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Life in **CUBA**

WHAT DO YOU THINK of when you hear the word “Cuba”? Do you think of Fidel Castro? Or, if you are old enough, the Bay of Pigs or the Cuban Missile Crisis? My children might remember the little boy, Elián González, who lost his mother while fleeing Cuba and became a national icon as government leaders debated where he should live. I can relate to that little boy. I love my Cuban family and my homeland, but I cannot forget the suffering that still exists there today.

In 1956, the year I was born, Cuba was a popular place for a weekend getaway. From Key West, Florida, to Havana was a ninety-mile trip across the Straits of Florida. Wealthy people put their cars on a ferry, rode over for a weekend of

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always the paternal name from each parent. Manolo and Rafaela had three children, Rafael Mill Hernandez, Nora Mill Hernandez, and my father, Manolo Mill Hernandez.

My dad, *mi viejo* as I called him, worked extraordinarily hard. He looked just like me. I guess I should say that I look like him. He was a very active man, driven to provide for his family. Even as a young boy, he helped my grandfather with the cigar business by making most of the deliveries. Cigars in hand, walking wherever they had to be delivered, there went little seven-year-old Manolo Mill. After about the sixth grade, he quit school, and he worked from that time on. The desire to work was instilled in him, and he transferred it to me. Later, perhaps by age eighteen or twenty, Manolo followed in his brother Rafael's footsteps and became a butcher.

I affectionately address Uncle Rafael as *Tío Tato*. The Spanish word for uncle is *tío*, and the word *tato* is a word of endearment that I only use for him, like Dearest Uncle. Tío Tato lived in Cuba and worked as a butcher in his hometown, Lawton. He is retired now because of blindness and still lives in Lawton.

His sister, my aunt Nora, Tía Nora, is a medical doctor, a gynecologist. She was married to another doctor, Dr. José Fernandez Echazabal, who was my Tío Pepé. Pepé is the nickname for José. In Cuba, when a woman marries, she

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his legs, requiring emergency surgery. In spite of his renowned reputation, no penicillin was available for him. All the money in the world couldn't buy what they didn't have, and Tío Pepé died of infection.

Because professional people were not allowed to leave Cuba, after her divorce Tía Nora arranged a marriage with a Cuban political prisoner who spent more than twenty years in prison. He was released as part of a deal the U.S. made with Cuba in the 1980s. Since he was allowed to leave and she was married to him, she and my two cousins got out of Cuba and went to Miami. I don't know how much Tía Nora loved him then, but they remained married.

MY PARENTS

As a butcher in Cuba, my dad sold mostly beef. He did not slaughter animals himself. He received them whole, and then he had to cut the pieces. La Carnicería, the meat store, was about twenty minutes from our house, in another suburb called La Víbora. The store was in a busy location, right next to a bus terminal, Paradero de la Víbora, in Havana, and not too far from the Clínica Lourdes where I was born. There was also a university right behind the *clínica*, so this tiny little store saw a lot of action selling just meat.

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retary for General Motors, but after they married, Dad didn't want her to work any longer. Because Mom liked to work, she thought of a way to do it at home in her living room. She started doing manicures and washing hair, just small stuff until her business grew. Then Dad built her a big beauty salon in front of their home on La Calle Rabí. In those days, men allowing their women to work outside the home was not common, but Dad recognized Mom's uncommon talent. She also worked for Channel Four Television, styling hair for Cuban entertainers and movie stars from the U.S.

A CUBAN CHILDHOOD

My parents were great financial providers. Since both were consumed by their work, I was raised by a *tata*, a nanny, who took good care of me. I remember going to the park, Parque Santo Suárez, named after the suburb of Havana where we lived. It was just a few blocks from my house, so my *tata* and I went every day and played.

All available relatives and other kids from the neighborhood enjoyed my traditional Cuban birthday parties, especially *la piñata*. Outings with my parents were most often to the shore, the beaches of Havana. My parents were members of a bank club called Santa María del Mar—St. Mary of the Sea—which had a very beautiful and

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When I was four years old, my sister, Normita Mill Martinez, was born. Besides the four of us, my mom's brother, René Martinez Ochoa, was the other close member of our family. My parents cared for Tío René all of his life.

My mom told me that I was a very orderly little boy. My toys were always all lined up and my room was very clean. She said I was so careful that when I finished playing, I put my toys back in their boxes just how they came. She said I was polite, never sassy to her, and never a loudmouth. I guess "loud" is a matter of perception!

My dad was a good man and I know he loved me. He was not a Christian believer yet, so of course, when I say he was good, I mean relatively moral, because he was a sinner. He was a law-abiding, decent man, providing for his family, but a sinner just the same. He had a genuine desire to provide for us the best he could, but he could not impart anything of eternal value, since he did not know Jesus during the years I lived with him. He did not even believe in God.

