Group, Guillermo Barreto, Frank Emilio, Changuito, Juan Pablo Torres, Pablito Milanés, Sara Gonzales, and Elena Burke.

The festival started Friday night, March 2nd, and ended on Sunday, March 4th. The opening night belonged to Weather Report, who took the stage and received several standing ovations from the audience, which was consisted mostly of a cadre of the Cuban Communist Party, the Young Communists League, leaders of the revolution and their families, and even members of other organizations like the National Association of Small Farmers that – unlike the children of the ruling class

– had no idea who these artists were, and of course didn't know their music either.

The Fania All Stars started playing at midnight and most of the audience began to leave. Mainly because it was late at night and many in the audience lived in the countryside far away from the theater. Much of the audience also left because they became disinterested when the Fania All Stars made the mistake of playing their interpretation of some traditional Cuban songs. These interpretations did not come off well. They would have received a much better reception had they done their own original repertoire. Their music was already very well known in Cuba, especially the song "*Pedro Navaja*," written and performed by Ruben Blades on his album entitled, "*Siembra*." For many, this clumsy and unsuccessful attempt to interpret traditional Cuban music was like trying to sell ice cubes to Eskimos at the North Pole.

Opening Saturday night was the group Jazz All-Stars. The group performed several songs by Walton and Jimmy Heath and kept the crowd on its feet after each performance. Then they gave the stage to "Trio of Doom," consisting of John McLaughlin, Jaco Pastorius and Tony Williams. The trio captivated the audience with their unique and well-amplified sound. The third group that took the stage was Blythe, Jimmy Heath, Laws, Bobo, Rodney Franklin Richard Tee, Eric Gale, John Lee and Gerry Brown. Although they only played two pieces, they were very well received.

What followed was the highlight of the evening, a group of twenty five Afro Cuban percussionists. The jam session featured some of the biggest names in modern Cuban percussion music, such as Tata Guines, Los Papines, Guillermo Barreto and Changuito, backed by pianist Frank Emilio and his quartet.

This masterful drum set exhibition was followed by a great rock performance by Stephen Stills, who delighted the audience with his high-energy band featuring a class act that included Bonnie Bramlett and Mike Finnegan. Stills played several of his well-known hits from over the years. He then jumped into the audience with his remote control guitar, touring the theater, going through a door exiting the lobby and entering back into the theater through the other door while singing and sending a greeting to the audience, from a distance, called "*Cuba Al Fin*," meaning "*At last in Cuba*."

Irakere closed the show with an historic performance inspired by the great energy that reigned in the theater and directed by his keyboardist, Chucho Valdés. The group then joined with Rodney Franklin, Richard Tee, John McLaughlin, Willie Bobo, Stan Getz, Jaco Pastorius and others in a jam session. They played late into the early morning hours, finishing around 3 a.m.

The next day, Sunday, March 3, it was time for Kris Kristofferson, Rita Coolidge and Billy Joel to perform. They were backed by an excellent band

made up of Billy Swan and other top musicians. Kristofferson sang first, performing several of his hits that were immediately recognized by the audience. The melodies were intermingled with Kris' good intentions of trying to communicate in Spanish with the audience.

But the theater exploded when Rita Coolidge took the stage and sang her hits that Cubans were accustomed to hearing through the radio stations from Miami, such as WQAM, WLCY, WKWF, and WGBS. The audience recognized and sang along with songs like "*We're All Alone*," and "*Higher and Higher*," and that really impressed and inspired Rita Coolidge.

The end of the event came when Billy Joel came on stage. He was already super popular in Cuba, especially with his song "*Piano Man*" and his album "*The Stranger*," which had recently been released. His great popularity was apparent as he electrified the room. The audience came alive, as people screamed his name and rushed the stage causing a big mess. That was an unforgettable night for those who had the privilege to attend this concert.

During this sojourn, the artists stayed at Marazul Hotel located on Santa María del Mar and the vast majority of people on the island knew nothing of this festival. Thirty-three years later, just a very small number of people know that this festival took place. Everything was handled with a

lot of secrecy and paranoia. The festival did not receive any advertising or promotion by the media. As usual, and to the amazement of the American musicians, the Cuban government turned this great festival into a political event, robbing the Cuban people of the opportunity to see their favorite American artists. I learned about the festival through my friend Villy.

Admission to the festival was by invitation only. Karl Marx Theater was fully guarded during the three days of the event. The area around the theater was full of police and sentries who acted as gatekeepers, controlling access and blocking the streets so ordinary Cubans could not get near the theater.

The irreparable damage the Cuban government has caused the Cuban people with all its restrictions goes beyond the sphere of the economy. Their campaign of pervasive censorship has also affected our cultural heritage and has allowed our music to be stolen and exploited by other countries to the extent that now it is known worldwide as "Salsa."

As part of a very limited cultural exchange program, in December 1979, an American Amateur Baseball team was allowed to come to Cuba for the first time to play against the Cuban National Baseball team. Sixto and I went to watch the game at the Latin American Stadium in Havana. The arena was completely sold out and even Fidel

Castro himself attended this game. There was only one black guy on the American team, Joe Carter. He along with first baseman Terry Francona were the stars of the team. The Cubans eked out a victory by beating the Americans 6-4. At the end of the game Sixto and I sneaked in where their bus was parked and were able to shake hands with most of the team and thank them for a good game. Eventually both Terry Francona and Joe Carter became stars in major league baseball. Terry Francona later became the manager of the Boston Red Sox.

It was also around this time that Reverend Jesse Jackson visited Cuba for the first time. I remember going to the University of Havana and running into Abilio, a friend of mine from high school when I was studying on the Isle of Youth. I noticed he was very well dressed, in a suit and told me he was working for the Secret Service. He also told me Jesse Jackson was going to make a speech at the University of Havana and Castro was going to join him. We were talking about the old days and our friends when we heard through his radio walkie-talkie that Castro was entering the University. And there was Castro, coming in followed by a huge entourage of bodyguards. My friend signaled them that I was ok, and Castro walked by very close to me. He was wearing a very green uniform unlike any military uniform I had seen before. He was tall and his face was red with freckles. He looked at me and there was no expression on his face. I had no choice but to avoid eye contact with him. When he finally passed me by, I noticed his butt was flat and

his pants were wet, probably because he had been sitting. Later I went inside the classroom where Castro and Jesse Jackson both spoke to the students.

In 1980, at the university, the so-called process of "Deepening of Political Consciousness" was taking place, under the mantra that the university was only for the revolutionaries. In what looked like a Roman circus, there was a meeting in our class to crucify Sixto for his antisocial behavior, which simply consisted of reading American magazines, listening to American music and joking about class differences existing in our classroom. At the end of the meeting, Sixto was severely punished and ousted from the Young Communist League. I disagreed with the verdict. I could not understand this hypocrisy on the part of our classmates who were the same people who delighted in his jokes and now were unscrupulously turning against him. I could not stand by idly and allow my friend to be crucified. I felt obligated to defend him so I decided to address this travesty. I stood up before the class to defend him and ultimately they expelled me too. Even though Sixto was expelled from the Young Communist League, he still managed to finish his career, but was relegated to a position of no importance or travel opportunities. He was ostracized and eventually became a cab driver.

Eventually, I was forced to stop hanging out with Sixto when it came to meeting Europeans and American women. Sixto had a terrible fear of the police and did not want to get in any kind of trouble

that could jeopardize his future. Ironically, Sixto was never a person trusted by the Cuban government for the reason that his father was a political prisoner, exiled in the U.S. Sixto was a good-looking guy and he spoke English very well. However, these women were not interested in him at all and they would ask me blatantly to bring other friends along who looked like me. They said if they wanted to hang out with white guys, they could do that easily in their own countries. The last time I saw my friend Sixto, I hardly recognized him. He was mentally sick and unable to work.

So instead, I became good friends with Moses. Moses was Jorge's brother and Jorge was a good friend of mine since senior high school while we studied on the Isle of Youth. Moses was an English teacher at the University of Havana and we had a lot in common. We loved American music, sports, movies, and books in English. Plus we were black and proud. We would spend nights gallivanting all over the streets of Havana, dancing in night clubs or drinking and cracking jokes by the seawall. Moses was a polyglot; he was fluent in five languages (Spanish, English, French, Italian and Danish). We became the dream team.

Moses had a good friend from San Francisco, California, whose name was Armstrong. This friend owned a Record Store. Armstrong knew how much we liked American music so in the early _80s he surprised us with a bag full of records: Donna Summer, Earth Wind and Fire, Parliament

Funkadelic, Maze, Gap Band, Rappers Delight, Michael Jackson and more. Armstrong explained to us that since he owned a record store, all those albums had been given to him for free and most of the music had not even been released to the public yet. He was right.

A couple of days later we ran into a big group of American tourists from Boston, Massachusetts and we decided to have a party with them at a friend's house that could accommodate a large group of people. There were many women in that party and I ended up with the only black girl in the group. All of my friends were laughing at me because they could not believe that with so many available, beautiful, white women, I chose the only black.

When the music started playing, the Americans were expecting to hear some Cuban music and they could not believe we had so much American music. They were speechless when they listened to Michael Jackson's; *"Rock with You," "Don't Stop Till You Get enough,"* and *"Wanna be Startin" Something.* They had never listened to those songs and could not believe someone in Cuba would have that music. There was Michael Jackson, on the cover of the album, wearing white. I had grown up listening to the Jackson Five and seeing Michael Jackson now as a solo artist was a thrill.

I also became good friends with two guys I met through the underground; Bonito and Gordo.

Bonito was very skinny and short. Gordo was tall and fat. They looked like a black Cuban version of Laurel and Hardy³¹. They had two things in common; they were both very dark and could pass for Africans and both of them loved white women! We used to joke about this all the time. Bonito spoke Italian and French and Gordo did not speak a foreign language. However, he had developed some special skills in sign language and had the uncanny ability to communicate with foreigners despite the language barrier.

Bonito would make the white policemen very irritated because he was the type of guy who loved to prance about and show off his white girls. He was flashy, flamboyant and boisterous. They could not believe that such sophisticated women from countries like the U.S., France, Italy and Canada would actually go for a guy like Bonito. Bonito was often harassed by the police and the tour guides. There were even times when he was harassed by ordinary white Cubans as well.

One night, he was dating this beautiful Spanish woman from Spain who was a lot taller than he. He left this nightclub really late and there was a group of white Cuban teenagers who were also at the club and were drunk. They were driving a Russian car called a Lada³² that was very popular at the time and only available to a select few government officials. They started calling him names like “Monkey” and they almost ran him over with their car. Mulo, Moses and I were luckier since

we were bigger guys and therefore more intimidating. These teenagers did not want to cross swords with us. It was more difficult to pick on us, but sadly, Bonito was picked on a lot due to his small stature.

In this underground world I also met a group of African-Americans who, to my surprise, were living in Cuba. I was hanging out in a club with a group of Americans when I got approached by a black guy and right away I knew that he was not Cuban because his English was perfect and he had no accent at all. His name was Sunny.

Sunny was a member of the Black Panther Party who had hijacked a plane with other party members and killed a policeman during this incident. The hijackers took the plane to Havana and the Cuban government gave them political asylum. Eventually, I became very good friends with Sunny.

There was this particular bar in downtown where most of my African-American friends would hang out and we would listen to music like *"Easy Like Sunday Morning," "Brick House"* by the Commodores, *"Let's Groove Tonight"* and *"Boogie Wonderland"* by Earth Wind and Fire, *"Ladies Night"* and *"Celebration"* by Kool and the Gang, *"Bring the Funk"* and *"Atomic Dog"* by Parliament Funkadelic. I used to laugh at them because they would miss America so much and say that they would do anything to go back to the U.S.

Although they were foreigners, they were still black, and they would sometimes be harassed by the police. Some of them ended up staying in Cuba, but later I found out that Sunny was given amnesty, so he moved to Jamaica and eventually he was allowed to go back to the U.S. Every once in a while I think about Sunny and wonder how his life might be now in America, but I don't know anything about his whereabouts today.

Cuba had become the sanctuary of many fugitives from U.S. justice. I remember in the early _80s a one individual who posed as a Canadian citizen and came to Havana under the name of Tom Adams. Later we learned, he was in fact from the United States and became known in Cuba by the pseudonym, "Tom the American."

Tom was not your typical foreigner. He was driven around incognito in a Mercedes-Benz with tinted windows, and was always accompanied by several bodyguards. He also lived a hedonistic lifestyle and organized some extravagant parties in his luxurious yacht, complete with a disco on board. He was a very mysterious character who seemed to be right out of a gangster movie. He was tall and lanky with a mustache, always wore dark glasses, and spoke very good Spanish.

Finally, one day his true identity was revealed by Carlos Lubonis, a friend who used to hang out in the underground world and controlled the business of selling Cuban cigars to foreigners.

Carlos lived in a suburb called "Nuevo Vedado" and his father was a high government official. Carlos was the typical rich kid. He did what he pleased and whenever he got in trouble with the police, he would just mention his father's name and they would let him go. I was always very wary of Carlos and never trusted his beguiling smile. I always suspected he was a snitch working undercover for the Cuban Secret Police.

One day Carlos told us that Tom was a fugitive absconding from U.S. justice, a con artist who had embezzled more than \$250 million from a group of investors, and his real name was Robert Vesco.

Robert Vesco had fled the U.S. and moved to San Jose, Costa Rica, where he lived for a long time protected by President Jose Figueres, who Vesco influenced to pass the "Vesco Act," a decree that prevented his extradition to the United States. This was one of a number of Central American countries he lived in because they did not have extradition treaties with the United States.

By 1978, the new president of Costa Rica, Rodrigo Carazo, repealed the Vesco Act and forced him to take refuge in Nassau, Bahamas. Eventually, Robert Vesco would move to Antigua, another Caribbean island, and while there, try to buy the island of Barbuda and create his own sovereign state. But he met with no success. His last stop before going to Cuba was Nicaragua, where of

course he also received protection by the Sandinista government.

The U.S government publicly denounced Robert Vesco's presence in Cuba, but Castro refused to acknowledge that Cuba had been harboring him. It was not until several photos of Vesco appeared in an American newspaper that Castro finally admitted having welcomed him in Cuba under the guise that Vesco was very ill and had gone to Cuba to receive medical treatment.

A few years ago, it was published in the news in Cuba that Robert Vesco had died after being imprisoned for several years as a result of being indicted and convicted by the Cuban government for "fraud and illicit economic activity" and "acts prejudicial to the economic plans and contracts of the state" in 1996. This news shocked many people who knew the close relationship Vesco seemed to have with Castro.

Later, it was reported that Vesco died of lung cancer while incarcerated in 2007; even to this day there is no proof of Robert Vesco's death in Cuba. There are rumors that the whole process was a maneuver of identity change planned by the Cuban authorities. Vesco might very well have orchestrated and staged his own death. There are people who claim to have seen him in Santa Maria del Mar, where he may have been living under a new identity. Who knows if today Robert Vesco

lives in the same place that was once my beloved elementary boarding school!

In Cuba there were also some foreign residents who lived there before the triumph of Castro's revolution. One friend I will never forget was Chang "The Chinese," who worked in a dry cleaner in Chinatown, Havana. I met Chang through Fulgencio "The Haitian," a friend from the underground world who told me Chang was good at dry cleaning. In Cuba, it was very difficult to wash and dry-clean foreign clothes because the delicate fabrics could not withstand the rough and tumble of the Russian washing machines, as well as the scarcity of good quality detergents. Chang had emigrated from China before the triumph of the Cuban revolution, fleeing Marxist Communism, and used his life savings to open a dry cleaning business in Havana's Chinatown. When the Communists came to power in Cuba, they confiscated his dry cleaning business and Chang ended up working for Castro in the same place that formerly belonged to him. Somehow Chang found my company amenable and we used to talk at great length. Although I always felt very sorry for Chang, I used to laugh at the way he told the story of his life and how he pronounced my name, missing the "b" and saying "Palo." He said, *"I came from China lunning away flom Communita and Communita got me here again. Yu see, Palo, Communita no good...veli bad. But one dei wen Catlo die, I get back my dly cleaning."*

Chang had some family and friends in San Francisco's Chinatown in the United States, but he was too old to emigrate and start afresh. Years later I learned that Chang had died in Cuba and never regained his bona fide dry-cleaning business.

It was very common to meet other foreigners in the underground world, especially blacks from the Caribbean Islands like Jamaica, Granada, San Lucia, and Guyana. There were a lot of students from these islands studying in Cuba. The Cuban government has always tried to keep this image of a Cuba that is always willing to give a helping hand to the less fortunate. They loved to brag that they had the best educational system, so they would give scholarships to students from these other islands.

Another foreign guy who became a very good friend in Cuba was Randy. Randy was from Jamaica and he was studying to be a dentist. He was always complaining about racism in Cuba. Coming from Jamaica where the black civil rights movement had such a big impact, he could not understand why the blacks in Cuba had such lack of pride and low self-esteem. He told me that once, in the middle of his class, he got caught talking to another student and the teacher asked him to stop. The teacher said that he should be very grateful that the Cuban government was giving him the opportunity to study in Cuba when that position could have been easily given to a Cuban. Randy stood up to the teacher and told him, "My

government is paying your government with American dollars so that we could come to study here.” The teacher was very surprised and puzzled by this, as was the rest of the class. Randy was the very first one to blow the whistle on the seemingly altruistic Cuban government, which was actually doing business with the Jamaican government.

Also at this time Mulo’s sister, Ophelia, married an African guy who was living in Cuba. He was sent to work for the Cuban government in Jamaica as a journalist along with Ophelia. This was also the time when reggae music started becoming very popular through Bob Marley. Mulo had the whole collection of his records. On the weekends, we would go to either his house or mine and spend the whole weekend drinking beer and listening to Bob Marley (*War*, *Africa Unite and Exodus*), Jacob Miller, Peter Tosh, Jimmy Cliff, Steel Pulse, Black Uhuru and others. I would invite some of my friends from Jamaica over so they could translate the message of Bob Marley to me. Even though I understood English, the Jamaican accent was different for me and I needed help.

Among my Jamaican friends was Joseph Manley, who was the son of the former Prime Minister of Jamaica, Michael Manley. Manley was the Prime Minister when Jamaica experienced a significant escalation of its political culture of violence. Supporters of his opponent, Edward Seaga, and the Jamaica Labor Party (*JLP*), and Manley’s People’s National Party (*PNP*), engaged in

a bloody struggle, which began before the 1976 election and ended when Seaga was installed as Prime Minister in 1980. It got to the point where I was spending so much time with foreigners and was dressing so much like them that I would even go to places pretending to be from the Caribbean and get away with it. I was so transformed at one point that when I was in my own town hanging out with some friends from the Caribbean, one woman in a group of young women passing by said, "Did you see that foreigner over there? He looks so much like Pablo."

I had gone through such a complete metamorphosis that even people who were from my own town couldn't recognize me anymore. The music that I was listening to was not even Cuban. I either listened to music from the U.S. or music from Jamaica. Later when I moved to the U.S. and worked in the music industry, I would hang out with Parliament and Carlos Santana, and even get to meet Michael Jackson, my childhood hero.

Sometimes when we were at home drinking and listening to reggae music, my friends from the Caribbean would ask me if I had ever smoked marijuana or knew of somebody who did. They claimed that smoking marijuana was better than drinking alcohol and it made for a more pleasant experience while listening to reggae music. I have to admit I was curious but at the same time, very scared as well. I had heard of some stories of people being sent to jail for a long time for being caught with just a joint. I didn't have to wait long before

the opportunity to try marijuana was presented to me.

One morning my brother Raúl woke me up saying that a boat had landed near our house and a lot of people were going toward the beach to see what was going on. We headed toward the beach and could see a crowd looking at a boat which was obviously not Cuban. We could see there were two guys inside the boat; a black guy with dreadlocks and a white guy with a pony tail. All of a sudden the coast guard arrived along with a helicopter. The two guys were handcuffed and taken into custody. They both looked very frightened and confused.

A couple of days later, news was being spread that something unusual was happening around the ocean. There was apparently this huge dark spot or shadow in the ocean moving toward the beach. I decided not to go this time to check it out. What had happened was the boat was carrying a large load of marijuana bound for Miami, when suddenly there was a malfunction and the engine broke down. They wound up adrift at sea. Realizing they would eventually get caught, they had no choice but to get rid of all the marijuana by disposing of it in the ocean. The coast guard came in later, blocked access to the perimeter of the beach and confiscated all the marijuana. However, a good friend of mine who was one of the first on the scene was able to grab more than half of a huge bag full of marijuana and get away with it.

I went to my friend's house to check it out and there it was, lying on the floor, a big bag of weed.

"Can I have some?" I asked.

"Of course," my friend replied.

"Have you ever smoked marijuana before?" He asked.

"No," I answered.

"Ok then I am going to teach you how to roll a joint first and how to smoke it later," he said.

He rolled a joint that looked more like a Cuban cigar and explained to me that I should inhale the smoke, hold my breath and try to keep it in as long as I could. We smoked almost half of the joint and he allowed me to keep the rest and take home as much marijuana as I wanted. Then it was time to go home.

In this altered state of consciousness, somehow the trip back to my house seemed longer than usual. I seemed to be more focused and colors seemed brighter everywhere I looked. Everything became more beautiful; the ocean, the sky, the trees and the flowers. I finally arrived home and noticed my mother in the kitchen cooking. I could hear the sound of sizzling and smell the food. I looked at her and she gave me a look as if wondering what was wrong with me. Everything seemed so cool but I was thirsty. So I decided to have a beer and listen to

one of my favorite groups at that time, “Duran Duran” (*The Reflex, New Moon on Monday*). The beer tasted so good! And the music was incredible. “*Why don’t you use it? Try not to bruise it. Buy time, don’t lose it,*” I kept singing. Suddenly, my brother Jose arrived from work and saw me dancing and singing.

How come you are so happy?” he asked.

“Well, I got something here I want you to try,” I said.

My brother Jose was eager to give it a try so I did not need to coax him. We both went inside the bathroom and finished the rest of the joint I had been smoking earlier with my friend.

“I don’t feel anything yet,” my brother kept saying, until all of a sudden he started laughing and soon we were both laughing hysterically without knowing why and not being able to stop.

We stayed high and later we were ravenously hungry. We ate all our food plus our oldest brother’s food too. Our mother, of course, was very upset when she found out we ate all that food but we did not know at the time smoking marijuana would give us “the munchies.”

The day after I woke up and started to get ready to go to school. My friend had told me that if I smoked before class I would be so focused that I

would be able to understand everything better and quicker than the rest of my classmates. So I got really high.

This time I was taking the public bus to the university and I was having a different sensation. It was not as pleasant as the day before. I had the feeling people were looking at me, not because I was happy, but because they knew I was high. I could not wait to get off the bus.

On this particular day, my first class was political economics. The teacher was an Ecuadorian guy who had studied in the Soviet Union and was a member of the Communist Party. His name was Vladimir. He carried this name in honor of Vladimir Lenin³³ the Russian Marxist Revolutionary and Communist politician who led the October Revolution of 1917³⁴

So I sat next to my friend Villy, who immediately frowned and looked at me quizzically.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked.

“Nothing,” I answered.

“Are you OK?” he continued.

“Yes, I am OK. Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know. You look weird,” he said.

The more questions he asked the more paranoid I became. I started thinking that my friend Villy was a member of the Secret Police so I asked for permission to use the bathroom and went home.

That was the last time I smoked weed in my life. But I still had plenty of weed left at home so I gave some to my brother and my friends who were puzzled and very grateful at the same time for my gesture.

I always wondered what really happened to all those drug shipments that were usually confiscated by the Cuban authorities and later destroyed, according to them. My question was answered years later.

As usual, where there is voracious appetite for money and drugs, death will follow. So soon a scandal involving drug trafficking and high-ranking Cuban officials led to the conviction and long prison terms and even the execution, of several of these officers.

There are also rumors that Robert Vesco was the mastermind behind every sort of money laundering, narcotics distribution and smuggling plot in Cuba, playing a major role in the logistics and the design of the strategy that the Cuban government would use to evade the authorities of the United States. He also served as a liaison in connection with drug lords such as the very well

known Colombians, Jorge Ochoa and Pablo Escobar.

Many witnesses today, former Cuban government officials, former intelligence officers and drug traffickers, have testified in International Courts and confirmed the participation of the government of Cuba in the illegal business of drug trafficking.

Chapter Six

SUSPENDED FROM THE UNIVERSITY

EVERY DAY I was growing more and more disillusioned with my life in Cuba and the communist system. It was a combination of living in a constantly beleaguered state, having firsthand information about how much better life was outside of Cuba and not relying on the government to make a living anymore. Self-reliance and independence had transformed my life in a big way. I had created a network of friends outside of Cuba that would be visiting me very often. That included old friends who had a great time in Cuba and were eager to come back and also new friends who were planning to visit Cuba and were referred by the old friends.

Sometimes I would take a friend to the airport and would pick up another who was coming in on the same flight. During these times, I was finding it more difficult to attend university classes. My classmates had already taken notice of the new

way I was dressing. It became obvious some of them were extremely jealous and wanted to know how I was able to dress better than they were dressed.

The situation in Cuba was gradually deteriorating. Crime and street violence were at all time highs. There was more repression in the street and there was a general feeling of discomfort and uneasiness all around. It felt as if something was about to happen. Indeed, it did not take long until our worst fears became reality and the police began to crack down on jineteros. Some of our friends from the underground world, including Bonito, now found themselves in trouble with the law.

Cuban law criminalizes any conduct which moves away from public morality. Any citizen can be arrested and sent to jail under the “Pre-Criminal Social Dangerousness Law,” a legal aberration that assumes one is considered guilty without the benefit of due process. Under this Cuban law, thousands of homosexuals, prostitutes, political dissidents, Jehovah's Witnesses and jineteros were arrested and sentenced to imprisonment and social rehabilitation. In a democracy, under the rule of law, of course it is the other way, with the presumption of innocence granted and no defendant declared guilty until proven so in court with all procedural safeguards.

I remember the case of a local guy called “Paquito” who was arrested at that time because he was gay. Paquito was a very good-looking and

feminine guy. He was tall and lean, with light skin and black silky hair. Many women were jealous of his eyelashes and bedroom eyes. Paquito dressed very nice and used to hang out mainly with European diplomats. His sister, Lola, was the female version of him. She was a lesbian.

When Paquito was arrested and searched, the cops realized he was wearing women's undergarments.

"So you are a ladybird!" they told him facetiously.

"Let's see how you fly with the falcons then."

The cops started laughing. They not only mocked and humiliated Paquito but purposely put him in a cell with some very bad criminals. This group of convicted criminals was an organized gang that used to commit violent crimes only during the night and called themselves "The Falcons." Paquito was gang raped several times by these delinquents while the jailers were watching and they only stopped when he was finally unconscious.

Cuba has always been one of the most homophobic, misogynic and racist countries in the world. Things got even worse for homosexuals after the triumph of the revolution. The Cuban culture is so homophobic that if you really want to insult someone, you would call him or her a homosexual. I myself used to despise homosexuals, until

something happened to me at a young age that changed forever the way I looked at homosexuals and people in general.

There was a homosexual guy living in my building whose name was Fernando. He was a lot older than I was, and he used to be a tailor. Some of the kids from my neighborhood used to harass him frequently and call him names. One day we decided to take the harassment a little bit further and teach him a lesson. So we created a plan to jump him just for fun.

We waited for the right moment when he would be coming back to his house and started yelling at him, pushing and shoving. I could see the fear on his face. Fernando was terrified and kept begging us to leave him alone until we finally thought we had had enough fun. We then stopped and ran away laughing.

I was already home when I heard the bell ringing and it was Fernando. He had already spoken to some of the kids and they succumbed to pressure and blurted out that I was the mastermind behind that act of villainy. I knew I was in real troubles so I went inside my room and hid under the bed. I could eavesdrop on my mother apologizing and assuring him I was going to get spanked big time.

“Please don’t spank him!” I heard Fernando say. “Just ask him why he wanted to hurt me,” he continued.

Right at that moment there was an awakening of my consciousness. *Yes, he is right! He has done nothing to me!* I said to myself.

Fernando was getting ready to leave but before he did, he wanted to be sure my mother wasn't going to spank me.

"Don't worry," I heard my mother say. I came out of my room and my mother asked me a question. "Just tell me why?"

I was in a real predicament and I couldn't come up with an answer. Ultimately I was not only admonished but spanked as well. I remember crying over the pain but still there was that question I could not answer. Why?

I learned one of the biggest lessons of my life too. I grew up as a person after that incident and a well of unmitigated sadness beckoned me. So from that moment on, I made a resolution that I would never hurt another fellow human being again.

One afternoon after finishing classes, I decided to hang out downtown when I ran into Gordo and Jorge. We had decided to go to a bar and have a drink, when suddenly we heard some car tires squeal and we were stopped by the police. They showed us their badges and ordered us to come inside the car. Gordo and Jorge complied immediately. However, I refused to do so, citing the

fact that I needed to know the reason why I was being arrested.

“Get in the car!” they insisted.

But I did not comply. There were two plainclothes cops, a black guy and a Spanish guy. The car had stopped in the middle of the street and was blocking all the traffic. I could hear the sound of some horn honking and the cops were getting very irritated. One of the cops tried to put the handcuffs on me but I broke free from his grip.

“We will explain to you at the police station!” one of them kept saying. The other one was growing more and more impatient and blustery.

There was a big crowd around us that consisted mainly of students who happened to be on break. So I decided to be candid about it and used this opportunity to let everybody know that the only reason we were being arrested was because we were blacks. To my surprise I garnered the support and sympathy of the bystanders. All of a sudden this man in a green uniform showed up. The traffic jam had elicited his attention and he wanted to know what was going on. Looking at the color of his uniform (it was very similar to the one I had seen Castro wearing before) and by the deference shown by the two cops, I knew this guy was a high-ranking official in the Cuban government. I vehemently asserted that I had committed no crime but was still being arrested. He listened to me very carefully and politely encouraged me to go inside the car. So

finally, after an invasive body pat-down, I complied and we headed toward the police station. During the course of the trip, the two cops were very angry and continuously threatened me.

“You are going spend the night in jail!” they kept growling.

When we finally arrived at the police station, they put us in three different rooms. The police station was full of activity and I could hear the sound of people bustling around, chattering and screaming. Suddenly the door opened and a tall, light skinned plainclothes cop came in and sat in a chair in front of me, looking at me inquisitively.

“So, you are part of the group that was wearing the Che Guevara red T-shirt, right?” the reticent cop asked, looking straight at my eyes and nodding slowly, as if measuring what I was going to answer.

“What group?” I replied.

“Do not try to be stupid! You know exactly what I am talking about,” he said. “The T-shirt that you are wearing with the image of Che Guevara and the letters on the back saying, “*A true revolutionary is guided by feelings of love.*” Do you know Mulo? He then asked.

“Yes, he is my friend.” I answered
“What about Moses Lima?

“He is my friend too!” I said.

“Well. The three of you are friends and wear the same type of T-shirt,” he said in an indicting tone.

That was when it finally dawned on me that Mulo and Moses had been stopped by the police too, a couple of days before and they were wearing the same T-shirts that had been given to us by a group of Americans from San Francisco who were sympathizers of the Cuban revolution and Che Guevara. Mulo and Moses were both very outspoken. They got into an argument with the police and complained about racism in Cuba too. So they inadvertently triggered a slew of events that wound up with our expulsion from the University of Havana.

“Listen, you guys are studying at the University and you are supposed to be the future leaders of the Revolution. How can we trust you if you are hanging out with American tourists?” inquired the officer. But by that point, it was more of a rhetorical question.

We were released from the police headquarters after signing a document where we agreed not to contact foreigners anymore and we would have to go in front of a judge. The charges were buying and selling merchandise from foreigners in the black market. The police also sent a letter to the University of Havana that stated we

were not trustworthy any longer. So we were suspended from the university for two years.

When my family heard that I had been suspended from the university, they were very upset and disappointed, especially my oldest brother Daniel. He had been working in Africa and was planning to help me get a job working as a Cuban diplomat in the Congo. My mother was very sad and displeased that her hopes and expectations were not going to be fulfilled. She had always been very proud of me and used to tell all of her co-workers I was going to be an ambassador. She couldn't believe why, after so many years of studying, I would jeopardize my future and my chances of working for the Cuban government in a privileged position. Yet for me, it was a bittersweet experience because I could have taken the path of least resistance and finished the university. But in my heart I had already divorced the Cuban government and the communist system. So I felt very relieved.

The day finally came when Mulo, Jorge and I had to be in court. The only time I had visited a courtroom before was at the age of nine when I was run over by a car and they were trying to prosecute the driver. This time, since it was a public trial, the room was full of activity. There were several police officers and prisoners along with family members who were waiting for their case to be heard by the court. Most of the accused were black Cubans.

We had decided to create our own defense since all the attorneys lacked impartiality and

worked for the Cuban government at that time. They were members of the Communist Party. It was quite clear they were not going to be serving our needs. Only one of us would take the stand so we did not contradict ourselves. We all agreed I should be the one.

The judge was a black woman so I would use the public trial as a platform to decry the injustices of racism in Cuba. We would be truthful and straightforward.

She tapped the gavel once to mark the opening of the session. The charges were; 1. Association with foreigners from capitalist countries and 2. Illegal possession of merchandise (by that they meant the three Che Guevara T-shirts that had been given to us by a group of American students). An additional, third charge was leveled against me for failure to go inside the police car.

The policeman who was accusing us was used to dealing mainly with black criminals so he tried unsuccessfully to portray us as crooks, delinquents and counter-revolutionaries. But we did not fall into those categories because we had no records and were excellent students. Our only crime was to associate ourselves with foreigners and there was no law in place at that time to prosecute us for that matter.

I opened my testimony by explaining how our fathers had fought for the revolution and helped

Castro to overthrow the former government so blacks and whites could not only go to the university together but walk safely around the streets as well, without the fear of being targeted or harassed by the police because of the color of their skin and hence the law should apply to everyone equally. I noticed how the face of the judge, who looked very serious at the beginning, started to change along with her body language. She started nodding in agreement and acknowledgment. I thought it was likely that as a black woman, she or members of her family, had experienced or witnessed their share of racism too.

Our strategy really worked. The judge tapped her gavel twice and the court was adjourned. We walked out of the courtroom with a 20 Cuban pesos fine and a big smile on our faces.

When my sister Lilia found out that I was no longer going to the university, she was also disappointed. However, she had heard they needed a Math teacher in her school and thought I could apply for the job. My sister was very intelligent. She was undoubtedly the most intelligent person in the whole family. Lilia had an uncanny capacity to learn and was an avid reader.

She was very precocious and learned how to read at the age of three. She was the youngest one in the family and the only girl. Therefore, she had nobody to play with in the house. The only thing she could do was to listen to our conversations and

discussions about books. She would spend all her time with our next door neighbor's daughter, Teresita, who was three years her senior. Teresita was already going to school so my sister would borrow some of her books to practice reading. She would eventually help Teresita with her homework too, even though she hadn't started school yet.

My sister was attending high school at this time. I went to apply for the job and was hired right away. The school was in the countryside of Havana, so I had to wake up around 5'o clock in the morning in order to catch the bus. It was the same type of school I had attended on the Isle of Youth. Students would spend the entire week at the school and would go home over the weekend.

I became an instant celebrity, not only because I was probably the youngest teacher but the coolest as well. I dressed in American jeans and listened to American music with them. I was also able to help Mulo get a job as a Math teacher in another nearby school, so we stayed close and hung out together as usual.

Chapter Seven

THE ESCAPE

WE HAD ALL AGREED the only answer was to leave Cuba, probably by marrying one of those girls we used to date. Mulo was getting ready to marry Carmen, a girl from Spain we had met together. She was coming back to see him. Moses, on the other hand, was going to marry a girl from Denmark, and Jorge a girl from Mexico. Although I was dating several girls, I considered all of them my friends and was not in love with any of them.

There was this Spanish girl I had met before and she came back to Cuba with Mulo's girlfriend to visit me with the intention of getting married. Mulo encouraged me to do it. "Come on, Pablo this is your opportunity," he said. "You can always divorce her when you get to Spain!"

I thought about it and decided not to get married because I hardly knew her. So in the end, she was very disappointed and let me know she had

even borrowed money from family members to come to Cuba to see me. I just couldn't do it. I was not ready to get married just to get out of Cuba.

Although Mulo had already decided to get married, we were still looking for other ways to get out of Cuba. We had heard news about this government agency that was looking for teachers to teach sailors on merchant ships. We tried to get work on one of those ships with the intention of defecting once we touched foreign soil. However, after they conducted a meticulous investigation and found out the reason why we had been suspended from the university, our applications were rejected.

Mulo and Moses started doing all the paperwork needed to get married and leave Cuba but soon realized they were not alone in their quest. They were not the only ones trying to get married to escape the communist regime. We learned there were several people in the same situation. So the Cuban government created a new agency to deal with these cases and began to charge horrendous fees in U.S. dollars to those who wanted "Manumission."

Finally, the day came to say goodbye to Mulo. He was going to start a new life with his wife in Madrid, Spain. We decided to have a farewell party at Mulo's house with our closest friends. Then some of us would accompany him to the airport. I was very happy to see Mulo would finally get to leave Cuba. Yet it was difficult to let go of my best

friend, even though I knew, this meant he would finally be free.

A couple of weeks later it was Moses 'turn to leave to Denmark, so we performed the same rituals at Moses' house. The last one to leave was Jorge. But it was harder for him to finally leave Cuba because he had fallen in love with a black Cuban girl, and he had to choose between the woman he was in love with and the one who was helping him to be free. In the end, freedom prevailed over love.

Every day there was more violence in the street. There were a lot of stories about tourists being robbed and mobbed, and of course the Cuban government reacted by putting more police forces on the street.

One day when I was downtown, I heard the news that my brother Raúl had been attacked and was in the hospital. I went to the hospital and saw my brother lying in bed unconscious, with an intravenous bag hanging on a pole and connected to his arm. According to the police report, he had been stabbed in the back with some sharp object and was in very serious condition.

Finally my brother woke up and explained to us he had been having dinner with a group of foreigners downtown at a restaurant called "El Polinesio," when he decided to use the restroom. Suddenly, he told us, this guy came in and attacked him from behind with a broken bottle of beer. He

fought for his life and did not let his attacker flee the scene until somebody from the restaurant called the police.

At the end, the assailant was apprehended by the police who, after conducting an investigation, determined the guy was insane and had him sent to a mental institution. Raúl finally recovered from the injuries, but was left with a big scar on his back. He had never met the assailant before, so to this day we still don't know the reason why he became a target.

A friend of mine was visiting from Holland. I wanted to get out of the bustle and hustle of the city and spend some time with her in the countryside far away from all the violence and hostilities in Havana.

We went to the office of Cuban Airlines to book a flight to Santiago de Cuba, a city on the east side of the island where I had some relatives. The lady who was making our reservation was very nice, and at the beginning she thought I was a foreigner too. But when I told her I was Cuban, she asked if I was a tour guide, and I told her I was unemployed. She enthused over my communicating skills, personal appearance and kept giving me some compliments.

"Your English is already better than everybody who works in this office," she said. "Plus, you are young and good-looking. We are going to be hiring some people for Cuban Airlines

to fly internationally, and I think you should fill out an application. I will be sure they call you.”

So I did it. She also told us that it was cheaper to rent a car or go by bus. At the end, we decided to rent a car instead and drive across the island.

My next door neighbor had given me a poodle that we named “Kizzy.” We got the name from the American TV series “Roots.” She was adorable, and being a poodle made her very exotic because that breed was very unusual in Cuba. Kizzy was very spoiled for a Cuban dog; all my foreign friends used to love her and bring her presents like shampoo, clothes and toys (something that was very uncommon in Cuba). Kizzy was also a magnet for people, especially kids and women. They would pick her up and the reaction was always the same. “Oh my God she smells so good!”

My Dutch friend had already fallen in love with Kizzy and she insisted we should take Kizzy with us on our trip. We went on a trip across the island and we did not have any problem with the police at all. Everywhere we went people thought the three of us were foreigners, and Kizzy was the star. I remember when we came back to Havana and it was time for my girlfriend to leave Cuba, she wanted to take Kizzy to Holland with her; she had fallen under the spell of Kizzy too.

We have all heard the phrase, “Dog is man’s best friend.” But you will never understand it unless you have a dog and you really pay attention to their actions. I got Kizzy when she was a puppy. Kizzy grew up in the house as a member of the family, full of love and attention. We taught her about respect and gave her the best training. Kizzy was my alarm clock and every single day she would come in my room and wake me up, barking and licking my face. One day, after I finally left Cuba, my mother told me that Kizzy was still going to my room, hoping that one day I might come back and she would find me there.

When I came back from my trip, I found a letter from Cuban Airlines letting me know I had been selected to go through a series of tests to see if I qualified for the job. The letter stated I had to dress properly for the interview, bring a swimming suit, be able to swim and communicate in English or French. I had been swimming all my life, I was wearing the latest fashion, and I was fluent in both English and French, so I thought I wasn’t going to have any problem in getting the job.

There was a panel of four people, asking questions in English like: What’s your name? Where do you live? Why do you want to work for the airlines?

I had been talking to English-speaking people from all over the world, with different accents, about all types of subjects, so for me it was

like having a normal conversation. When I opened my mouth, they were enthralled and dumbfounded. They could not believe I was Cuban.

“Do you want me to do it in French now?” I asked.

“No thank you; we’ve heard enough,” they said.

So, I passed all the tests with flying colors and I went home feeling extremely confident I had the job, but I didn’t. After conducting a meticulous background check into my life, the positions were sorely skewed in favor of other guys who could not even speak English, but were more reliable for the Cuban government. Of course I was disheartened after hearing the news, but it was a wakeup call for me. I finally realized I was not trustworthy for the Cuban government anymore; therefore I would never be able to get a job that would provide me with the opportunity to travel abroad. I was a pariah, a social outcast branded for the rest of my life.

On May 20th, 1985, the U.S. government launched “Radio Marti,” an ardent Cuban government critic radio station that would be broadcasting to Cuba with the mission of fighting Communism on the Island and the hopes of hastening the fall of Castro’s regime. Overnight, Radio Marti became a hit and turned into the most popular radio station in Cuba. Cubans were already tired of the locals’ radio stations peddling the same

communist propaganda 24 hours a day. For the very first time the Cuban people had a radio station where they could find information different than the official information provided by the Cuban government. We used to sit in this park during the day and sometimes we could even see and hear government officials in uniform listening to Radio Marti sitting in the park during their lunch break.