I don't really remember having a one-on-one talk with my dad about anything. He just basically allowed me to see the way he lived and I caught what I could from that. Without the fear of God, I was not able to get a strong sense of right and wrong.



RELIGIOUS TRAINING IN CUBA

I attended a Roman Catholic school, La Escuela de Las Pias, until Castro took over everything, and then I attended “Castro school” where they indoctrinated us in the Communist system. Although God was not a part of that system, *santería* (witchcraft) was. Castro himself was very involved in witchcraft, as were many Cubans, including my own mom, who practiced *espiritismo*, spiritism, and became a medium.

Most Cubans prayed to statues of the Roman Catholic saints as a part of witchcraft practices, offering apples, coconuts, and even cigars to gain their favor. The requests were usually self-serving, either for personal gain or harm to an enemy. The Roman Catholic Church leaders misled the Cuban people because they condoned these practices and did not speak out against them as they should have. Church leaders emphasized attendance on Easter and Christmas, but the rest of the year it seemed OK to do whatever one wanted. Cubans had difficulty understanding the need to come to Christ, because they thought they already knew God. Their ungodly religious practices clouded the truth of the gospel.

La Escuela de Las Pias had kindergarten through eighth grade, and it was run by nuns. Their clothing fascinated me. Yards of fabric

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flowed all the way down to their feet. I was so intrigued with what was under there that my curiosity drove me to do a terrible thing. From behind one nun, I went under her dress, touching her legs to see some skin. I wanted to see her thighs. I guess that was the start of my womanizing lifestyle to come. My first attraction to a female and she was a nun! She took me to the principal's office and had my mom come to school and rescue me. I think my inner sense of morality went downhill from that day on.

Generally speaking, teachers told my mom that I was a good student and everything was fine. I was very organized like my dad. He was rigorous about order and doing all things well. He was also very concerned about my manhood, so he emphasized my participation in sports. Dad used to get upset when I played with my sister and her "girly" toys. My parents hoped to have children right away, but God didn't send me until eight years after they were married. Having waited so long for a son only put more emphasis on my need to be a man!

At age ten or eleven, Cuban students had to do "volunteer" work. So the government sent my whole class to the fields, supervised by schoolteachers. We went for two months away from home, to do anything that we could—pick tomatoes, pick bananas, help in the field, whatever. We had to give that time to Castro's government

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judo and either fourth or fifth dan (degree). That meant he was really up there, a top guy in his weight. He was in a league all by himself, and he was my judo professor for about eight years.

He was tough with us, but very practical. He would tell us, “If you are going to fight in the street, you won’t have a mattress.” Many days at judo practice he made us break our fall on the concrete floor, just to get used to it. Of course, at first we were aching in pain. It was not the same as breaking our fall on a mat, which was pretty comfortable. Nevertheless, we did get used to it. Some nights we had no mat and no light, because of *el pico eléctrico*, certain times when the government cut the electricity to save energy. El Loco Valdés had us practice with a flashlight. And when we didn’t have a flashlight, we practiced with a match. Can you imagine that? With a match. He was a tough guy, but he really taught us a lot of good stuff about discipline, keeping our word, and being on time. He was no-nonsense about the time. We had to be on time, all the time.

When I was a yellow belt, not too many years into judo, I was at a competition and got thrown. I landed very wrong, on my stomach, and it knocked the wind out of me. I couldn’t breathe at all, and there was El Loco Valdés by the sideline telling me, “Get up! Get up! Go back to the mat.” He had no mercy. Talk about pushing somebody

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All the schools competed against the one elite school called ESPAD where the best of the best of the kids in any sport attended. Whether it was ping-pong, volleyball, baseball, basketball, or fencing, kids in all the schools competed and hoped to beat the kids from ESPAD. Winning meant an automatic scholarship to go into ESPAD, and I used to beat those kids in ping-pong. But I was a marked man, a *gusano*. A person who wanted to leave Cuba was called a *gusano*, like a worm. Being a worm was something like being considered a traitor. Because of that, I was excluded from getting a scholarship.

Sports taught me a lot about discipline, and the demand to compete in Cuba taught me how to approach competition. No halfheartedness was in me at all. This drive that swelled inside me as a young teenager would serve me well in the challenging days ahead.

Living in Cuba was difficult after Castro came into power. My family had been accustomed to a very comfortable lifestyle, and then everything changed. Things had to be done in secret. No one, including my dad, could be open anymore about anything. Castro and his government commandeered everything without any compensation in return, including my dad's meat store and my mom's beauty salon. That's when my dad could no longer ignore the pleas of my mom to leave Cuba.