I had planned to leave Cuba in so many different ways and none of them had worked yet. I had already ruled out the possibility of getting a job working for the Cuban Government that would allow me to travel abroad. I was dating a beautiful Swedish girl whose father was a diplomat in Cuba and I really liked her; however she had a boyfriend in Sweden and she did not want to get married.

When Mulo and Moses left Cuba, I managed to go back to the university, this time switching to national instead of international affairs. I started hanging out with other people, including my brother Armando (Mandy), who was already a teenager, and he always looked up to me. Mandy had already grown taller than me and he was very strong. We were all very athletic, but Mandy was the strongest among all of us. He had a very bad temper and was very well known and respected in my neighborhood for being a nice guy, but someone you shouldn't mess with. My little sister Lilia was a teenager too. She used to blame Mandy for not having a boyfriend because guys would be hitting on her and

suddenly disappear when they found out she was Mandy's sister.

My house was a very cozy and happy home, always full of friends and family members and somehow the vast majority of them were black and over six feet tall. My cousin Ernesto William was about six feet, nine inches and was a basketball player. He loved to come to my house, borrow my clothes and invite over all his friends who were also basketball players. That's why they used to call my house "the house of the Globetrotters"³⁵

They would be looking at sports magazines with pictures of the NBA featuring Wilt Chamberlain, Moses Malone, Kareem Abdul Jabbar, etc. Eventually my cousin Ernesto would play for the Cuban National Basketball team and became one of the best players. They used to call him "El Oso William."

We had unwittingly become very popular in Havana so we had a lot of fans – but a lot of people apparently hated us as well and we had to deal with the schadenfreude.

One night I was sleeping and my brother, Raúl, woke me up saying, "Pablo, wake up! Something bad happened to Mandy and he is in the hospital." We got dressed and took a cab to the hospital. During the trip Raúl explained to me how that night Mandy had been drinking some Mojitos with my cousin Luis and Baldo at one of our favorite spots, La Bodeguita del Medio³⁶.

There was already some animosity between some guys from the ghetto who lived in the vicinity. They always felt we were invading their territory. They were very jealous and always seemed to be looking for a fight. When Mandy left the bar, some guys were waiting for him outside.

Although my friends were outnumbered by this group of thugs, Mandy still got into a fight with them and someone pulled out a machete. The guy attacked my brother with the machete and two of his fingers were cut off as Mandy tried to stop the machete with his bare hands. So there I was, in the hospital again, watching the same scene. It felt like *déjà vu*. There I was facing another family crisis but this time it was my youngest brother.

My first reaction was to hunt these guys down and kill them. I knew exactly who they were and where they lived. When the news about what happened to Mandy spread around Havana, all of my friends and cousins wanted to exact retribution in a very a violent way. “Guys, we will not retaliate!” I vehemently told everybody. I did not believe it worthwhile retaliating.

The situation in my house was becoming more unbearable every day. My mother had gone through so much suffering. For some reason, I was riddled with guilt and started feeling remorse for all the bad things that were happening to our family.

After all, I was the first one to start hanging out in the underground world and my brothers looked up to me and followed in my footsteps.

I went to bed that night feeling very depressed and I could not fall asleep no matter how hard I tried. There was something creepy about the room and I had the feeling somebody else was inside the room beside me. Suddenly I entered a state of half-wakefulness where I was neither completely asleep nor was I completely awake. What happened next is difficult to explain. I heard this hissing voice whispering in my ear and it still echoes in my mind until this day; ***“You will be leaving Cuba soon. Your mission in this land is over. You shall leave Cuba the way your African ancestors came, through the ocean on a primitive boat.”*** When I regained my full awareness, I found myself sweating and panting with goose bumps all over my body. I had never believed in spirits but at this exact moment, as I am writing this sentence, I can feel the presence of the same unseen force here in my room.

So the day after I woke up, feeling my spirit was completely saturated with an extremely strange sensation. It was a shattering and beautiful burst of self-confidence which made me feel, from that moment on, everything I did was going to be all right.

I was acting as if I knew what was going on. I had the feeling I was being divinely guided in

every choice I was making. Everything was being orchestrated for me.

Later I talked with my brother Raúl about the incident and the idea of leaving Cuba. He not only thought it was a good idea but wanted to leave as well.

We would have to concoct a plan of action to assemble our team to get all the items we needed. To make sure our plan would come to fruition, I painstakingly jotted down everything we were going to need for the trip. My first plan was to purchase a river raft from one of those shops where only foreigners were allowed to shop. Then we bought some Coca Cola, Heineken beer, chewing gum, suntan lotion and an American flag in case we got caught at sea by the Cuban authorities. We would speak English and pretend to be Americans stranded in the middle of the ocean. We were also hoping once we made it to the U.S. to be sponsored by Coca Cola and see some headlines in newspapers saying; "Cubans survived for several days in the ocean drinking Coca Cola."

I spoke with one of my foreign friends in Cuba and he thought it was a great idea. He was afraid we might get caught and the Cuban authorities would be able to trace the purchase of the river raft back to the purchaser and my foreign friend would get in trouble.

Upon considering all of our options and the risk involved, we decided to design a Plan B that consisted of building our own homemade rafts.

We would need two truck inner tubes, two backpacks, two air pumps, canned food, drinking water, four oars, a compass, ropes and canvas to undergird the raft. We'd need to rent a house by the beach and some sort of transportation. We spoke to our friend Baldo and he suggested we talk to another friend, Miracielo, who was a carpenter and always wanted to leave Cuba. Baldo was a good friend of the family and a strapping wrestler who grew up in my town. He resembled us so much and a lot of people always thought we were related. Miracielo was a good friend from the underground world. Some members of his family had already left Cuba during the exodus of Mariel. Miracielo had tried to leave Cuba several times but he always seemed to fall one step short. He grew up being a Jehovah's Witness so his family had always been persecuted by the Cuban Government because of their religious beliefs.

I agreed to meet Miracielo in a park in Old Havana, the same place where we used to hang out during the day. At night, this park was more frequently used by gay couples. For the sake of our security, we decided to have the meeting at night so that we would not draw any unwanted attention or raise any suspicion.

When Miracielo finally showed up, he sat down and I informed him we were planning to leave Cuba within the next 48 hours. He had to assure me he would have no problem building the four oars within that time frame. “No problem,” he assured me.

We were getting ready to split when suddenly Miracielo tapped me on my knee and said,

“Oh shit! Look at that!”

I raised my head and saw a group of about ten guys armed with baseball bats moving toward these two gay guys who were sitting on a bench right in front of us. This gang of hooligans had no qualms about what they were about to do and for no reason at all they started beating the hell out of those guys until they could not scream anymore.

“What about those two!” one of the guys said pointing at us and they started walking toward us. I could feel Miracielo’s hand squeezing my knee. I was completely immobile after witnessing such a display of violence and it did not occur to me to flee.

“What’s up!” one of the guy said.

“What’s up” I replied.

“Oh, that’s Pablo! Sorry,” one of them said after recognizing my face. Then, they apologized

and started chasing their next two victims who had already started running because they knew they were next. Miracielo breathed a sigh of relief.

“Feel my heart,” he told me while putting my hand on his chest. I could feel his heart still pounding with fear.

“Man, you’ve saved my life. I will never sit in this park again,” he said.

“You are right,” I said, “because we are leaving Cuba tomorrow.”

Still to this day, whenever I see Miracielo, he always remembers the incident on that day and we talk about how lucky we were compared to the other guys.

We all had been assigned different responsibilities. Raúl was in charge of listening to the weather forecast on Radio Marti, going to church and consulting Miracielo’s father who was a Santeria priest. Baldo and I were in charge of getting most of the items we needed, including the two truck inner tubes.

I had a friend who knew about a farmer who used to sell truck inner tubes to some fishermen who usually would be fishing around the coast of Cuba. The farmer lived in the countryside of Havana, about an hour away from my town, near Jose Marti Airport. We bought two truck inner

tubes from him and put the tubes inside the backpacks. Next, we needed to take a taxi back to my house. Since we were near the airport and most of the taxis at the airport were driven by cops, we had to be very careful to avoid them.

Finally a taxi stopped and agreed to take us home after I offered him a big tip. We put the two backpacks in the trunk and headed back to my town.

The month of June is Mango season in Cuba. A lot of people go to the countryside to buy mangos from farmers or steal them from government plantations, although it is illegal to do that. If you get caught they will confiscate your mangoes and at the very least you may walk away with a fine.

So before the driver asked me what was inside the backpacks, I let him know they were mangoes. We reached our destination and as promised, I gave the driver a big tip. He was very happy. Then as I was leaving he said, "Hey, man, will you give me a mango for my little daughter?"

"I am sorry, man. I have a large family!" I said.

That was the only excuse I could come up with at that moment and kept on walking when I heard him saying, "That guy is weird. He gave me a \$20 tip and cannot even give me a mango!"

The next morning I went to the beach to rent a house. I talked to the girl at the reservation office who knew me very well. I had rented houses from her many times and always left her a good tip. I knew houses were not usually cleaned and ready until after 1 p.m. However, since I was a good customer, I could get the keys a little bit earlier, probably around 11 a.m. I decided to go to a nearby restaurant to have breakfast. I sat down by myself and was looking at the menu when I saw this gorgeous black woman standing by herself waiting for a table. I stood up and went to talk to her.

“Do you mind joining me for breakfast?” I asked. “You will not have to wait any more plus, I might pay for your breakfast too,” I added. She laughed and walked with me to my table.

“What is such a beautiful woman doing here so early?” I asked.

“Getting ready to have breakfast,” she answered and we both laughed. “I am here on vacation. I like to wake up early in the morning and walk around the beach,” she continued. “I am staying in a house with some friends. We partied last night until late, so everybody is still sleeping but me.”

The waiter brought our breakfast and she asked why I was having breakfast by myself.

“I came to rent a house for a couple of days to have some fun with my friends too. However the house will not be ready until later so I decided to have breakfast,” I said. “That means we are going to be neighbors,” I concluded.

After an exchange of a couple of friendly, playful and teasing remarks, we finished our breakfast and I took care of the bill as promised.

“Do you like walking around the beach?” she asked.

“Of course I do. Plus, it will be a very good exercise after breakfast,” I added.

We both took off our shoes and went for a brisk walk on the sand. The weather was nice, you could feel the morning breeze and the sun was still rising.

“I have to go back and get my keys for the house but I can probably meet you later to go for a drink,” I suggested.

“OK. I would love to do that,” she said.

“Let’s go and get my keys,” I said.

We got the keys to the house I had just rented and it was very close to where she was staying. So when she walked toward her house, I kept looking at her

from behind and saying to myself, “Pablo, you are a lucky guy!”

In the afternoon I met my new friend again. We went to a nearby bar, had some drinks and later went swimming and skinny dipping. We played and made love in the ocean in what seemed to be a dance and a warm farewell from the two female Afro-Cuban Goddesses, Ochun³⁷ and Yemaya³⁸. Our precious time together seemed like a betokening assurance that my life was going to be protected during this hazardous trip.

It was about 5 p.m. when I went back to my town. First, I wanted to see my family for what could be the last time. I went inside the house and as usual, I was welcomed by my dog Kizzy. She was barking and jumping all over me and was so very happy to see me. I picked her up, went inside my house and there was my mother talking to one of my uncles from the countryside who was visiting us. I said hello to both of them and gave my mother a big kiss and a big hug.

“Are you ok?” she asked.

I don’t know if it was mother’s instinct but a few years later she would tell me she had felt something at that moment. I also went inside my sister’s room where I found her sobbing because my brother, Mandy had learned our sister’s her boyfriend had been cheating on her and Mandy had beat the hell out of him. She kept repeating how

much she hated Mandy. I told her to calm down and explained to her Mandy was just trying to protect her. I used the occasion to give her a hug and told her how much I loved her. I took Kizzy with me and went down to look for Mandy. I found him sitting with my brother, Jose, drinking the Heineken beer I had purchased for Plan A.

“You have to leave today! We have been listening to the radio too and the weather is nice!” my brothers said.

“Yes, I am leaving today and I am here to say Good bye to the two of you.” I gave them both a big hug and told them to please take care of our mother. I reached into my pocket and pulled out some American money.

“Here, take this money,” and I gave them all of the U.S. dollars I had with me. “I will keep the Cuban pesos because I still need to pay for taxis in Havana tonight.”

“What about those Levis jeans? You will have plenty in America,” Jose said.

“OK, let’s trade.” I gave him my jeans and he gave me a pair of shorts.

“What about the sneakers?” Jose asked.

“Ok, you can have them, too. But I am taking

Kizzy with me,” I joked.

“No way! Kizzy stays here,” they said and we all laughed. I hugged them and said goodbye to them again. At that moment, I did not know I was hugging Mandy for what would be the very last time. Sadly, I would never see my brother Mandy again.

I met with Raúl and Baldo who to my surprise had already purchased the rest of the items we needed for our trip, plus an additional backpack full of food and two gallons of water.

“Wow! How did you do it?” I asked Baldo.

He explained to me he had run into another good friend of ours. We called him “Julito El Rasta,” because he had dreadlocks and was actually one of the first Cuban “Rastafarians.” Julito had told Baldo that by sheer coincidence, another friend nicknamed Nano was planning to leave Cuba too. By a quirk of fate, he already had most of the items we needed so Baldo bought them from him at a good price and promised Nano we would take him with us. Baldo also confirmed Miracielo had already built the oars. Raúl assured us that according to the weather forecast of Radio Marti, there was going to be good weather for the next couple of days. I gave Baldo and Raúl the keys, plus the address of the house I had just rented by the beach I told them we all needed to be there no later than midnight. Now all we needed was to find some

kind of transportation that would take us to the house along with the three backpacks and the oars.

I went downtown and met with my friend Dennis. Dennis was a good friend from the underground world. His father was a doctor before Castro's revolution and Dennis had inherited a very nice 1957 Chevy that he always kept in great shape. I talked to Dennis about my plan. I offered him some money and asked him if he was willing to take us to the site where we were going to be leaving Cuba.

"You don't need to give me any money," he said. "I would love to help you. However, I don't think it's a good idea to use my car as transportation to do that. People who have this type of car are usually harassed by the police especially when they see more than one person inside the car. Somehow the police seem to think I am charging people for rides. We will get pulled over and they will order everybody out of the car so they can search the car to see if there is any luggage and the police will question all of the passengers. Why don't you talk to Iran?" he suggested.

"If he says yes, I will be your getaway driver."

I started looking for Iran all over downtown. Iran was another friend of mine from the University of Havana. Iran's father was an attorney who had been Castro's classmate before the Cuban

revolution. His father was pro-Castro, worked for the Cuban government and the government had given him one of those Russian Lada cars that only high government officials drove. It was already past 9 p.m. and I was still looking for Iran all over. Finally I ran into a friend who told me Iran was at a popular bar in Old Havana called Floridita³⁹ so I headed toward Floridita and noticed Iran's car parked outside. It gave me a great sense of relief. I went inside and there he was, sitting at the bar drinking some daiquiris and laughing with a couple of tourists. As usual he was very happy to see me and offered me a drink. I knew it could probably be my last drink in Cuba so I ordered my favorite, Hemingway Daiquiri.

"I need to talk to you," I said.

"Is there something wrong?" Iran asked.

"It is something very important and I prefer to talk outside," I answered.

Outside I told him, "Listen, I will be escaping from Cuba tonight and I will need your help."

He gave me a surprisingly look like I was crazy but I kept on talking. "I am going to escape tonight on a raft so I need to use your car to take everything to the house where we are all meeting. Then we will be driving to the site where we have chosen to jump into the water to begin our journey."

I continued, “Dennis is going to be our getaway driver and all I need is to use your car. Since Baldo had purchased a third raft, there is room for one more person – so you are welcome to leave Cuba with us if you want.”

“I am already married to an American woman, as you know and I am waiting for my U.S. visa so it does not make any sense to try to escape now. Thank you very much for thinking about me. You are a good friend. I will let you use my car,” he said.

Time was running out and it was already about 10:30 p.m. We started driving toward the beach and I told Iran I needed to make a final stop. We stopped by the seawall and I walked toward the entrance of the bay of Havana. As I was getting closer, I could see a black silhouette. There in the darkness was my friend Portu waiting for me. He seemed very nervous.

“I thought you were not going to show up and was about to leave,” he said.

Portu was another friend of mine from high school when I was studying on the Isle of Youth. He had joined the navy after we finished pre-university and he had worked in the Cuban Coast Guard for a long time. I asked him to locate the schedule of the Coast Guard and a compass.

“Here you are, man,” he said and he handed me the compass and a piece of paper.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” he asked, sounding genuinely concerned.

“Yes,” I answered.

“Have you lost your mind?” he asked again, continuing to talk without waiting for an answer.

“You don’t have the slightest idea of what it will be like in the middle of the ocean at night,” he stated.

Then there was a moment of silence and we both turned around and looked at the ocean. It was so pitch dark you couldn’t tell the difference between the sky and the sea. I could also hear the wind blowing and the squelching sound of waves hitting the seawall. Suddenly, my throat began to tighten as my anxiety took over. At this moment I was confronted with fear but the mere thought of dying alone could not prevent me from pursuing my freedom. I was willing to risk my life for what other people took for granted even if the price I had to pay was death. Then he made a last attempt to persuade me.

“I have been in the middle of the ocean in a boat with all the different amenities like food, water, TV, radio and telephones to communicate and it is still the scariest situation you could find

yourself in, especially if you get hit by a storm. The waves are huge and you have the feeling they are playing ping pong with the boat,” he concluded. Although he warned me about the potential dangers, the unknown difficulties of the journey and the sheer distance involved, it didn’t matter. I knew it was a frightening bet but I had already made up my mind and I wasn’t going to be deterred. I laughed, perhaps only to dispel my own fear so he had no choice but to laugh too. I gave him a hug, thanked him for the compass and the information and said goodbye to him.

I walked amid the sheer silence of the night, towards my friend’s car, pondering our conversation. I had no regrets even if I died pursuing my freedom. Since my father’s death, I had lived a very full life and in those few years had seen more than most Cuban people see in a lifetime. I already considered myself very fortunate.

So we made our way to the beach. As I pondered all the steps we had taken to get to this point and the future that lied ahead, the trip felt like watching the scene of a movie in slow motion.

We went through the tunnel of Havana and passed the town where I grew up. During the whole trip we were listening to one of my favorite reggae bands, Alpha Blondy, and songs like: *“Interplanetary Revolution,” “Cocody Rock,”* and *“Bory Samory.”* I was saying goodbye to Cuba and

what better way to do so than listening to reggae music!

We finally arrived at the beach house and there were Baldo, Raúl, Miracielo and Dennis. They all looked very nervous so I knew something was not right. “We need to leave now. Nano got busted,” Baldo said. Apparently, someone had alerted the police that Nano was planning to escape from Cuba. They went to his house and although they did not find the raft, he was arrested anyway. It was just a matter of time before he would succumb to the pressure and reveal our plans.

“So let’s go! We have no time to waste,” I said.

We said goodbye to Iran, he wished us good luck and we picked up the backpacks and put them in the trunk of the car. The oars would not fit in the trunk so we put them inside the car and we all jumped in. I sat in the front seat next to Dennis and he started driving.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“Just drive and I will let you know where to drop us,” I answered him.

My plan was to get out of the beach town and find a spot on the road not too far from the ocean where Dennis could make a U-turn and drop us off.

We were about to go through the outskirts of a town called “Guanabo,” when we realized all the cars in front of us were slowing down.

“What’s going on?” We all wondered.

There was a check point and the police were stopping and searching all the cars. We had some cars behind us and making a U-turn was not an option because it would alert the police. They would know we were trying to avoid the check point. So we kept moving slowly and could see the police approaching us.

“Please let me do the talking,” I told Dennis.

So I greeted him first. “How are you doing, officer?” I asked him bluntly.

“Good,” he answered.

The policeman was so close to me that I could see the inquisitive look and harsh features on his face.

“Where are you guys going?” the leery policeman asked.

“Varadero Beach,” I answered.

“Okay. Keep on going,” he ordered us.

We all exhaled as we kept on our journey!

Varadero is a town in the city of Matanzas that has the most beautiful beach in Cuba. Tourists and government officials usually go there. So Dennis was right! My unwavering confidence plus the fact that we were driving a car usually driven by government officials convinced the policeman and saved us from being arrested. We were all breathing deeply and Dennis said, "If you don't tell me where to stop, we are going to actually end up in Varadero Beach!" We all laughed.

We were already approaching a town called "Santa Cruz del Norte" and I could see the towers of the oil wells. I knew we could not keep on driving aimlessly and the longer we stayed on the road, the more chance we had of being stopped again by the police. We might not be that lucky the next time.

Nevertheless I still had the feeling I was being guided by an unseen force.

"Ok, make a U-turn now," I ordered Dennis. Everybody said, "Are you crazy?"

"This area is protected by radar," they argued.

"Yes, I am crazy. We are going to get out of the car right here because they will never think someone will try to leave Cuba from this area because it is protected."

Dennis made the U-turn and we all exited the car from the side facing the ocean. We rolled down a small hill and hid behind some shrubs. Now it was time to inflate the rafts. We had all practiced how to inflate the rafts with the air pumps and Baldo was the best. We finished the first one almost immediately. Raúl and Miracielo were having a hard time finding their air pump. That was when we realized there was a major oversight. We had left a backpack behind in the house with a gallon of water and the other air pump. So Baldo had to take over. Then we hit a snag. The air pump broke. Baldo hunkered down and started using his mouth and finished it.

“Come on guys, let’s go!” I said.

We started walking over the cliffs toward the ocean battling a very strong gust of wind that kept blowing us back. Suddenly, we heard a distant siren blaring. The wind was blowing and we had no shoes. My feet began bleeding and the walk to the ocean felt like we were walking miles. We could also hear the sound of the waves crashing. Finally, we reached the ocean and jumped in the water helter-skelter without even thinking about how deep it was.

We were now in the water and could hear a siren wailing and the sound of a helicopter whirling. Raúl wanted to board the raft immediately so I had to tell him to wait until we were further from the coast. Meanwhile we all submerged ourselves under

the water and only came out when we were gasping for air.

The helicopter was getting closer and the buffeting wind was making the waves bigger and turning the ocean into a whirlpool. The waves were pushing us further from the place we had entered the water and we could see the helicopter still looking for us right in that area. We kept drifting until we disappeared from their sight and knew it was time to climb into the two rafts.

Raúl and Miracielo were in one raft and Baldo and I were in the other. The current was making us drift in the direction of Havana and we found ourselves being steered by the nightly wind. It was a smooth ride and we could see the bioluminescence created by marine organisms which combined oxygen with the chemicals of their bodies to create such beautiful lights in the water. Looking up to the heavens, we marveled at the beauty of the celestial objects that mankind calls the stars and the moon. There were millions of twinkling dots of light in the sky. Suddenly, Miracielo saw a shooting star and we interpreted it as an omen that our lives were going to be protected during our journey to freedom. *What a beautiful night!* I thought to myself.

Looking at the city, we could see the buildings of my hometown, Havana del Este. Then we passed the city of Havana. We saw the lighthouse at the entrance of the Bay of Havana, the

cars moving along the seawall, downtown, the National Hotel, and the Riviera Hotel. We were saying goodbye to our city. It was already past midnight but we kept talking until we were so tired we finally fell asleep.

Chapter Eight

THE VOYAGE

WE WOKE UP before the sunrise and to our surprise we were still very close to the coast of Cuba. The day was dawning and we could not tell exactly where we were but we knew we had to hurry and start paddling. We could still see the jagged silhouette of the mountains emerging out of the sky so we knew all we had to do was to start moving in the opposite direction.

“Come on guys, let’s do it. We do not have time to waste,” Baldo said

“Oh shit! What’s that?” someone said.

We all looked and there was the Cuban Coast Guard a couple of miles away from where we were. They seemed to be looking for us. However, they must have estimated our location based upon the time we left the Cuban shore. They were looking for us in the wrong place. So there we were

right under their noses, still very close to Cuba and yet they couldn't find us. Finally, the Coast guard was gone so we were able to start paddling again. We were very lucky to escape detection.

It was around noon and our journey was well underway. We had advanced so far, all we could see was a foggy image of the island. It was a sunny day and the ocean was azure.

"Guys, today is June 10th, my birthday!" I said.

"Oh, man! Happy birthday!" they all said.

"Okay guys, so let's celebrate!" I suggested.

"It is time for lunch," Baldo said.

So we opened a can of meat, a can of tomato juice and some condensed milk. We passed it around so we could all get some. The tomato juice was salty and we became thirsty. We also passed around the gallon of water. "Let's take it easy with the water because we forgot one backpack in the house with the rest of the food and a gallon of water. We don't know how long we are going to be in the ocean," Baldo said.

We started paddling again and the island looked farther and farther away as the water also became darker. We were all full of energy and to bolster our morale we kept on talking, telling

stories, making jokes and remembering some of the best moments we had on the island with our friends and family members that we had just left in Cuba. It was about 6 p.m. when we noticed a ship heading toward us. "Come on, guys! We need to hurry!" Miracielo yelled. But no matter how much we paddled, the ship kept moving right at us. Now that it was getting closer we were able to tell how big it was.

"Come on, guys!" we were all screaming in desperation.

The ship was so close now that we could even see the Cuban flag. It was a Cuban merchant ship and everything seemed to indicate he was trying to run us over. In the end, we managed to avoid the ship. It missed us by just a couple of meters. It was so close it almost flipped the two rafts. We could even see the name of the ship. However, we did not see any members of the crew outside the ship. We were still wondering whether they were trying to run us over or if we were in the wrong place at the wrong time. One thing we all agreed on was we were lucky to survive the incident and all had a deep sense of relief.

It was getting late and we could see the sunset on the horizon. We were all thirsty so it was time for another round of water. I took a look at the compass, before it was too dark to see and pointed to the north where we were supposed to be heading. It was easier to paddle at night because the ocean

was very calm and we did not have to paddle against the current

It was already about 10 p.m. It was so dark we could not even see each other's faces. All we could hear were our own voices and the sound of the ocean.

"Okay, guys. Let's be sure we stay in touch by talking all the time so we know that everything is okay" I said while we kept paddling our way to freedom.

It was about midnight when we heard the first resonant sound of distant thunder and could see bursts of lightning in the sky. The flashes of lightning and the sound of thunder made the whole experience even more frightening.

"Wow! I hope it's not a storm," Raúl said.

"Well, you should know. You were in charge of checking the weather," I reminded him.

The hurricane season in Cuba usually starts in June and lasts until the middle of November. We had been checking weather conditions and no hurricane warning had been issued. We were still worried. The weather was changing dramatically. It was cold and the rain was accompanied by high winds and more thunder and lightning. Soon we realized we were in for a fast ride. We had to fasten our seat belts and hold on tight. We were about to

face nature's fury. We braced ourselves for the worst and suddenly were in the throes of a tropical storm. We faced winds ranging from 40 to 50 miles per hour and monstrous waves over three meters high. The last thing I remember was telling everybody no matter what happened, we should stick together and hold on to the raft.

The day after we woke the sun blurred our tired eyes. My first reaction was to make sure we were all still alive. Even though the storm had wreaked havoc and we were very exhausted, everybody was still alive. That in itself, gave us all a feeling of relief. However, we soon realized we had lost our backpacks with the food and the compass. All we had left was less than half a gallon of water. At first, it did not bother us. After making it through such a terrible storm, we were all happy just to be alive. But there was still another problem. We had been whisked with unseemly haste back to Cuba and again we were right by the shoreline.

"Guys, let's go back home," Miracielo implored.

"You must be kidding," I answered.

I was very straightforward and reminded him we all had an agreement. This was a one-way trip and we did not have a contingency plan. We had to stick to our original plan. I was assertive and made it very clear I would not forsake my dream of

making it to America. I was not going to be deterred. There was no going back.

“We are not going back to Cuba.” I said cuttingly.

“If we go back to Cuba, we might save our lives, but we are going to wind up in prison. Plus, we don’t even know where we are right now,” I argued.

“Come on, Pablo. We can always go home undetected and do this again,” Miracielo said, bolstering his argument, and Raúl agreed with Miracielo.

We were now in a quandary, split in two groups. Raúl and Miracielo wanted to go back. Baldo and I were adamantly opposed and reluctant to accept any idea of returning to Cuba. We wanted to keep on going.

“But we have no more food, water, or energy left either,” Miracielo insisted. I still did not budge.

“Ok. Don’t worry about paddling anymore,” I said.

“We will carry you, but please shut up.”

We’d decided to try our best all to no avail. No matter how hard Baldo and I paddled, we were

not going anywhere. The sun was still rising and we were getting more and more frustrated because of our lack of progress. There were moments when I wondered if Raúl and Miracielo were right. Finally, Raúl and Miracielo fell asleep. It was time for me and Baldo to take care of business. Although we were trying our best, it still wasn't working for us.

We stopped paddling for a moment and became more aware of our surroundings. We focused more of our attention on the movement of the water. That was when we realized there were different currents going in different directions and that was the reason we could not move. We finally caught a wave and veered off in the right direction. We gained some momentum and it became much easier to paddle as we started moving away from Cuba. This time, much more effortlessly. We could also feel that the water was becoming lukewarm. It was what is called the current of the Gulf of Mexico that usually flows northward. We were moving so fast that we did not have to paddle anymore. All we were doing was just enjoying what seemed to be a water ride.

It was about noon on the second day of our journey. We were now in the middle of the ocean, scanning the vastness of the sea. The water was so dark and gloomy. Due to its opaqueness, you could not even see through it. We could hear the screeching sound of the seagulls and watched the mesmerizing flight of the albatrosses gliding through the wind without flapping their wings.

There was just water in every direction. Finally we knew this was it. Raúl and Miracielo woke up and were surprised to see how far away we had gone this time. We were all very happy and thrilled at the same time. However, we were not only venturing into uncharted waters, we were facing new challenges as well. There was neither food nor water for our sustenance. Raúl had taken the last sip and we were getting extremely exhausted.

All we had left was an empty plastic jug for water. We figured out the best way to face all these obstacles was to remain positive. We started telling stories and jokes to cheer ourselves up. Then we saw a big sea turtle that passed by, followed by a couple of playful dolphins chirping and even a big whale surfacing briefly to breathe. We were completely astounded and puzzled by the beauty of these creatures. Suddenly our reverie was replaced by a total silence and our quiet interlude was overcome by an ominous feeling. Something was about to happen!

“Oh my God!” Raúl screamed and pointed at a shark fin torpedoing toward us.

We all trembled at what we saw. At that portentous moment, we were about to cross paths and come face to face with one of the deadliest predators on this planet. This shark was huge – about four meters long – and had a broad square head and dark stripes on his body. We knew it was a tiger shark. Tiger sharks are very popular in the

Caribbean and they are dubbed “the trash collectors of the ocean” because they are scavengers who would devour virtually anything that resembles a prey. They have found human remains, license plates and empty cans in their stomachs. They are formidable predators, second only to the great white shark both in size and the number of attacks on humans.

We grew up in Cuba watching all types of American movies but there were two movies that forever changed the way we felt about swimming in the ocean; “Moby Dick⁴⁰” and “Jaws.⁴¹” So when the shark was approaching us, all I could hear was the sound track of the movie “Jaws” playing in my head. This movie made a huge psychological impact on everyone who likes to swim in the ocean.

There are a lot of myths about fending off sharks attacks. We had heard some fishermen in town pass on the lore that sharks have very sensitive snouts and an acute sense of smell and they can even feel your heart rate. That’s how they sense nervousness.

When the shark got close to us, we took the paddles and all aimed at his snout. It seemed to work because Miracielo hit him unerringly in his snout and the shark retreated.

After this deadly encounter, we were all left with a spark of fear in our eyes. The shark’s presence had created an unfamiliar lull and we

breathed very deeply because during this onslaught, the shark was so close to us we caught a chilling glimpse of his unblinking eyes and massive, serrated teeth. We had looked death directly in the eye.

Our respite and sense of relief did not last very long. This shark proved to be more resilient than we had anticipated. Now we could see four fins approaching us. I remember telling my raft mates that I could not believe how smart and amazing these fearsome creatures were because the shark went to get some help. He brought three more sharks, one for each of us. Hence, now we were evenly matched. Our strategy was very simple. We had to muster our courage, keep our eyes fixed on the sharks and we each would target the one heading our way. We would protect the raft by never allowing them to touch it. Otherwise it would be deflated and we would be stranded in the ocean at their mercy, utterly helpless with nothing to hang on to.

“Come on,” we all screamed as we pounded these seemingly determined sharks very hard with our oars. In the end, it was a skirmish and not a battle because no blood was spilled. Our fear had awakened the warriors within us and taught both the sharks and ourselves a very valuable lesson. We were ready to fight for our lives. They did not attack us again.

After thwarting the wrath of the sharks, we could shift our attention to how hungry and thirsty we were. There was a shadow under the raft and we could see a shoal of fish underneath. It was a bountiful supply and sometimes we could even witness sharks helping themselves to the variety of fish in what seemed to be a seafood buffet for them. We were hungry and it seemed unfair to watch the sharks having their own feast while we were starving to death. We had to design a strategy to catch something to eat.

All we had left after the storm was that empty plastic water bottle, a safety pin, and small knife. We had to use our ingenuity to fish. We decided to create a hook by bending the safety pin. Yet we also needed a fishing line to attach it to. Miracielo volunteered his shoelaces and we were getting ready to start fishing. We tried several times. However, there was a big problem. The fish were not interested in just an empty makeshift hook at all. We needed to have some kind of bait to lure them. We tried to catch at least one of them with our bare hands and later use its flesh as bait. We all tried unsuccessfully because the fish were very elusive, slimy and slippery. No matter how hard we tried we couldn't catch a single fish. Until finally our survival instincts kicked in and – oddly enough – one of us bit a fish with his teeth and got a chunk of flesh. Now we had the bait.

We started fishing and caught our first fish, then the second one. We then caught and ate so

many fish we even gave the leftovers to the sharks that were still circling us. We watched the sharks devour our scraps in a feeding frenzy. The fish we had eaten were extremely salty. We ate so much raw fish and all unanimously agreed it had been the best sushi we'd ever eaten.

Raúl was the first one to start feeling queasy. He wanted to throw up. We had eaten so much we forgot the fish had salt water inside. Digesting so much salt had drawn the fluid out of our bloodstream. We were all becoming sick and thirsty. Plus, we had lost our small water supply the night before during the storm. Now we were feeling, for the first time, the effects of the burning sun and our dehydration.

We paddled for the rest of the day and most of the night too. We had lost our compass. In the morning we would have to use our surroundings for navigation. We noted the rising of the sun in the east so we could locate north. During the night, all we had to do was follow the North Star in the sky.

There is something eerie about being in the ocean at night in menacing and murky water, especially when a real and ever-present danger might be lurking beneath you. We were surrounded by tiger sharks slithering on the surface of the water, continuously circling us. All the while reef sharks, the bottom feeders of the ocean, lay in wait, deep in the ocean, ready to unleash an ambush attack from below at any time. We also knew that

since sharks are night feeders and become more aggressive after the sun goes down, we were more likely to be attacked at night during their dinnertime. Whenever I heard the water splashing, I could picture in my mind the opening scene of “Jaws” where the girl is being dragged under the sea during her dawn skinny-dip. In order to be safe, we resolved for our protection that one of us had to be awake and stay vigilant all the time.

It was the third day of our voyage in the middle of the ocean and our bodies were deteriorating from sunburn and dehydration. The wind was blowing and the sun was scorching our bodies. Heat depletes the moisture that all life depends on. As a result, my skin was becoming extremely dry and shriveled. I could see some sores appearing mainly on my right leg (the one I kept out of the water) and I regretted trading my Levis jeans for a pair of shorts that could not protect my body against the elements. Raul and Miracielo were arguing a lot. We were without water and food. Our bodies were short of glucose. An excess of adrenaline in our systems added to our stress and caused a lot of bickering between us.

We were in international waters and we saw a container ship passing by but were not sure of its nationality so we did not make any attempt to contact it. We had heard stories of Cubans who had been found in the ocean before by Russian ships and of course they had been sent back to Cuba. We also saw a small plane. I took off my shirt, used one

of the oars as a pole and unsuccessfully waved it to signal and get their attention. Looking for someone in the middle of the ocean is like trying to find a needle in a haystack. There we were, stranded in the middle of the sea yet they could not see us.

We paddled through the rest of the day and then came the sunset followed by dusk, the darkest stage of the twilight. The ocean was quiet and we could see a soft glowing light from the sky and the sun below the horizon. We were extremely tired. When the night finally came, we all fell asleep.

It was during day four when we started hallucinating for the first time. The ordeal had taken a toll on us. We were getting increasingly dehydrated and our brains were not getting enough blood so our minds were becoming weak.

I remember Baldo getting all excited because according to him, he could already see Miami Beach –people swimming and playing around. He was so sure of his new reality that it took us some time to convince him that he was hallucinating. We were all in very bad shape.

Raúl was feeling despondent and had given up completely. He was shivering and retching and urged us to throw him in the ocean so he would not be a burden on us anymore.

Miracielo looked like a disheveled *ecce homo* with a peeled prominent nose, a stubbly beard

and watery red eyes. He had been praying for our safekeeping during the trip and was rambling and talking to himself now.

My teeth chattered uncontrollably and my raft mate said I was confusing him with Portu, my friend who had given me the compass and the schedule of the Coast Guard. Once I hallucinated I was home and so thirsty I was heading toward the refrigerator to drink some milk, when suddenly Baldo stopped me and said, "What are you doing? You can't get in the water. We are still surrounded by sharks."

Miracielo and Raúl kept moaning and groaning while Baldo and I kept drifting in and out of our hallucinating state. We were in dire straits, our situation was very bleak and the torment of thirst kept growing after four days adrift at sea. During the day, we had to deal with the sun and the heat. The sun was parching the inner-tube rafts and our bodies could not withstand the sweltering heat anymore. We had to keep on throwing water on the inner-tubes, and still it was almost impossible to stay sitting. When the sunset came we felt very relieved the sun was gone. At night, however it was the opposite. It would get very cold and we were chilled to the bone, mumbling and shuddering. So the day was an agony and the night was a nightmare.

There was another moment when I thought I was on the verge of dying and could see myself

lying on the raft while there was another me floating above the raft. Again, I was having a near-death experience of being split into two persons and experiencing a moment of supreme confusion. Suddenly, I started traveling inside a spiral tunnel at a very high speed.

There was a bright dot that was getting bigger as I was approaching it. I could also hear the most beautiful heavenly music I had ever heard in my life. Again my life was flashing before my eyes and I could see a myriad of images of myself when I was younger. This included images of my mother and my father being alive. I was taking a look back at events that had already taken place in my life. I could hear a voice calling me that seemed to be coming from far away but I did not want to answer. I had been in this tunnel before and I was happy to be back. The light was becoming more intense and I finally made it to the end of the tunnel where there was a room full of light.

There I was being welcomed again by the same two luminous beings who had spoken to me the first time when I was a kid and had a car accident. During this unforgettable moment of extraordinary joy, sudden and great revelation, they assured me that everything was fine and I had their protection. They showed me some images of the incident in the park with Miracielo and the time the police stopped us while we were leaving the outskirts of Guanabo. Obviously they were letting me know I was being watched over and I could rest assured everything was going to be all right. So I took the opportunity to ask them if they could do something about the

sharks, whose mere presence had us very concerned throughout our journey.

“What about the sharks?” I asked.

“They are your guardians,” they answered me.

Any doubt or trepidation I may have had about our trip and the ability of dealing with the sharks instantly vanished. At that moment I felt a surge of peace and serenity. I experienced an unfathomable joy, a feeling of unconditional love and did not want to go back. Suddenly I woke up again lying on the raft. My raft mates told me that I had been deeply asleep and they could not wake me up. My brother Raúl had been agitating my body laboriously while calling my name. Again, they thought I was dead. Nevertheless I was euphoric and filled by a deeper sense of confidence.

The mysterious incident had left me with a profound conviction that everything was going to be all right. I could not disregard what had happened and feel and act as though it had never occurred. My friends noticed a change in my demeanor but I did not feel compelled to describe to them what had happened to me. There was no rational explanation and there were still some doubts in my mind that perhaps I had just woken up from a dream. Nevertheless, deep inside, I knew what I experienced had to be real.

It was about midnight and everything was quiet. To the best of my knowledge, my faculties were unimpaired, my thoughts were crystal clear and I could hear the sound of the ocean and the sharks moving through the water. Baldo, Raúl and Miracielo were already sleeping and I was keeping a close vigil over them. All of a sudden something incredible happened and I knew I was at the threshold of an exciting event. Although it was dark, there was still a glowing light engulfing us. I could see the darkness above me and a light coming from below. We were surrounded by a sublime light. Oddly enough, I could see everything, including my raft mates. I felt some kind of enveloping force around me, connecting me to everything, including the ocean and the stars. I was no longer a fragment of the universe. I was the universe per se. Then I noticed that my mind and my eyes were focusing on the water. I was becoming spellbound and immersed in the view of its liquidness. The water was becoming slightly different and I could witness how the water inside the raft and around us was changing colors. The water was becoming dazzlingly radiant and more brilliant, gradually being transmuted into what seemed to be fresh water. I was totally mesmerized and befuddled by what was unfolding right in front of my eyes and did not know what was going on. *Am I hallucinating again? Is this a figment of my imagination?* I asked myself. But this time it was different. Somehow it looked and felt very real. Being able to see my raft mates jolted me and I experienced a fleeting moment of ease and sobriety.

I felt boundless and free so I summoned up my strength, reached inside the raft and gently scooped up some water with my hands, tasted it and – it was fresh water! Then I reached out for the empty water jug and filled it up with fresh water and passed it on to my friends who were extremely happy and grateful after quenching their thirst. At the end, they all thanked me and went back to sleep again.

The next day, we woke up and the sun rose as did our spirits. We started our fifth day feeling revitalized, cheerful and lively again. We talked about how good the water was the night before. All of a sudden there was complete silence and they all asked me at the same time: “Where did you get the water?” At that moment, I felt compelled to explain to them what had happened to me the night before but there were no grounds for a logical explanation. Somehow I still felt validated by the actual proof that we were all feeling invigorated because the water had given us an extra boost of energy. Although we still had to deal with the sun’s heat and the sunburn, we had a much better day. When the night came this time, we were more willing to keep on paddling.

It was late in the night when we saw this glimmering light coming out of the darkness. We could tell it was some sort of vessel and of course it had to be American because we were not that far from the US. “Come on, guys” We need to reach it before it starts moving,” Baldo said.

We were all so excited that Miracielo wanted to jump in the water and start swimming. We had to remind him that the sharks were still there. We gathered our strength and started moving toward our target, which seemed to be further from us than we originally anticipated. “Come on, Pablo. We are almost there!” Baldo kept saying as we were all straining.

Baldo was the strongest among the four of us but we had to paddle in unison to be able to move. We were getting closer and the ship was becoming more visible as it was looming out of the fog. Then we started screaming for help, in case they were about to leave, so they could hear us. We were completely right. It was an American fishing boat and we could see its English’s name, “Triple Pain.”

We were now just a couple of meters away from the ship. We kept screaming for help until finally someone emerged. I knew right away by the way he looked that he was an American. I spoke in English and explained to him that we were Cubans stranded at sea, trying to reach America. We were in very bad shape and had run out of food and water. He went inside the boat to talk to his peers and came back with two more guys.

“Niggers!” they yelled.

“We can’t pick you up,” they said. And we heard the sound of an engine starting.

We were totally shocked and dismayed when they refused to rescue us. All the joy we had felt before suddenly disappeared.

“Can you at least give us some water?” I besought them.

One of the men went inside again and brought back several gallons of water. They turned on a big flashlight to see us better and threw us the water.

“Wait a minute! There is a white guy with them,” I heard one of them saying.

“Okay, stay there and don’t move because you guys are surrounded by sharks,” they said.

“Yes, I know. They have been stalking us for five days,” I said.

They opened a ladder next to the ship but we could not climb it because after five days in the ocean, our legs had already given up on us. They had to come down and help us. Once on board, we drank more water and they offered us some hot soup, coffee and milk, plus a couple of blankets. We were so happy to be finally out of the water. Miracielo looked up to the starry sky, crying tears of joy and thanked God for saving our lives. Deep in my heart, I thanked those beings of light for protecting us during this difficult journey and then I understood the serendipity of having brought our

friend Miracielo with us because without him we would have never been picked up. Our ordeal was finally over!

Lying on the floor we settled into a warm, comfortable position and we were welcomed by this frisky black chow chow puppy that was running around the deck. He was all over me, yelping, whimpering, nuzzling my face and licking the sores on my salty legs. He was very playful and seemed to be welcoming us to America. It made me think about my dog Kizzy that I had left behind in Cuba and I became sad. I also wondered if the puppy were to fall in the water, would they think twice about picking him up? After all, he was black, too.

“Leave the man alone!” One of the guys yelled imperatively at the little dog as he was approaching.

“Oh, don’t worry. I love dogs,” I said.

I was lying on my back facing him. I smiled at him and he smiled too. Then he bent over.

“What’s your name?” He asked.

“Pablo,” I answered.

He introduced himself. His name was David.

“You speak English very well,” he said.

“Hey, man, thanks a lot for saving my life!” I said while I was reaching inside the pocket of my bathing suit. I pulled out about 30 Cuban pesos, all I had left, and said, “Take this money, this is all I have and I want to give it to you to let you know how much I appreciate you for saving my life.”

“I have never seen Cuban money,” he said, and took the money.

Then he reached into his pocket too and offered me the same amount in U.S. dollars. I told him I did not want the money. He put the money in my hand and held it with his two hands.

“Take this money,” he insisted.

“You are going to need it in the U.S. Now get some rest! We’ve radioed the U.S. Coast Guard and they will be picking you up early in the morning. They should get here before sunrise.”

Then he left, taking the puppy with him. I was left with mixed feelings. I thought about all the obstacles we had overcome, all the suffering we endured, everything we left behind in order to get this far. I was very happy to be alive and grateful they picked us up but still bothered by their first reaction. I thought about the Tylenol incident in the elevator with the African-American guy and my white girlfriend. *Is this a preview of what the future holds for us in America?* I asked myself.

“The Coast Guard is already here,” I heard someone say.

I woke up and I was very happy to know it was not a dream. It was all real. We went outside the deck and there it was, the U.S. Coast Guard with the American flag waving intensely in the wind, making a sound, cheering as a sign of enthusiasm or approval, welcoming us to the land of freedom. I breathed deeply the fresh sea air and for the first time smelled the scent of freedom. Then we turned around and said goodbye to the crew of the “Triple Pain.”

In the American Coast Guard vessel, there was this guy who seemed to be in charge. They took the two rafts, but one of them was blown away by the wind. The captain gave orders to some of the crew members of the Coast Guard to help us transfer from the fishing boat to their vessel. I stood up holding on to one of the guy’s arms. I attempted a step with my right foot and lost my balance. The guy held my arm at the armpit level while I tried to move forward. My legs did not respond and I would have fallen right on my face had this guy not caught my arm and prevented my fall. Again he held me by the right armpit and made me lean on him but my legs were very weak. Suddenly, another crew member showed up and gave me a pair of crutches so I was able to walk. Once inside the Coast Guard’s ship, we collapsed in some chairs and they offered us some hot tea, hot coffee and milk. Later they took us to the ship’s cabin where they had

some bunk beds ready for us. We were still groggy and fell asleep again right away.

That morning we arrived at Key West around 8 a.m. They had some ambulances ready and waiting for us. I was rushed on a gurney into this building that looked like a small clinic. We were put in separate rooms where they gave us some intravenous fluid to treat the dehydration. Suddenly I heard a screaming followed by some laughs coming from Raúl's room.

“What happened?” I asked.

Then I learned that Raúl had just woken up and the first thing he saw in front of him was the face of this Puerto Rican immigration officer who talked to him in Spanish and was wearing a green uniform very similar to the one members of the state police wore in Cuba. Raúl thought we had been captured by the Cuban state police.

The ambulance drove over the bridge that connects Key West to Miami, Florida. Through the small windows I caught a glimpse of the ocean on both sides of the road. All the colors looked so bright. I thought about the first time I got high smoking marijuana. It was a similar feeling but this time it was a natural high. Now we were on our way to Miami and I asked the nurse if she knew exactly where they were taking us. “You guys are going to the hospital inside the Krome Immigration Detention Center,” she answered.

The ambulance driver stopped at a gas station, so I asked the driver if he could buy some Coca Cola for us with the money I had. He bought us our first Coca Cola in the U.S.

Finally, we arrived at the Krome Immigration Detention Center Hospital and they put us in some wheelchairs. We were introduced to the medical staff that was going to be working with us. Most of the staff was from Cuba or another Spanish-speaking country.

They performed a couple of physical examinations, checked our weight, took some pictures of our scrawny faces and gave us some wristbands for our identification. We looked haggard and I tipped the scales at one hundred and twenty five pounds. I had lost thirty pounds in five days as a result of the exhaustion and dehydration of our perilous journey.

We were still feeling tired so we took a decent shower for the first time in more than six days, followed by a nice lunch and a snooze.

We stayed in this area where there were also other Cuban patients who were being held by immigration. All of them had left Cuba in 1980 during the Exodus of Mariel and were in prison for committing crimes related to drug trafficking.

Unlike in Cuba, the hospital here was sanitized and there was a lot of food. The room was

cold and the air conditioning hummed loudly. My bed was next to Raúl's bed and a television hung from the ceiling.

My right leg was sorely in need of treatment. It was so swollen I could not walk and the pain was excruciating. The doctor came to see me and after taking a close look at the sunburn told me they were going to have to scrub off all the dead skin in the burnt areas. Otherwise I could get an infection and they might have to amputate my leg and I'd suffer permanent physical disability. He warned me about the painful procedure that was done without anesthesia. The treatment was agonizingly painful but my leg started healing very fast.

The day after, we woke up and they served us breakfast in bed. Everybody in the hospital was very nice to us. They kept giving us a lot of compliments about our education and mannerisms.

"You guys are not like these other Cubans. You have a great future in America. You guys are celebrities," they said.

"There are a lot of media outside the hospital waiting to talk to you guys, so get ready because they are going to come in," one of the nurses said. Soon the area was invaded by cameras and lights.

There were both national and international media from all over the world and they all wanted to know how we did it. The local media – such as the Miami Herald and the local Spanish TV station – was interviewing us in Spanish, while the English media – such as CNN, FOX, NBC, and the Los Angeles Times – were conducting their interviews in English. They were surprised at how easily we communicated. They wanted to know how I had learned English so well.

Some Cubans had been living in Miami for decades and had never learned English. It was very unusual to see someone who had just arrived in Miami and spoke English fluently, answering questions about subjects like politics. I was excited and thrilled to talk to all the media. Finally I could talk freely with people from other countries without the fear of being arrested.

There was a journalist from Newsweek Magazine who just wanted to talk to me. We spoke a lot about my life in Cuba. Then at the end he told me, “You have a great story and should write a book about your life one day.” I laughed and told him my life was not interesting enough to write a book about it.

Miracielo was the first one to leave the hospital. As soon as his family heard the news they came to the hospital to pick him up. He said goodbye to all of us and we wished him good luck. Baldo, Raúl and I, on the other hand, did not have

any family in the U.S. so we needed someone to sponsor us.

There were private parties who came to see us but most of them were interested in just taking me. I made it very clear that I came with Baldo and Raúl and we would leave the hospital together.

Our odyssey received a lot of media coverage and laudatory publicity. But soon the education I thought was going to be a benefit backfired on me.

Some people began to spread scurrilous rumors that we were probably spies trained in Cuba to infiltrate the Cuban organizations in Miami. One day we even had a special visit from the FBI. We were going to be taken to the federal building in downtown to be debriefed and interrogated. I remember the FBI officer was a Cuban American fellow who probably knew Cuba better than I did. He did the whole interrogation in English first.

“Wow, man! You speak English very well. I am impressed,” he said.

He wanted to know everything about my life and how I learned English. I told him about all my encounters with American and Canadian tourists. I also told him about my friends from the Caribbean who were going to school in Cuba. We met several times and then he started wondering if I was actually Cuban. He talked to me in Spanish using Cuban slang.

He asked me some questions about Cuban history and the location of different places in Cuba. Suddenly he asked me in Spanish, “At what time was Lola killed⁴² ?

At first I was confused and did not know what he meant. But it was a trick question that only a Cuban can answer. It took me some time to figure it out. He kept looking straight at my eyes waiting for an answer.

“At 3 p.m.,” I answered.

He stood up, shook my hands, smiled graciously and said, “Man, you are more Cuban than me. Welcome to America!”

EPILOGUE

LOOKING back at my life. I have had many reasons to consider myself shortchanged but I have always refused to feel that way. From an early age I was faced with situations that seemed to be horrible, painful and unfair. I lost my father at a very young age. During that period of trials and tribulations, I did not have the slightest idea what the future held for me and my family, living in a poor communist island in the Caribbean. I had to endure harsh racial discrimination in a country that claimed to have eliminated racism when it was actually one of the most racist nations on this planet.

However life has taught me it is not what happens to us but how we react and cope with what happens to us. Indeed, I've learned good fortune can be created through our actions and opportunities can sometime present themselves masked and disguised as adversities and calamities.

All the challenges I have faced and all the obstacles I have overcome have not only made me stronger but forced me to use my imagination and discover the magic that exists within all of us.

In the aftermath of our hazardous journey to America, I can say with certainty it helped me grow and become the type of person I am today. It gave me a different outlook on life. My experiences molded in me the never-give-up spirit, the resilience and unwavering determination to face and surmount any obstacle, no matter how difficult it may be.

In my personal spiritual journey, there are a lot of people I have to be thankful to for the role they have played in my life. Sometimes people come into our lives and we know right away they were meant to be there. They serve some sort of purpose, teach us a lesson and help us to figure out who we really are or who we are going to become. We never know who these people might be; our childhood friend, our classmate, our roommate, our professor, our lover, our family – or even a complete stranger.

In spite of our terrible trauma, my raft mates Miracielo, Baldo, Raúl and I are bound to one another. Together we have had an incredible and daring journey and our friendship will continue until the last day of our lives.



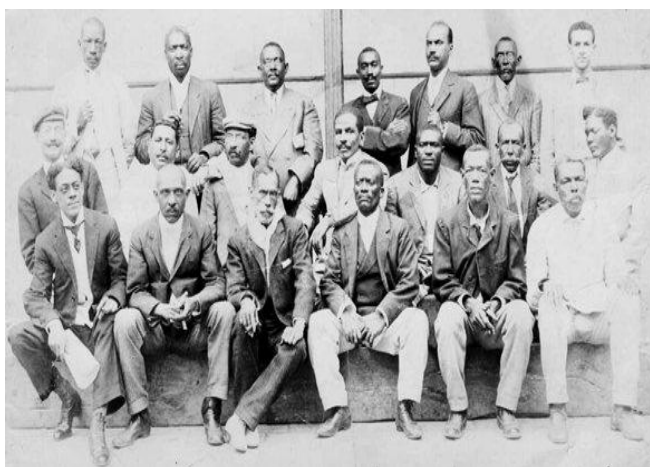
My mother celebrating her 80th birthday



A group of Mambises soldiers



Children working in the country



The Black Independent Party



Evaristo Estenoz founder of the Black Independent Party



Dead body of Evaristo Estenoz surrounded by his killers



**Left- “Daniel Ortega” (President of Nicaragua)
Center-“Dennis Sassou Nguesso” (President of
Republic of the Congo) Right- My brother Daniel**



**Left- “Yasser Arafat” (Chairman of the PLO),
Right-“Dennis Sassou Nguesso” (President of
Republic of the Congo) Center- My brother Daniel**



**Pablo & Ana, Carmen & Mulo at “Café Cantante”
bar in Havana**



**Pablo & Ana, Mulo & Carmen in “Tropicana”
Cabaret**



Pablo & Moses in Havana



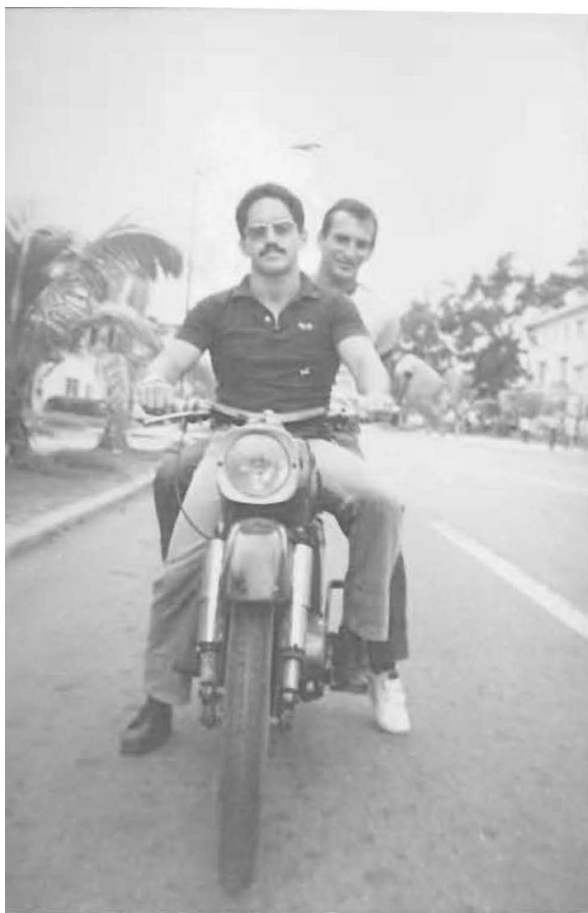
Gordo, Pablo, Mulo & my brother Raul with a group of friends from Spain at “1830 Cabaret”



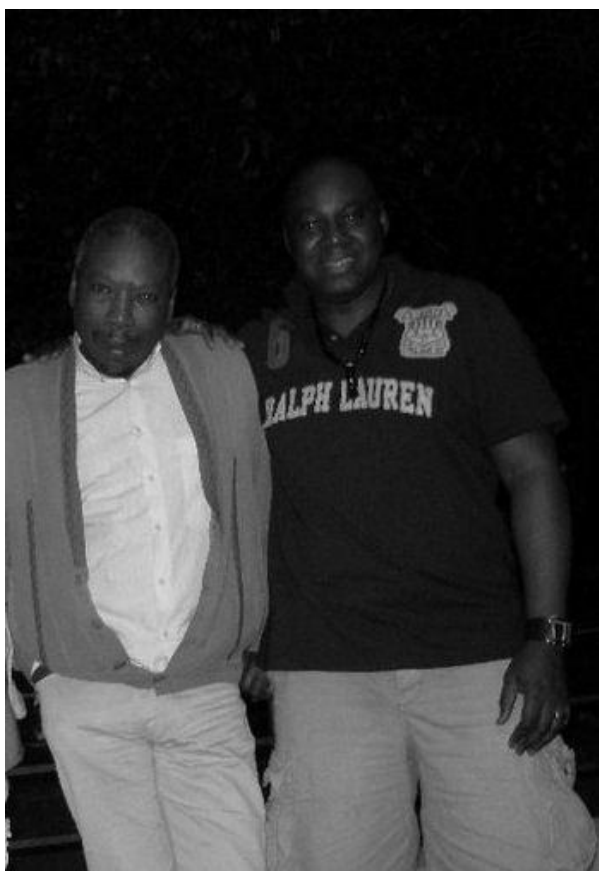
Pablo & his friend from Holland “Nelleke” with a group of students sitting in the Park in Old Havana



**Pictures of the area where we escaped from
Cuba**



My friends Villy & Sixto



Gordo & Bonito

The Miami Herald

June 17, 1986

CUBANS SURVIVED SEA PERILS

By: Jose Cordoba

The latest four Cubans raft refugees to arrive dodged a Cuban freighter, fought off a shark with a homemade oar, survived two storms and hallucinated about a glass of milk before being picked up by a fishing boat after four days and five nights floating on the Gulf Stream. "If you pay me one million, I wouldn't do it again," said Pablo Betancourt 28, an economics student at the University of Havana, as he limped to his cot at the Krome Avenue Detention Center.

"But I am happy to have escaped Fidel Castro," He said.

The four men Betancourt, his brother Raul a warehouse worker, Jesus Ruiz, an unemployed carpenter on a secret police black list because his family are members of Jehovah's Witnesses; Luis Terry, a French student and star wrestler- bring to 24 the number of young Cuban men who have made the hazardous trip to Florida in makeshift raft in the last three months.

The most dangerous moment of the trip was in the second day when a hammerhead shark circled the raft, made out of two truck inner tubes tied together with ropes and canvas. "Jesus hit him with an oar and he left," said Raul Betancourt "But then the shark came back with three others. I thought there is a shark for each one of us," said Raul.

Pablo Betancourt didn't sleep throughout the four nights of the trip. Once he hallucinated he was in

his house in Havana. "One night he said he was going to get a glass of milk from the kitchen," said Terry. "We were in the middle of the Gulf Stream." The four repeated stories told by early arrivals widespread dissatisfaction with political and social repression and threadbare economic conditions that characterizes life in Cuba. Under those conditions, most young Cubans would emigrate. They said. "If there was a situation where you could emigrate without suffering violence consequences, more than two millions people would go." said Betancourt. They said the Cuban government is issuing passports to all who want them, fueling speculations that a mass emigration like the 1980 Mariel boatlift that brought 125.000.00 Cubans to the United States is being planned. Government officials and Cuba analysts doubt however that there is another Mariel on the way. "We do not foresee any kind of boatlift," Perry Rivkind district director of the Immigration and Naturalization Service said recently. "We would not stand for another Mariel."

Houston Chronicle

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'JMC 'BSG Cuban Refugees

Cubans brave brutal voyage in sea odyssey for freedom

Author: BARRY BEARAK; Los Angeles Times

Dateline: MIAMI

Article Text:

MIAMI - The four Cubans battled an afternoon sun that glittered floating on two inner tubes lashed together with rope. They were floating to America.

In the first hours, the choppy water washed away half their canned meat and juice. Then the morning brought that sun, and the naked heat brought on the thirst. Their Russian compass stuck and never budged again.

On the second day, a tiger shark swam beneath them. The men jerked their blistered legs from the water. Jesus Ruiz swatted at it with an oar. Then more sharks came, and after that the circling of fins never stopped.

By the fourth day, the water jugs were empty and the hallucinating began. Pablo Betancourt thought his mother sat beside him. He asked her to pour him some milk. Then the delirium went away. "We're going to die," Pablo mumbled.

But during the night, they glimpsed a fishing boat. "Hello," they shouted toward a faint yellow light.

They paddled furiously. Finally, a voice drifted to them on the wind. "Hello," someone was answering. Their rescue brought to 24 the number of freedom floaters who have reached America in the last three months. Barely a week goes by without another weary, sun-parched man bobbing his way toward stunned fishermen.

For 27 years, Cubans have fled Fidel Castro and communism, some by boat, some by plane. This spring, that exodus has discovered the inner tube.

There are few more perilous ways to cross the Florida Straits, but each passage has only encouraged others to try.

The Cubans say they learn of the successes from Radio Marti, the year-old broadcast service beamed to Cuba by the U.S. government.

However heroic the efforts, there is a troubling fear. Many undoubtedly are being beckoned to their death.

Coast Guard and immigration officials say the 90 miles between Cuba and Key West, Fla., is no place for tubing. The sea is unpredictable, the storms fierce, and the sun a demon's eye.

On Wednesday, Ernesto Betancourt, the director of Radio Marti in Washington - and no relation to Pablo - said future reports of the crossings will be paired with a warning.

"We will tell them there is great danger to their lives if they try to do this," he said. "And we will tell them that the United States will not legally accept them."

But those who have survived the trip have, in fact, been rewarded with a new life. They may be illegal

aliens, but the United States has no active immigration treaty with Cuba. They cannot be sent home, Dwayne Peterson of the Immigration and Naturalization Service in Miami said.

So far, the floaters have been released to families or friends in Miami. This is in contrast to the many Haitian boat people picked up at sea. Most often, the Haitians are returned.

Jesus Ruiz, 31 and a carpenter, is jubilant knowing he can stay.

"I have grandparents and aunts and two cousins in Miami," he said. "I'll do OK here."

It was the short and gabby Ruiz who convinced his boyhood friends that they could sneak past the border patrols and drift away in an amiable current.

Ruiz convinced Raul Betancourt, 29, an unemployed laborer. Raul convinced his brother Pablo, 28, a strapping university student who speaks good English.

Pablo convinced Luis Terry, a 25-year-old student and wrestler. All are single.

In the darkness before dawn June 10, they set out from the rocky coast near some petroleum fields east of Havana, from where they felt they had the best chance to avoid patrol boats. Their odyssey would last 100 hours.

They had planned carefully. They had bought a compass. They had told virtually no one.

Their two inner tubes were deep and wide and sturdy, and they had strung canvas underneath them and from the sides. But they struggled with the

makeshift raft as they entered the sea and the waves washed away some of their supplies.

They were left with only 10 liters of water, three cans of condensed milk, two cans of meat and chopped fish, two cans of grapefruit juice.

Worse yet, three of them foolishly stripped down to their underwear, letting their shirts and pants disappear into the dark sea. They did not want to swim in heavy, wet clothes. In the days to come, the sun would blacken their exposed skin. Burns would open into sores.

They straddled the tubes and paddled with scrap wood. Progress was painful. Their backs ached. Their arms tired from holding tight.

They had wrapped the tubes with burlap so the rubber would not roast in the heat. As they rocked in the water, the harsh fabric rubbed at their flesh.

By the second night, they were exhausted. They slept fitfully, curled on top of the tubes.

Then the waves picked up and a chill set in. A hard rain fell. The winds nudged them steadily, but they had lost sense of direction.

By morning, they saw land. Matanzas, they guessed.

They had been pushed back toward Cuba. They could see the bright lights from a search tower.

"We thought we were trapped so we started to paddle like crazy," Pablo said. "Everybody but Raul. He was too sick, throwing up and moaning."

They made it back out to sea. Soon, a brutal sun gobbled away the clouds. Later, in the afternoon, they saw the first shark.

After that, no one slept, though the fatigue was awful.

And no one talked much. When they did, they argued. But by the fourth day the drinking water was gone.

Raul took the final sip, and then he spit it right up.

Pablo, who had seemed the strongest, began talking nonsense. He thought he was at the neighbor's, reaching for the refrigerator door.

On their fifth night at sea, Jesus Ruiz was the first to see the glimmer of the yellow light aboard the fishing boat Triple pain, not far from Molasses Reef and 30 miles from land. It made him want to lunge into the water. No, the others warned: the sharks.

So they paddled toward the yellow light, staring as it got brighter.

Hours later, they finally picked the boat's shape out of the darkness. Then they heard voices.

A floodlight came on. They were bathed in light – four men clinging to rubber. Pablo spoke up.

"They thought I was Jamaican, my English was that good," he recalled.

The fishermen lifted them aboard. They heated up some vegetable soup. In a few hours, the Coast Guard arrived. The Cubans were sped to a hospital.

"They thought we were brave, something like heroes," Pablo said.

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MD BOAT ARRIVAL CUBAN REFUGEE

RAFT TRIP WAS ANSWER TO DOUBTS

Author: JOSE DE CORDOBA Herald Staff Writer

Article Text:

Pablo Betancourt was born poor, the son of a cleaning woman and a longshoreman, six months before Fidel Castro took power in Cuba on New Year's Day 1959.

Revolutionary ardor and scholastic ability propelled Betancourt from one of Havana's meanest neighborhoods to a boarding school for special scholarship students. Later, his brains and militancy pointed him toward a coveted career in foreign trade at the University of Havana.

But on the way his enthusiasm cooled. The more questions Betancourt asked as he rose higher on the educational ladder, the more the answers provided by his teachers were suspect. Instead of winding up with a job at the Cuban foreign trade ministry, Betancourt, 28, tall, lean and bearded, wound up in Miami on June 14. With his brother Raul and two other friends, Betancourt was picked up by a fishing boat 17 miles southeast of Molasses Reef, after spending five nights at sea on a raft made of two inner tubes.

Betancourt and his three boat mates brought to 24 the number of young Cubans who have survived the raft trip to Florida since mid-March.

For Betancourt, the one-time committed revolutionary, the voyage was psychologically a much longer journey than the 90 miles that separates Cuba from the Florida Keys.

"One begins to question a lot of things," said Betancourt from his hospital cot at Krome Avenue detention center, where he is recovering from sunburn suffered on the trip.

"I was a Communist, and look at how I think now," Betancourt said. "If I ever have a son, I will speak to him so badly of communism. I will tell him 'If you don't eat your food, a Communist will come and take you away.' "

As a university student, Betancourt questioned Marxist tenets. "You realize after a while that theory does not have anything to do with practice," he said.

Betancourt said he also encountered an unspoken racism in Cuba in the foreign trade classes he attended.

That specialty, which permits foreign travel, is largely reserved for the sons and daughters of the government establishment, he said. "I felt very badly when I entered the room because of the class differences," Betancourt said. "Many students looked at me with repugnance for being black and poor. My father was a nobody and in my classroom, everyone was driven by a chauffeur."

"In Cuba there is racism, but the worst thing is that since it has supposedly been eliminated, there is no way to fight it," he said.

Betancourt's commitment to the revolution also was shaken after Cuban Americans flocked to the island after the 1978 thaw between Washington and Havana.

"Before the trips .Cuba was totally isolated and the government had a monopoly of information," said Betancourt. "With the trips, Cubans saw the contradiction between the information provided by the Cuban government and what their relatives said."

The visits by Cuban exiles fed the discontent which led to the takeover of the Peruvian Embassy in 1980 and directly to the Mariel boatlift, which brought 125,000 Cuban refugees to the United States.

The year after Mariel, Betancourt was purged from the university and from the Union of Young Communists.

His crime, he said, was associating with foreigners and telling some Canadian students, racism exists in Cuba.

After his expulsion from the university, Betancourt worked as a high school mathematics teacher for a while, but he quit after a year. He managed to continue his college education at night, this time switching to national, instead of international trade.

But dissatisfaction still gnawed at him.

Betancourt, who left behind his widowed mother and three siblings, has no family in this country besides his brother Raul. His only options to get out

of Cuba, he felt, were either to marry a foreigner or to go the raft route.

In the United States, Betancourt said he only wants to live in peace, "which is something I could not do in Cuba."

Meanwhile, he is waiting in Krome for the Immigration and Naturalization Service to finish investigating his case. INS District Director Perry Rivkind said Betancourt probably will be released soon, although since he does not have family here, a sponsor will have to be found for him.

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REFERENCES/END NOTES

1 **Habana del Este** (Spanish for "Havana of the East" or Eastern Havana) is one of the municipalities forming the city of Havana. As its name indicates, it is on the eastern side of the city and includes the towns of Camilo Cienfuegos, Cojimar, Bahía and Alamar, as well as the beach towns (Playas del Este) of Tarara, Bacuranao, Santa María del Mar, Boca Ciega and Guanabo. The original Havana del Este is what is called now Ciudad Camilo Cienfuegos. This city was designed and built by famous developer, Pastorita Nuñez. It was located in front of the ocean, near Naval Hospital, and it was supposed to be a neighborhood for the rising middle class in Havana. After Castro's revolution, many families with poor backgrounds moved into this neighborhood. (pg.11)

2 **Celia Sánchez Manduley** (May 9, 1920 - January 11, 1980) was a participant of the Cuban Revolution and a close friend and rumored lover of Fidel Castro. She was born in Media Luna, Oriente, Cuba. Sánchez joined the struggle against the Batista government following the coup of March 10, 1952. She founded the 26th of July Movement in Manzanillo; and along with Frank País, was one of the first -- and the first woman -- to assemble a combat squad. During the revolution, she was in charge of making all the necessary arrangements throughout the southwest coast region of Cuba for the Granma landing and was responsible for organizing reinforcements once the revolutionaries landed. In 1957, she

joined the guerrillas and served as a messenger for Fidel Castro's army. Celia used to place small telegrams inside a Butterfly flower so the messages would remain in secret and would not be exposed to the enemy. As a member of the general staff of the Rebel Army, she managed to supply Che Guevara and other rebels with weapons, and occasionally food and medical supplies. After the revolution, the title of Secretary to the Presidency of the Council of Ministers was bestowed on Sánchez, and she served in the Department of Services of the Council of State until her death of lung cancer in 1980. The Celia Sánchez Memorial in Manzanillo honors her name. (pg.19)

3 **Mambi** (Mambises in the plural) is a term used to refer to soldiers who participated in the Cuban War of Independence. The Mambises were named after the Negro Spanish officer, Juan Ethninius Mamby (Eutimio Mambí), who joined the Dominicans in the fight for their independence in 1844. The Spanish soldiers referred to the insurgents as "the men of Mamby," and "Mambies." When Cuba's first war of independence broke out in 1868, some of the same soldiers were assigned to the island, importing what had become by then a derogatory Spanish slur. The Cubans adopted the name with pride. The Mambises were the heroes of the Cuban war of independence from Spain. Their team was comprised of former black slaves and their master who decided to free them for the purpose of joining forces against the Spanish to free Cuba from being a colony. The Mambi Army was the National Army of Liberation that

defeated the Spanish through two wars: 1868 to 1878; and again, 1895 to 1898. Their leader was Antonio Maceo, a black man and one of the main figures of the Cuban struggle for independence. Maceo participated in more than 500 battles. (pg.19)

4 **José Julián Martí Pérez** (January 28, 1853 - May 19, 1895) was a Cuban national hero and an important figure in Latin American literature. In his short life he was a poet, an essayist, a journalist, a revolutionary philosopher, a translator, a professor, a publisher, and a political theorist. He was also part of the Cuban Freemasons. Through his writings and political activity, he became a symbol for Cuba's bid for independence against Spain in the 19th century and is referred to as the "Apostle of Cuban Independence." He also fought against the threat of United States expansionism into Cuba. From adolescence, he dedicated his life to the promotion of liberty, political independence for Cuba and intellectual independence for all Spanish Americans; his death was used as a cry for Cuban independence from Spain by both the Cuban revolutionaries and those Cubans previously reluctant to start a revolt. Born in Havana, Martí began his political activism at an early age. He would travel extensively in Spain, Latin America, and the United States raising awareness and support for the cause of Cuban independence. His unification of the Cuban émigré community, particularly in Florida, was crucial to the success of the Cuban War of Independence against Spain. He was a key figure in the

planning and execution of this war, as well as the designer of the Cuban Revolutionary Party and its ideology. He died in military action on May 19, 1895. Martí is considered one of the great turn-of-the-century Latin American intellectuals. His written works consist of a series of poems, essays, letters, lectures, a novel, and even a children's magazine. He wrote for numerous Latin American and American newspapers; he also founded a number of newspapers himself. His newspaper Patria was a key instrument in his campaign for Cuban independence. After his death, one of his poems from the book, "Versos Sencillos" (Simple Verses) was adapted to the song, "Guantanamera," which has become the definitive patriotic song of Cuba. (pg.20)

5 **Santa María del Mar** is a sandy beach located 12 miles east of Havana, Cuba, along the Via Blanca highway. It is a segment of a chain of beaches called the Eastern Beaches Spanish: (-Playas del Este)) which extends for 15 miles along the north coast of Havana province in the municipality of Havana del Este. Santa Maria is the biggest and busiest of the eastern Havana beaches also named the "Playas del Este"; it's a popular and excellent place for beach activities where tourists can dive and rent jet skis and sailboats. On the weekends, the place is visited by locals from Havana. The playa is situated at 25 km from Central Havana, a 20-minute ride by taxi. Santa Maria del Mar is also a place where some of the elite class used to have vacation homes before Castro's revolution. Most of

the houses in Santa Maria have been turned into Government residences, and Castro himself owns a house over there. Robert Vesco, the famous American fugitive, is said to live there under the protection of the Cuban Government, hiding from the U.S. authorities. pg.20)

6 The Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) was a period of conflict in the French colony of Saint-Domingue, which culminated in the elimination of slavery there and the founding of the Haitian republic. The revolution was one of the two successful attempts, along with the American Revolution, to achieve permanent independence from a European colonial power for an American state before the 19th century. Furthermore, it is generally considered the most successful slave rebellion ever to have occurred in the Americas and a defining moment in the history of Africans in the New World. Although an independent government was created in Haiti, its society continued to be deeply affected by the patterns established under French colonial rule. The French established a system of minority rule over the illiterate poor by using violence and threats. Because many planters had provided for their mixed-race children by African women by giving them education and (for men) training and entrée into the French military, the mulatto descendants became the elite in Haiti after the revolution. By the time of war, many had used their social capital to acquire wealth, and some already owned land. Some had identified more with the French colonists than the slaves, and associated within their own

circles. Their domination of politics and economics after the revolution created another two-caste society, as most Haitians were rural subsistence farmers. In addition, the nascent state's future was practically "mortgaged" to French banks in the 1820s, as it was forced to make massive reparations to French slaveholders in order to receive French recognition and end the nation's political and economic isolation. These payments may have permanently affected Haiti's economy and wealth.pg.28)

7 **The Morúa Amendment** was a bill introduced by Martin Morúa Delgado that banned black political parties because they discriminated against white Cubans. The Morúa Amendment would later be cited as inciting Cuba's Race War of 1912. (pg.28)

8 **Martin Morúa Delgado** (1856-1910) was a major political figure in post-independence Cuba. He was one of two men of color elected to the country's constitutional assembly under United States occupation. In 1901 he became the country's first elected Afro-Cuban senator (1901). As part of the Afro-Cuban intellectual and political elite, Delgado symbolized a social mobility that very few black Cubans were able to achieve because of social and legal barriers. Although a believer in racial equality, Morúa Delgado opposed independent, black civil rights organizations. Instead, he worked through his political party, the Liberal Party, in establishing patronage networks among Afro-Cubans as the first Black President of the Cuban Senate (1909). In May 1910, while serving as

President of the Cuban Senate, Morúa Delgado introduced a law that banned political parties based on race or class. The Morúa Law was a direct attack on the Black Independents, and sparked a period of racist isolationism that led to the so-called "Race War of 1912." Morúa Delgado would go on to become Minister of Agriculture, passing away in 1910 while serving in that office. (pg.28)

9 The Massacre of 1912: In 1912, the Cuban army massacred thousands of Afro-Cubans in what became known as "El Doce," "The Twelve," and the "Guerrita de Raza," the "Little Race War." Many of those murdered, but by no means all, were members of the western hemisphere's first black political party outside Haiti. The Independent Party of Color (PIC) was largely made up of veterans of the Mambi Army, the Cuban Army of Liberation that defeated the Spanish in two Wars of Liberation (1868-1878 and 1895-1898). Recent research in Cuba has established that this army was overwhelmingly made up of Cubans of African descent (80%, and perhaps as high as 90%): it was one of the largest slave revolts in the hemisphere. When the Mambises had all but ejected the Spaniards from Cuba, the plutocracy, as Maceo had predicted, allied themselves with the Americans to bring about the American intervention known as the Spanish American War in 1898. That year, the 9th and 10th Cavalry (the Buffalo Soldiers) took San Juan Hill with some help from the Rough Riders, and Teddy Roosevelt later claimed all of the glory, which greatly aided him in his quest to become President. Evaristo

Estenoz, Pedro Ivonet, and others founded the Independents of Color (PIC) in 1908 in order to secure a rightful share for Afro-Cubans in a Cuba which had successfully marginalized them since Independence. The plutocracy responded with a law, the Morua Amendment, to prohibit parties restricted to a particular race, even though there were white members of the PIC. Then, after the party's protests continued, the plutocracy engaged in an intense media campaign to demonize the party. This culminated in a massacre where Estenoz, along with 6,000 or more other Afro-Cubans, mostly fellow party members, were murdered by Cuban troops that President Jose Miguel Gomez ordered to the field in 1912. (pg.29)

10 **The Parsley Massacre:** A little over 70 years ago, from October 2 to October 4, 1937, 15,000 to 20,000 Haitian immigrant workers were massacred in the Dominican Republic. Most were slaughtered with bayonets and machetes by the Dominican army and some Dominican big landowners. Infants had their heads cut off and smashed against walls. Women were speared with pitchforks. Many who were attempting to escape back to Haiti were captured at the border and killed. These murders were ordered by Dominican dictator Raphael Leonidas Trujillo in an effort to -cleanse|| the border region and expropriate small peasants or -conuqueros|| so that big landowners could take over their lands. The international outrage brought on by this massacre was soon abated by an agreement between both governments, on January 31, 1938, to

settle -these few incidents on the border between some Haitians and Dominicans. The Haitian government of Sténio Vincent capitulated completely and dropped all proceedings in international court. The Dominican Republic agreed to pay \$750,000 in compensation to the victims. Eventually, \$500,000 was paid, amounting to about \$25 to \$33 per murdered Haitian. No one was ever brought to justice. (pg.29)

11 **Rafael Trujillo** (also known as "The Boss") was the president of the Dominican Republic for almost 30 years, a period considered to be the bloodiest era ever in the nation. He was a ruthless dictator who exercised absolute control over every single aspect of the country. He promoted anti-Haitian prejudice and in 1937 ordered the massacre of thousands of Haitian migrants, an incident later dubbed the -Parsley Massacre.|| His tyranny is historically known as the -Era of Trujillo|| and is considered one of the bloodiest of the twentieth century. It was characterized by anticommunist repression of all opposition, and was called the cult of personality. Proponents emphasized some positive aspects of the regime as being the restoration of public order and economic progress. Trujillo was born in the city of San Cristobal on October 24, 1891. Son of Jose Trujillo Valdez, a small businessman descended from Spanish sergeant (canary) José Trujillo Monagas who arrived in Santo Domingo as part of the Spanish troops during the Annexation booster, and Altagracia Julia Molina Chevalier, later known as Mamá Julia,

daughter of Pedro Molina, Dominican farmer, and Louise Ercina Chevalier, daughter of a Haitian officer from the time of the occupation of 1822.

Trujillo later renounced his Haitian ancestry from his mother because of its massacre of Haitians in 1937. His grandmother, Diyeta Chevalier, was also of Afro-Haitian origin. From September 28 to October 8, 1937, Trujillo decided the genocide of 15,000 to 20,000 Haitians living in the border area with Haiti in an event known as the Slaughter of the parsley, or -The Haitian Massacre.|| During this time, the Dominican Army troops killed thousands of Haitians. This abominable fact sought to be justified under the pretext of fearing infiltration, but in reality was a reprisal of the dictator who believed that the Haitian government was cooperating with a plan of Dominican exiles seeking to overthrow him. However, among the various factors that led to the massacre, one of the main was also the aspiration of Trujillo to "whiten" the Dominican population. (pg.29)

12 **Gusano** (worm in Spanish) is a derogatory term created by the communist government of Cuba to refer to all of those Cubans who are against the Cuban revolution. (pg.33)

13 **The Adventures of Pow Wow** is an animated cartoon that was broadcast locally in New York City in 1949 and later on the Captain Kangaroo show during the 1950s. The cartoon featured the pre-adolescent Indian boy Pow Wow, the tribe's medicine man, and an Indian girl who was a friend

of Pow Wow's. The cartoons were often centered on Pow Wow's discovery of an animal, hurt or otherwise, and his attempts to protect the forest and wildlife from various threats. When Pow Wow needed help in these missions, he would seek counsel from the wise medicine man. (pg.36)

14 The Cuban Five: Also known as the Miami Five (Gerardo Hernández, Antonio Guerrero, Ramón Labañino, Fernando González, and René González), are five Cuban intelligence agents arrested by the FBI in 1998 and convicted in Miami of conspiracy to commit espionage, conspiracy to commit murder, acting as an agent of a foreign government, and other illegal activities in the United States. The Five men were in the United States to observe and infiltrate the U.S. Southern Command and the Cuban-American groups: Alpha 66, the F4 Commandos, the Cuban American National Foundation, and Brothers to the Rescue. At their trial, evidence was presented that the Five infiltrated the Miami-based Cuban exile group Brothers to the Rescue, obtained employment at the Key West Naval Air Station in order to send the Cuban government reports about the base, and had attempted to penetrate the Miami facility of U.S. Southern Command. On February 24, 1996, two Brothers to the Rescue aircraft were shot down by Cuban military jets in international airspace while flying away from Cuban airspace, killing the four U.S. citizens aboard. One of the Five, Gerardo Hernández, was convicted of conspiracy to commit murder for supplying information to the Cuban

government, which according to the prosecution, led to the shoot down. The Court of Appeals has, however, reversed the conviction on the conspiracy to commit murder, since there is no evidence that Hernández knew the shoot down would occur in international airspace. For their part, Cuba acknowledges that the five men were intelligence agents, but says they were spying on Miami's Cuban exile community, not the U.S. government. Cuba contends that the men were sent to South Florida in the wake of several terrorist bombings in Havana, allegedly masterminded by anti-communist militant Luis Posada Carriles, a former Central Intelligence Agency operative. (pg.37)

15 **The Red Wasp** was a spy ring that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) dismantled with arrests in 1998. According to the U.S. government, they were Cuban agents convicted of spying and conspiring to commit murder. They were also accused of failing to register as foreign agents with the Attorney General of the United States. All its members were captured, tried and sentenced in 2001 to prison terms ranging from 15 years of imprisonment to four life sentences. (pg.37)

16 **The Presidio Modelo** was a "model prison" of panoptic design, built on Isla de Pinos (now the Isla de la Juventud) in Cuba. The prison was built under President-turned-dictator Gerardo Machado between 1926 and 1928. The five circular blocks, with cells constructed in tiers around central observation posts, were built with the capacity to house up to

2,500 prisoners in humane conditions. Most of the survivors of the rebel attacks on Moncada Barracks, including attack leader Fidel Castro and his brother Raul Castro, were imprisoned there, most from 1953 to 1955. After Fidel Castro's revolutionary triumph in 1959, Presidio Modelo was used to jail political dissidents, counter-revolutionaries, homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and anyone else considered unfit or an enemy to the new norms and dictates of the Socialist Cuban State. By 1961, due to the overcrowded conditions (6,000 to 8,000 political prisoners at one time), it was the site of various riots and hunger strikes, especially just before the Bay of Pigs invasion, when orders were given to line the tunnels underneath the entire prison with several tons of TNT. Prominent Cuban political prisoners such as Armando Valladares, Roberto Martín Pérez, and Pedro Luis Boitel were held there at one point or another during their respective incarcerations. It was permanently closed down by the government in 1967. The prison now serves as a museum and is declared a National Monument, and the old administration building now serves as a school and research center. (pg.40)

17 **The Moncada Barracks** was a military barracks in Santiago de Cuba, named after General Guillermón Moncada, a hero of the War of Independence. On July 26, 1953, the barracks was the site of an armed attack by a small group of revolutionaries led by Fidel Castro. This armed attack is widely accepted as the beginning of the Cuban Revolution. The

date on which the attack took place, July 26, was adopted by Castro as the name for his revolutionary movement (Movimiento 26 Julio or M 26-7), which eventually toppled the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista in 1959. (pg.40)

18 **Malcolm X** (May 19, 1925 - February 21, 1965), born Malcolm Little and also known as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, was an African-American Muslim minister and human rights activist. To his admirers, he was a courageous advocate for the rights of African-Americans, a man who indicted white America in the harshest terms for its crimes against black Americans. His detractors accused him of preaching racism, Black supremacy, anti-Semitism, and violence. He has been called one of the greatest and most influential African-Americans in history. Malcolm X's father died-killed by white supremacists, it was rumored-when he was young, and at least one of his uncles was lynched. When he was 13, his mother was placed in a mental hospital, and he was placed in a series of foster homes. In 1946, at age 20, he went to prison for breaking, entering and robbing a house. In prison, Malcolm X became a member of the Nation of Islam; after his parole in 1952, he quickly rose to become one of its leaders. For a dozen years Malcolm X was the public face of the controversial group, but disillusionment with Nation of Islam head Elijah Muhammad led him to leave the Nation in March 1964. After a period of travel in Africa and the Middle East, he returned to the United States, where he founded Muslim Mosque, Inc. and the Organization of Afro-American Unity.

In February 1965, less than a year after leaving the Nation of Islam, he was assassinated by three members of the group. Malcolm X's expressed beliefs changed substantially over time. As a spokesman for the Nation of Islam, he taught black supremacy and advocated separation of black and white Americans—in contrast to the civil rights movement's emphasis on integration led by Martin Luther King. After breaking with the Nation of Islam in 1964, he disavowed racism and expressed willingness to work with civil rights leaders, though still emphasizing black self-determination and self-defense. (pg.43)

19 **Marcus Mosiah Garvey, Jr.** (August 17, 1887 – June 10, 1940) was a Jamaican publisher, journalist, entrepreneur, and orator who was a staunch proponent of the Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism movements, to which end he founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL). He founded the Black Star Line, part of the Back-to-Africa movement, which promoted the return of the African Diaspora to their ancestral lands. Prior to the twentieth century, leaders such as Prince Hall, Martin Delany, Edward Wilmot Blyden, and Henry Highland Garnet advocated the involvement of the African diaspora in African affairs. Garvey was unique in advancing a Pan-African philosophy to inspire a global mass movement and economic empowerment focusing on Africa known as Garveyism. Promoted by the UNIA as a movement of African Redemption, Garveyism would eventually inspire others, ranging from

the Nation of Islam to the Rastafarian movement, which proclaimed Garvey as a prophet. The intent of the movement was for those of African ancestry to "redeem" Africa and for the European colonial powers to leave it. His essential ideas about Africa were stated in an editorial in the Negro World titled "African Fundamentalism," where he wrote: Our union must know no clime, boundary, or nationality... let us hold together under all climes and in every country. (pg.43)

20 **Santería** is a system of beliefs that merges the Yoruba religion, which was brought to the New World by slaves imported to the Caribbean to work the sugar plantations, with Roman Catholic and Native Indian traditions. These slaves carried with them various religious customs, including a trance for communicating with their ancestors and deities, animal sacrifice and sacred drumming. In Cuba, this religious tradition has evolved into what we now recognize as Santería. In 2001, there were an estimated 22,000 practitioners in the U.S. alone, but the number may be higher as some practitioners may be reluctant to disclose their religion on a government census or to an academic researcher. In Puerto Rico, the religion is extremely popular, especially in the towns of Loiza and Carolina. Of those living in the United States, some are fully committed priests and priestesses, others are "godchildren" or members of a particular house group, and many are non-committal clients seeking help with their everyday problems. Many are of black Hispanic and Caribbean descent, but as

the religion moves out of the inner cities and into the suburbs, a growing number are of African-American and European-American heritage. The colonial period from the standpoint of African slaves may be defined as a time of perseverance. Their world quickly changed. Tribal kings and their families, politicians, business and community leaders all were enslaved and taken to a foreign region of the world. Religious leaders, their relatives and their followers were now slaves. Colonial laws criminalized their religion. They were forced to become baptized and worship a god their ancestors had not known, and who was surrounded by a pantheon of saints. The early concerns during this period seem to have necessitated a need for individual survival under harsh plantation conditions. A sense of hope was sustaining the internal essence of what today is called Santería, a misnomer and former pejorative for the indigenous religion of the Lukumi people of Nigeria. In the heart of their homeland, they had a complex political and social order. They were a sedentary hoe-farming cultural group with specialized labor. Their religion, based on the worship of nature, was renamed and documented by their masters. Santería, a pejorative term that characterizes deviant Catholic forms of worshiping saints, has become a common name for the religion. The term santero is used to describe a priest or priestess replacing the traditional term Olorisha as an extension of the deities. The orishas became known as the saints in image of the Catholic pantheon. As mentioned, in order to preserve their

authentic ancestral and traditional beliefs, the Lukumi people had no choice but to disguise their orishas as Catholic saints. When the Roman Catholic slave owners observed Africans celebrating a Saint's Day, they were generally unaware that the slaves were actually worshipping one of their sacred orishas. Due to this history, in Cuba today, the terms "saint" and "orisha" are sometimes used interchangeably. This historical "veil" characterization of the relationship between Catholic saints and Cuban orisha is made all the more complicated by the fact that the vast majority of santeros in Cuba today also consider themselves to be Catholics, have been baptized, and often require initiates to be baptized as well. Many hold separate rituals to honor the saints and orisha respectively, even though the faith's overt links to Catholicism are no longer needed. The traditional Yoruba religion and its Santería counterpart can be found in many parts of the world today, including Cuba, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, and even the United States, which was mainly the result of mostly Cuban and Puerto Rican migration. A very similar religion called Candomblé is practiced in Brazil, along with a rich variety of other Afro-American religions. This is now being referred to as "parallel religiosity" because some believers worship the African variant that has no notion of a devil and no baptism or marriage, yet they belong to Catholic or mainline Protestant churches, where these concepts exist. Operating independently of the historical syncretism described above, there are now

individuals who mix the Lukumí practices of Cuba with traditional practices as they survived in Africa after the deleterious effects of colonialism. Although most of these mixes have not been at the hands of experienced or knowledgeable practitioners of either variant of the system, they have gained certain popularity. In 1974, the Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye became the first Santería church in the United States to become officially incorporated. (pg.46)

21 Committees for the Defense of the Revolution

(CDR): The country's most repressive organization comprising almost all of the citizens. When they reach a certain age, it is mandatory to belong or else run the risk of being automatically branded for the rest of your life, and hence considered an enemy of the revolution. The leadership of the CDR is composed mostly of elderly and very low educational level individuals. It is headed by a president and a secretary who monitors and watches neighbors 24 hours a day. They encroach on people's lives, digging into every nook and cranny, and know everything about everyone's personal life, keeping a record book on all this information of the citizens in case the government might need it. These individuals are also responsible for organizing activities like night watches, volunteer work and acts of repudiation against other citizens. There is generally a defense committee in each building and on every block all across the island. (pg.55)

22 **Denis Sassou Nguesso** (born November 23, 1943) is a Congolese politician who has been the President of Congo-Brazzaville since 1997; he was previously President from 1979 to 1992. During his first period as President, he headed the single-party regime of the Congolese Labor Party (PCT) for 12 years. Under heavy pressure, he introduced multiparty politics in 1990 and was then stripped of executive powers by the 1991 National Conference, remaining in office as a ceremonial head of state. He stood as a candidate in the 1992 presidential election but was defeated, placing third. Sassou Nguesso was an opposition leader for five years before returning to power at the conclusion of the June-October 1997 civil war in which his rebel forces ousted President Pascal Lissouba. Following a transitional period, he won the 2002 presidential election, which lacked meaningful opposition participation; he was again re-elected under controversial circumstances in the 2009 presidential election. Sassou Nguesso is backed by a variety of political parties, the most important of which is the PCT. He is the President of the PCT Central Committee. He used to be a close ally of Fidel Castro, and the Cuban Government used to provide him with security forces during 1979-1992. (pg.58)

23 **La Lenin** is a boarding school built in 1972, but it was officially opened in 1974. It is the most prestigious high school in Cuba and it is located outside of Havana City, in the town of Arroyo Naranjo, in the countryside. La Lenin is a school that is largely reserved for the

sons and daughters of the government establishment. Most of Castro's sons have studied at La Lenin too. However, after the demise of the Soviet Union, the quality of the school has diminished a lot and la Lenin is not what it used to be. (pg.59)

24 **Woody Woodpecker** is an animated cartoon character, an anthropomorphic acorn woodpecker that appeared in theatrical short films produced by the Walter Lantz animation studio and distributed by Universal Pictures. Though not the first of the screwball characters that became popular in the 1940s, Woody is perhaps the most indicative of the type. Woody was created in 1940 by storyboard artist Ben "Bugs" Hardaway, who had previously laid the groundwork for two other screwball characters, Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck, at the Warner Bros. cartoon studio in the late 1930s. Woody's character and design would evolve over the years from an insane bird with an unusually garish design to a more refined looking and acting character in the vein of the later Chuck Jones version of Bugs Bunny. Woody was originally voiced by prolific voice actor Mel Blanc, who was succeeded by Ben Hardaway and later by Grace Stafford, wife of Walter Lantz. Lantz produced theatrical cartoons longer than most of his contemporaries, and Woody Woodpecker remained a staple of Universal's release schedule until 1972, when Lantz finally closed down his studio. The character has been revived since then only for special productions and occasions, save for one new Saturday morning cartoon television series, The

New Woody Woodpecker Show, for the Fox Network in the late 1990s/early 2000s. Woody Woodpecker cartoons were first broadcast on television in 1957 under the title The Woody Woodpecker Show, which featured Lantz cartoons book ended by new footage of Woody and live-action footage of Lantz. Woody has a motion picture star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame on 7000 Hollywood Boulevard. He also made a cameo alongside many other famous cartoon characters in the 1988 film, Who Framed Roger Rabbit. Woody Woodpecker and friends are also icons at the Port Aventura Park in Salou, Spain. Brought to the park by Universal Studios, Woody and friends remain there despite Universal no longer having a financial stake in the park. (pg.61)

25 **Betty Boop** is an animated cartoon character created by Max Fleischer, with help from animators including Grim Natwick. She originally appeared in the Talkartoon and Betty Boop film series, which were produced by Fleischer Studios and released by Paramount Pictures. She has also been featured in comic strips and mass merchandising. Despite having been toned down in the mid-1930s to appear more demure, she became one of the most well-known and popular cartoon characters in the world. Betty Boop made her first appearance on August 9, 1930, in the cartoon Dizzy Dishes, the sixth installment in Fleischer's Talkartoon series. Although Clara Bow is often given as being the model for Boop, she actually began as a caricature of singer Helen Kane. The character was originally created as an anthropomorphic French

poodle. Max Fleischer finalized Betty Boop as a human character in 1932, in the cartoon Any Rags. Her floppy poodle ears became hoop earrings, and her black poodle nose became a girl's button-like nose. Betty Boop appeared as a supporting character in 10 cartoons as a flapper girl with more heart than brains. In individual cartoons, she was called "Nancy Lee" or "Nan McGrew" - derived from the 1930 Helen Kane film Dangerous Nan McGrew - usually serving as a girlfriend to studio star, Bimbo. Betty's voice was first performed by Margie Hines, and was later performed by several different voice actresses, including Kate Wright, Bonnie Poe, Ann Rothschild (also known as Little Ann Little), and most notably, Mae Questel. Questel, who began voicing Betty Boop in 1931, continued with the role until her death in 1998. Today, Betty is voiced by Tress Mac Neille and Tara Strong in commercials. Although it has been assumed that Betty's first name was established in the 1931 Screen Songs cartoon, Betty Co-ed, this "Betty" is an entirely different character. Even though the song may have led to Betty's eventual christening, any reference to Betty Co-ed as a Betty Boop vehicle is incorrect, although the official Betty Boop website describes the titular character as a "prototype" of Betty. There are at least 12 Screen Songs cartoons that featured Betty Boop or a similar character. Betty appeared in the first "Color Classic" cartoon Poor Cinderella, her only theatrical color appearance in 1934. In the film, she was depicted with red hair as opposed to her typical black hair. Betty also made a

cameo appearance in the feature film Who Framed Roger Rabbit (1988), in which she appeared in her traditional black and white and was voiced by Mae Questel. Betty Boop was the star of the Talkartoons by 1932 and was given her own series that same year, beginning with "Stopping the Show." From that point on, she was crowned "The Queen of the Animated Screen." The series was popular throughout the 1930s, lasting until 1939. (pg.61)

26 **Porky Pig** is an animated cartoon character in the Warner Bros. Looney Tunes and Merrie Melodies series of cartoons. He was the first character created by the studio to draw audiences based on his star power, and the animators (particularly Bob Clampett) created many critically acclaimed shorts using the fat little pig. Even after he was supplanted by later characters, Porky continued to be popular with moviegoers and, more importantly, the Warner's directors, who recast him in numerous everyman and sidekick roles. He is known for his signature line at the end of each short, "Th-th-th-that's all folks!" The slogan had also been used by both Bosko and Buddy and even Beans at the end of every Looney Tunes cartoon. In contrast, the Merrie Melodies series used the slogan, So Long, Folks! until the late 1930s, when it was replaced with the same one used on the Looney Tunes series. (When Bugs Bunny was the closing character, he would break the pattern by simply saying, in his Brooklynese accent, "And Dat's De End!") He is the oldest continuing Looney Tunes character.

Porky's most distinctive trait is a severe stutter, for which he sometimes compensates by replacing his words; for example, "What's going on?" might become "What's guh-guh-guh-guh-...what's happening?" In the ending of many Looney Tunes cartoons, Porky Pig bursts through a bass drum head, and his farewell line "That's all folks!" becomes "Th-Th-Th-Th-Th-... That's all, folks!" Porky Pig would appear in 152 cartoons in the Golden Age of American animation. (pg.61)

27 **Edward G. Robinson**, born Emanuel Goldenberg (December 12, 1893 - January 26, 1973) was a Romanian-born American actor. A popular star during Hollywood's Golden Age, he is best remembered for his roles as gangsters, such as Rico in his star-making film *Little Caesar* and as Rocco in *Key Largo*. Other memorable roles include Barton Keyes in the film noir *Double Indemnity*, and as Dathan in *The Ten Commandments*. Robinson was selected for an Honorary Academy Award for his work in the film industry, which was posthumously awarded two months after the actor's death in 1973. He was included in the American Film Institute's list of the 25 greatest male stars in American cinema. (pg.61)

28 **Errol Leslie Flynn** (June 20, 1909 - October 14, 1959) was an Australian-born American actor. He was known for his romantic swashbuckler roles in Hollywood films and his flamboyant lifestyle. Errol Flynn was born in Hobart, Tasmania, where his father, Theodore Thomson Flynn, was a lecturer (1909) and later professor (1911) of biology at the University of

Tasmania (UTAS). Flynn was born at the Queen Alexandra Hospital in Battery Point. His mother was born Lily Mary Young, but dropped the first names Lily Mary shortly after she was married and changed her name to Marelle. Flynn described his mother's family as "seafaring folk" and this appears to be where his life-long interest in boats and the sea originated. Despite Flynn's claims, the evidence indicates that he was not descended from any of the Bounty mutineers. Married at St John's Church of England, Balmain North, Sydney, on 23 January 1909, both of his parents were native-born Australians of Irish, English and Scottish descent, with convict links to Tasmania long before Flynn's birth. Flynn, living at Mclean Avenue in Chatswood, Sydney in 1926, attended Sydney Church of England Grammar School (Shore School), where he was the classmate of future Australian Prime Minister, John Gorton. He was expelled for fighting and, allegedly, having sex with a school laundress. He was also expelled from several other schools he had attended in Tasmania. At the age of 20 he moved to New Guinea where he bought a tobacco plantation, a business which failed. A copper mining venture in the hills near the Laloki Valley, behind the present national capital, Port Moresby, also failed.

In the early 1930s, Flynn left for the United Kingdom and, in 1933, snagged an acting job with the Northampton repertory company at the town's Royal Theatre, where he worked for seven months. He also performed at the 1934 Malvern Festival and in Glasgow and London's West End.

In 1933, he starred in the Australian film, *In the Wake of the Bounty*, directed by Charles Chauvel, and in 1934 appeared in *Murder at Monte Carlo*, produced at the Warner Bros. Teddington Studios, UK. This latter film is now considered a lost film. During the filming of *Murder at Monte Carlo*, Flynn was discovered by a Warner Brothers executive, signed to a contract and immigrated to America as a contract actor. He became a naturalized citizen of the United States in 1942, eight months after America entered World War II.

In his lifetime, Errol Flynn received no recognition from his peers at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. He never attended a ceremony in his honor and was not nominated. Could it be that his screen persona, the swashbuckler, the rake, stuck to him too well? Yet in his career he defined a male archetype and forever set his mark on movie maleness - in fact, created a constellation of manly virtues that even today is the stuff of dreams. It's time to bring the black sheep home. Long regarded as the prodigal son of Hollywood, with his real-life adventures, scrapes and insubordination, Errol Flynn lived every man's dream of a full life and found himself typecast. As an actor, Flynn built the foundation for characters later elaborated by Mel Gibson, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Harrison Ford and Kevin Costner. Flynn was the granddad of action heroes who came in with talking pictures, ushering in the era of action-adventure movies beloved of film buffs throughout the 20th century. He defined the swashbuckling heroic type invented in that era. While in the early

years of silent pictures, Douglas Fairbanks held sway as the man of filmic dreams. Once the talkies arrived, Flynn was in the forefront of the action heroes' brotherhood. Flynn made movies, did his own stunts, lived his life, thumbed his nose at studio rules, left Jack Warner fuming in his Burbank office suite and went off to sea. Flynn had many interests, including writing and politics, which toward the end of his life in the late 1950s had him filming in Cuba, making him persona non grata in conservative Hollywood. Unfortunately, Flynn did not have a chance to make a comeback late in his career, but died at age 50 of a heart attack. Yet he did have a good run: 53 films - some for Jack Warner and others contracted out to MGM - across from great female players such as Olivia De Havilland, Maureen O'Hara, Bette Davis, Greer Garson and others. (pg.61)

29 Humphrey De Forest Bogart (December 25, 1899 - January 14, 1957) was an American actor. He is widely regarded as a cultural icon. The American Film Institute ranked Bogart as the greatest male star in the history of American cinema. After trying various jobs, Bogart began acting in 1921 and became a regular in Broadway productions in the 1920s and 1930s. When the stock market crash of 1929 reduced the demand for plays, Bogart turned to film. His first great success was as Duke Mantee in *The Petrified Forest* (1936), and this led to a period of typecasting as a gangster with films such as *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938) and B-movies like *The Return of Doctor X* (1939).

His breakthrough as a leading man came in 1941, with *High Sierra* and *The Maltese Falcon*. The next year, his performance in *Casablanca* raised him to the peak of his profession and, at the same time, cemented his trademark film persona, that of the hard-boiled cynic who ultimately shows his noble side. Other successes followed, including *To Have and Have Not* (1944); *The Big Sleep* (1946); *Dark Passage* (1947) and *Key Largo* (1948), with his wife Lauren Bacall; *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948); *In a Lonely Place* (1950); *The African Queen* (1951), for which he won his only Academy Award; *Sabrina* (1954); and *The Caine Mutiny* (1954). His last movie was *The Harder They Fall* (1956). During a film career of almost thirty years, he appeared in 75 feature films. (pg.61)

30 **Fantômas** is a 1964 French film starring Jean Marais as the arch villain with the same name opposite Louis de Funès as the earnest but outclassed commissaire Paul Juve. In the film Juve teams up with journalist Fandor, also played by Marais, trying to catch Fantômas but never quite succeeding. It was France's answer, in 1964, to the James Bond phenomenon that swept the world at around the same time. It is the first ever of a trilogy film, and Fantômas became extremely successful in Europe, the Soviet Union and Japan. It even found success in the United States, where fan websites exist to this day. Mylène Demongeot plays Hélène. Hélène Gurn is the girlfriend of Jérôme Fandor, Fantômas' arch enemy. The general tone of the films is more light-hearted than the original Fantômas novels. Commissaire

Juve, as played by Louis de Funès, becomes a comedic character, much different from his literary counterpart. Fantômas is a man of many disguises. He uses maquillage as a weapon. He can impersonate anyone using an array of masks and can create endless confusion by constantly changing his appearance. In the first episode of the series he is unhappy with Fandor because of a fictitious interview the journalist wrote about him. He takes his revenge by abducting Fandor and threatening to kill him. He then uses his formidable makeup skills to commit a spectacular crime while disguised as Fandor. When commissaire Juve joins the chase, chameleon-like Fantômas promptly commits a crime wearing a mask looking like Juve. In the end Fandor, Juve and Fandor's girlfriend Hélène are all on the master criminal's trail, all to no avail as the man of a thousand masks finally manages to escape. (pg.61)

31 **Laurel and Hardy** were one of the most popular and critically acclaimed comedy double acts of the early Classical Hollywood era of American cinema. Composed of thin Englishman Stan Laurel (1890-1965) and heavy American Oliver Hardy (1892-1957), they became well known during the late 1920s to the mid-1940s for their slapstick comedy, with Laurel playing the clumsy and childlike friend of the pompous Hardy. They made over 100 films together, initially two-reelers (short films) before expanding into feature length films in the 1930s. Their films include Sons of the Desert (1933), the Academy Award-winning short film The

Music Box (1932), Babes in Toyland (1934), and Way Out West (1937). Hardy's catchphrase "Well, here's another nice mess you've gotten me into!" is still widely recognized. Prior to the double act, both were established actors with Laurel appearing in over 50 films and Hardy in over 250 himself. Although the two comedians first worked together on the film The Lucky Dog (1921), this was a chance pairing and it was not until 1926, when both separately signed contracts with the Hal Roach film studio, that they began appearing in movie shorts together. Laurel and Hardy officially became a team the following year in the silent short film Putting Pants on Philip (1927). The pair remained with the Roach studio until 1940, then appeared in eight "B" comedies for 20th Century Fox and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer from 1941 to 1945. After finishing their movie commitments at the end of 1944, they concentrated on stage shows, embarking on a music hall tour of England, Ireland, and Scotland. In 1950 they made their last film, a French/Italian co-production called Atoll K, before retiring from the screen. In total they appeared together in 107 films. They starred in 40 short sound films, 32 short silent films and 23 full-length feature films, and made 12 guest or cameo appearances, including the recently discovered Galaxy of Stars promotional film (1936). A common comedy routine was a tit-for-tat fight. Their silent film Big Business (1929), which includes one of these routines, was added to the Library of Congress as a national treasure in 1992. Notable Laurel traits included crying

like a baby while being berated and scratching his hair when in shock. On December 1, 1954, the team made their only American television appearance, surprised by Ralph Edwards on his live NBC-TV program, *This Is Your Life*.

The works of Laurel and Hardy have been re-released in numerous theatrical reissues, television revivals, 16mm and 8mm home movies, feature-film compilations, and home video since the 1930s. They were voted the seventh greatest comedy act in a 2005 UK poll by fellow comedians. The duo's signature tune, known variously as "The Cuckoo Song," "Ku-Ku," or "The Dance of the Cuckoos," played on the opening credits of their films. The official Laurel and Hardy appreciation society is known as The Sons of the Desert, after a fraternal society in their film of the same name. (pg.85)

32 **Lada** is a trademark of AvtoVAZ, a Russian car manufacturer in Tolyatti, Samara Oblast. All AvtoVAZ vehicles are currently sold under the Lada brand, though this was not always so; Lada was originally AvtoVAZ's export brand for models it sold under the Zhiguli name in the domestic Soviet market since 1970.

Lada cars became extremely popular in Russia and Eastern Europe during the last two decades of the Soviet era, particularly in former Soviet bloc countries, where they have become a symbol of city life.

The name "Lada" meant "boat" in Old Russian. The Lada badge also depicts a Viking sailing boat. Lada made its name in Western Europe selling the Fiat 124-

based VAZ-2101 and its many derivatives as an economy car in large quantities during the 1980s, but later models were less successful.

The common Lada sedan/estate, sometimes known as the Classic in the west (Signet in Canada), was partly based on the 1966 Fiat 124 sedan, and became a successful export car. The keys to its success were: competitive price as an export, reliability, simple DIY-friendly mechanics and unpretentious functionality. Being exported worldwide in the 1980s and 1990s, the Lada was a big earner of foreign hard currency for the hard-pressed Soviet Union, and was also used in barter arrangements in some countries. Over 60% of Lada production was exported, mainly to western countries (the U.S. was the only large market not to have imported Ladas). The rugged design of the Lada Classic, built with heavier-gauge steel bodywork to cope with extreme Siberian climates, poor roads, and few service facilities in many parts of Russia, made high usage, such as 300,000 miles (480,000 km) possible under less extreme operating conditions. Because of their very competitive pricing and ease of service, Ladas became common as police cars, taxis, and a range of public service and civil defense vehicles in many parts of Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean.

In March 2008 Renault purchased a 25% stake in AvtoVAZ in a US\$1 billion deal. This is expected to result in new Lada models being manufactured on existing Russian assembly lines and increased output. The remaining 75% of AutoVAZ continues to be owned by the Russian

state-owned Rostekhnologia Corporation. Lada is now part of the Renault-Nissan-Lada group, which is the world's third-largest automotive group (after General Motors and Toyota). In spite of a flood of western models into the Russian market in recent years, Lada has managed to maintain its dominant market share. In Cuba, Ladas were very popular cars owned and driven only by Government officials, the police, some doctors, famous entertainers and athletes. (pg.85)

33 Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (April 10, 1870 - January 21, 1924) was a Russian Marxist revolutionary and communist politician who led the October Revolution of 1917. As leader of the Bolsheviks, he headed the Soviet state during its initial years (1917-1924) as it fought to establish control of Russia in the Russian Civil War and worked to create a socialist economic system. As a politician, Lenin was a persuasive orator; as a political scientist, his extensive theoretic and philosophical developments of Marxism produced Marxism-Leninism, the pragmatic Russian application of Marxism.

Lenin was born Vladimir Ulyanov in the town of Simbirsk in the Russian Empire. Simbirsk, a rural town on the River Volga nearly 1,500 miles from the capital Saint Petersburg, would be renamed upon Ulyanov's death 54 years later as "Ulyanovsk" in his honor. That same year, Saint Petersburg itself would be renamed Leningrad after Ulyanov's better-known cadre name.

Lenin was born into a comfortable middleclass family. Lenin's father, Ilya, was elevated into the Russian nobility

for his work in the government bureaucracy, and, after being appointed director of Simbirsk's primary schools in 1874, was entitled to wear a blue gold-embroidered uniform and be addressed as "Your Excellency." Although later Soviet biographies tried to disguise his background, Lenin himself never made any effort to hide the fact that he was a nobleman by birth. Lenin argued explicitly in one of his most famous works, *What Is To Be Done?* that intellectuals from "bourgeois" backgrounds have a vital revolutionary role to play, bringing political ideas to the working-class movement. Wrote Lenin: "By their social status the founders of modern scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, themselves belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia."

Athletically, Lenin was a good swimmer and ice skater, and later attended the Simbirsk Men's Gymnasium, which was headed by the father of Alexander Kerensky, and graduated in 1887 with a gold medal. Being of the intelligentsia, the Ulyanovs educated their children (all of them with the exception of one) to become revolutionaries against the ills of their time (violations of human rights, servile psychology, etc.), and instilled a readiness in them to struggle for higher ideals, a free society, and equal rights.

Lenin in particular was impressed by his father's descriptions of the "darkness" of life in the villages and of the arbitrary treatment of peasants by officials. Lenin, an intelligent and conscientious student who loved playing chess, also became a voracious reader,

enjoying the writings of Alexander Pushkin, Ivan Turgenev, Leo Tolstoy, and Nikolay Nekrasov. (pg.97)

34 The October Revolution, also known as the Great October Socialist Revolution, Red October, the October Uprising or the Bolshevik Revolution, was a political revolution and a part of the Russian Revolution of 1917. It took place with an armed insurrection in Petrograd traditionally dated 25 October 1917, Old Style Julian calendar (O.S.), which corresponds with 7 November 1917, New Style (N.S.) Gregorian calendar. It followed and capitalized on the February Revolution of the same year. The October Revolution in Petrograd overthrew the Russian Provisional Government and gave the power to the local soviets dominated by Bolsheviks. As the revolution was not universally recognized outside of Petrograd, there followed the struggles of the Russian Civil War (1917-1922) and the creation of the Soviet Union in 1922.

The revolution was led by the Bolsheviks, who used their influence in the Petrograd Soviet to organize the armed forces. Bolshevik Red Guard forces under the Military Revolutionary Committee began the takeover of government buildings on 24 October 1917 (O.S.). The following day, the Winter Palace (the seat of the Provisional government located in Petrograd, then capital of Russia), was captured. (pg.97)

35 The Harlem Globetrotters are an exhibition basketball team that combines athleticism, theater and comedy. The

executive offices for the team are currently in downtown Phoenix, Arizona; the team is owned by Shamrock Holdings, which oversees the various investments of the Roy E. Disney family.

Over the years they have played more than 20,000 exhibition games in 118 countries. Brother Bones's whistled version of "Sweet Georgia Brown" is the team's signature song. "Globie" has been their mascot since 1993.

The Globetrotters have gradually worked comic routines into their act until they have become known more for entertainment than sports. The Globetrotters' acts often feature incredible coordination and skillful handling of one or more basketballs, such as passing or juggling balls between players, balancing or spinning balls on their fingertips, and making unusual, difficult shots.

Among the players who have been Globetrotters are NBA greats Wilt "The Stilt" Chamberlain, Connie "The Hawk" Hawkins, Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton, as well as Marques Haynes, Meadowlark Lemon, Jerome James, Reece "Goose" Tatum and Hubert "Geese" Ausbie. Another popular team member in the 1970s and 1980s was Fred "Curly" Neal, who was the best dribbler of that era of the team's history and was immediately recognizable due to his shaven head. Baseball Hall of Fame members Bob Gibson and Ferguson Jenkins also played for the team at one time or another. In 1985, the Globetrotters signed their first female player, Olympic gold medalist Lynette Woodard, and their second, Joyce Walker,

just three weeks later. Because almost all of its players have been African-American, and because of the buffoonery involved in many of the Globetrotters' skits, they drew some criticism in the Civil Rights era. The players were derisively accused of "Tomming," a reference to Uncle Tom. However, prominent civil rights activist Jesse Jackson (who would later be named an Honorary Globetrotter) came to their defense by stating, "I think they've been a positive influence... They did not show blacks as stupid. On the contrary, they were shown as superior." In 1995, Orlando Antigua became the first Hispanic and the first non-black on the Globetrotters' roster since Bob Karstens played with the squad in 1942-43. (pg.121)

36 **La Bodeguita del Medio** is a typical Cuban restaurant and bar located at 207 Empedrado Street, Old Havana, Cuba. It is a popular place for tourists and has become very famous because of all the different personalities who have frequented it: Personalities such as Salvador Allende, the poet Pablo Neruda, Ernest Hemingway, the artist José Ignacio and many others. La Bodeguita is also known as the birthplace of the -mojito, a traditional Cuban drink prepared at the bar since its opening in 1942. The place is full of curios, paintings and photographs, and the walls are covered with the signatures of famous or unknown customers that chronicle the island's past.

Along with local food, cigars, traditional Cuban music and mojitos, the Bodeguita del Medio provides an overview

of the typical atmosphere of Cuba.
(pg.121)

37 **Oshun**, or Ochun in the Yoruba religion, is an Orisha who reigns over love, intimacy, beauty, wealth and diplomacy. She is worshipped also in Brazilian Candomblé Ketu, with the name spelled Oxum. She should not be confused, however, with a different Orisha of a similar name, spelled "Osun," who is the protector of the Ori, or our heads and inner souls. Ochun relates mostly to women but also men. Oshun is beneficent, generous and very kind. She does, however, have a horrific temper, one which she seldom ever loses. When she does, it causes untold destruction. Oshun is said to have gone to a drum festival one day and to have fallen in love with the king-dancer Shango, Undergod of lightning and thunder. Since that day, Shango has been married to Oba, Oya, and Oshun, though Oshun is said to be considered his main wife.

In Cuban Santería, Oshun (sometimes spelled Ochún or Ochun) is an Orisha of love, maternity and marriage. She has been syncretized with Our Lady of Charity (La Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre), Cuba's patroness. She is associated with the color yellow, metal brass, peacock feathers, mirrors, honey, and anything of beauty; her principal day of the week is Saturday, and the number she is associated with is 5. She is the river goddess. In one of the stories featuring her, she is forced to become a prostitute to feed her children and the other Orishas subsequently removed her

children from her home while she was away, apparently planning to use them as slaves. Oshun is then said to have gone mad with grief and to have worn the same white dress every day as a symbol of this madness; it eventually turned yellow. Ajé-Shaluga, another river Orisha, fell in love with her while she was washing the dress in a frenzied state one day. He gave her money and gems, which he collected from the bottom of the river he lived in. She used these items to liberate her children, and ultimately married her kindly benefactor.

Oshun had many husbands. Different tales attribute husbands to her, including Erinle, Oshosi, Orisha Oko, and Aje'-Shaluga. She was also the sexual partner of Shango and Ogun at different points. Her children include the Ibeji twins, Idowu and Logun Ede. (pg.131)

38 **Yemanjá** is an orisha, originally of the Yoruba religion, who has become prominent in many Afro-American religions. Africans from what is now called Yorubaland brought Yemaya/Yemoja and a host of other deities/energy forces in nature with them when they were brought to the shores of the Americas as captives. She is the ocean, the essence of motherhood, and a protector of children.

In Yorùbá mythology, Yemoja is a mother goddess; patron deity of women, especially pregnant women; and the Ogun river. Her parents are Oduduwa and Obatala. There are many stories as to how she became the mother of all saints. She was married to Aganju and had one son, Orungan, and fifteen Orishas came forth from her. They include Ogun, Olokun, Shopona and Shango.

Other stories would say that Yemaya was always there in the beginning and all life came from her, including all of the orishas. Her name is a contraction of the Yoruba words "Yeye emo eja" that mean "Mother whose children are like fish." This represents the vastness of her motherhood, her fecundity and her reign over all living things.

Yemaya is celebrated in Ifá tradition as Yemoja. As Iemanjá Nana Borocum, or Nana Burku, she is pictured as a very old woman, dressed in black and mauve, connected to mud, swamps and earth. Nana Buluku is an ancient god in Dahomey mythology. In Santería, Yemayá is seen as the mother of all living things as well as the owner of all waters. Her number is 7 (a tie into the seven seas); her colors are blue and white (representing water); and her favorite offerings include melons, molasses (-melao" is a sugarcane syrup), whole fried fishes and pork rinds. In Cuba, She has been syncretized with Our Lady of Regla. (pg.131)

39 Floridita or El Floridita is a historic seafood restaurant and cocktail bar in the older part of Havana (La Habana Vieja), Cuba. It lies at the end of Calle Obispo (Bishop Street), across Monserrate Street from The National Museum of Fine Arts of Havana (Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de La Habana). The establishment is famous for its daiquiris and for having been one of the favorite hangouts of Ernest Hemingway in Havana. -My mojito in La Bodeguita, my daiquiri in El Floridita,|| Ernest Hemingway used to say.

It opened in 1817 with the name "La Piña de Plata" (The Silver Pineapple) in the place it still occupies, in the corner of Obispo and Monserrate streets. Almost 100 years later, the large number of North American tourists persuaded the owner to change the name to "El Florida," but with time it became popularly known as "El Floridita." The place still preserves much of the atmosphere of the 1940s and 1950s, with the red coats of the bartenders matching the Regency style decoration that dates from the 1950s, although now most of its customers are occasional tourists. Besides the cocktails, the place is reputed for the expensive sea food. (pg.135)

40 **Moby Dick** or the Whale is a novel written by American author Herman Melville and was first published in 1851. It is considered to be one of the Great American Novels and a treasure of world literature. The story tells the adventures of a wandering sailor, Ishmael, and his voyage on the whale ship Pequod, commanded by Captain Ahab. Ishmael soon learns that Ahab has one purpose on this voyage: to seek out a specific whale, Moby Dick, a ferocious, enigmatic white sperm whale. In a previous encounter, the whale destroyed Ahab's boat and bit off his leg, which now drives Ahab to take revenge.

In Moby Dick, Melville employs stylized language, symbolism, and metaphor to explore numerous complex themes. Through the main character's journey, the concepts of class and social status, good and evil, and the existence of God are all examined, as Ishmael speculates upon

his personal beliefs and his place in the universe. The narrator's reflections, along with his descriptions of a sailor's life aboard a whaling ship, are woven into the narrative along with Shakespearean literary devices, such as stage directions, extended soliloquies, and asides. The book portrays destructive obsession and monomania, as well as the assumption of anthropomorphism--projecting human instincts, characteristics and motivations onto animals. Moby Dick is ruthless in attacking the sailors who attempt to hunt and kill him, but it is Ahab who invests Moby Dick's natural instincts with malignant and evil intentions. In fact, it is not the whale but the crippled Ahab who alone possesses this characteristic. Moby Dick has been classified as American Romanticism. It was first published by Richard Bentley in London on October 18, 1851, in an expurgated three-volume edition titled *The Whale*, and weeks later as a single volume, by New York City publisher Harper and Brothers, as *Moby Dick or The Whale*, on November 14, 1851. The book initially received mixed reviews, but Moby Dick is now considered part of the Western canon, and at the center of the canon of American novels. (pg.153)

41 **Jaws** is a 1975 American thriller film, directed by Steven Spielberg and based on Peter Benchley's novel of the same name. It is regarded as a watershed film in motion picture history, the father of the summer blockbuster. In the story, the police chief of Amity Island, a fictional summer resort town, tries to protect

beachgoers from a giant man-eating great white shark by closing the beach, only to be overruled by the town council, which wants the beach to remain open to draw revenue from tourists during the summer season. After several attacks, the police chief enlists the help of a marine biologist and a professional shark hunter. Roy Scheider stars as police chief Martin Brody, Richard Dreyfuss as oceanographer Matt Hooper, Robert Shaw as shark hunter Quint, Murray Hamilton as the mayor of Amity Island, and Lorraine Gary as Brody's wife, Ellen. The screenplay is credited to both Benchley, who delivered the first draft, and actor-writer Carl Gottlieb, who rewrote the script during principal photography.

The film was shot on location on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, and had a troubled production, going over budget and past schedule. As the art department's mechanical sharks suffered many malfunctions, Spielberg decided to mostly suggest the animal's presence, using representative props and an ominous minimalist theme created by composer John Williams to indicate the shark's impending appearances. Responding to the film's success in advance screenings, Universal Pictures executives decided to distribute it in a much wider release pattern than originally envisioned, accompanied by an extensive marketing campaign with a heavy emphasis on television spots and tie-in merchandise. Jaws was generally well reviewed upon its release, and became the highest-grossing film in history to that point. It won many awards, mostly for the soundtrack,

and is widely regarded as one of the greatest films of all time. (pg.153)

42 **At what time was Lola killed?** is a very old Cuban question/phrase. According to the legend, Lola was a prostitute who was killed by one of her lovers who was deeply in love with her. She was stabbed with a knife in her chest and died at 3 p.m. The phrase became popular when former Cuban President Ramon Grau San Martin was making a speech, looked at his watch, and said:

-It is already three o'clock - the time when Lola was killed.|| There is even a very popular Cuban song about the story. So this is a question that, if you are Cuban, you are supposed to know the answer to when someone asks you. (pg.174)

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