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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

drinking, gambling, and carousing, and then rode back. Most tourists were not interested in the Cubans east of Havana, living in straw huts with no running water or electricity. Illiteracy was high, and about 25 percent of the country's adult males were unemployed. Fulgencio Batista was the dictator then, and he was involved in a lot of corruption. A familiar story, yes? The need for change was obvious, so many people were glad when Fidel Castro came down from his rebel headquarters in the mountains on January 1, 1959. At age thirty-three, he had defeated Batista. A white dove on his shoulder, a Cuban cigar in his mouth, a long beard on his face, and the strength of his resolve gave the impression that he was a type of savior for the Cuban people. I was three years old.

MY FAMILY

My grandparents, Manolo Mill Hernandez and Rafaela Hernandez Hernandez de Mill, moved from a little town called Sagua La Grande, in the Cuban province of Las Villas, in 1927, when my father was about two. They settled in a suburb of Havana called Santos Súarez, which was also where I was born, and they owned a little cigar factory in the back of their house. Cuban children are given two last names, their father's and their mother's, and it is 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-yearold 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 *Tio Tato*. The Spanish word for uncle is *tio*, and the word *tato* is a word of endearment that I only use for him, like Dearest Uncle. Tio 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

does not take the name of her husband. Instead, she adds it onto the end, like she "belongs to" her husband, so Tía Nora's full name was Nora Mill Hernandez de Echazabal. Tía Nora and Tío Pepé had two daughters, Silvita, who became a

dentist, and Norita, who became a psychologist. Tío Pepé was the head of Hospital Aballí, a hospital for children in Havana. He was a wellknown pediatrician and allergist in Cuba, a brilliant man who had been schooled in New York. He was a very important person in my life, like a daddy to me. We spent a lot of time together fishing or at beach clubs. I never sat above water and fished with a fishing pole. We fished by snorkeling or scuba diving and using harpoons and knives. My parents included me in their leisure activities, but Tío Pepé was the one who took me all kinds of places. Because he had a lot of clout, we were able to go to spots that were normally just for foreigners, like Club Americano, where we played racquetball together. We swam in luxurious pools and ate in the best restaurants all over the island, even under Communist rule. He had a 1960 Chevy Impala in mint condition. We spent great times together in that car.

Tía Nora eventually divorced him, because he was a womanizer, and his example strongly influenced my own behavior when I grew up. One day a bus struck Tío Pepé and badly injured 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 Carniceria, 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 Clinica Lourdes where I was born. There was also a university right behind the *clinica*, so this tiny little store saw a lot of action selling just meat.

My mother, Norma Martinez Ochoa, first met my father at a party given to celebrate the end of a school year. They were at El Centro Dependiente, kind of like a banquet hall. My mom, *mi vieja*, was fifteen or sixteen years old at that time. They hit it off really well. Dad said he wanted to continue seeing her, but Mom was shy about it. This would be her first relationship with a young man, and she thought that giving him her address was inappropriate. In those days, women were very discreet in the way they approached relationships. Mom lived with her aunt, so while she and her aunt were walking home, Dad followed them in order to find out where she lived.

A trolley line passed right by Mom's house, and Dad told her that he was going to ride by. So she sat on the balcony and watched as he passed by on the trolley, waving to her. She knew that he liked her, and when he asked for her phone number, she allowed him to call. Then he asked if he could visit her. A month after he started visiting her, Dad made up his mind to ask for her hand in marriage. Altogether, it was three years from the time they met until they married on June 19, 1949. He was her only boyfriend, the only man in her life, and they celebrated fifty years together before Dad died and went to be with Jesus.

While they courted, Mom worked as a sec-

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 Súarez, 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

exclusive beach. Extended family got together there on weekends, and sometimes my parents rented a house and stayed there for their vacation. Mom's first cousin, Rolando Ochoa Garcia, owned a beautiful home on another exclusive beach called Boca Ciega. The family got together there sometimes. Cousin Rolando was a comedian and an entertainer, like the Bob Hope of Cuba. He hosted a popular prime-time show on national TV, *El Cabaré de Regalía*. He left Cuba in 1960, shortly after Castro came to power.

My great-grandfather, my mom's grandfather, was a devout Roman Catholic and the only doctor in Regla/Casablanca, two cities in the province of Havana surrounded by water. We had to take a boat, La Lanchita de Regla, to visit his home. He was generous to the people he served. If they had no money to pay, he helped them at no charge. When he came from Spain, he brought a big statue of La Virgen de Regla, the Queen of the Sea. She had a 22-karat-gold-plated robe, and I remember her mostly because she was the saint of September 7, my birthday. My mom superstitiously taught me to stand at the edge of the shore with seven centavos, pennies, in my little hand and throw them into the sea, asking the queen for permission to go swimming and protection from drowning. She was the one to please, because I was born on her day.

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

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 system of Communism. We slept on bunks without a mattress or a pillow, in burlap sackcloth. The food was terrible, the conditions were terrible, and the work was hard. Some people think that with Communism everything was free. That was not true, because we worked for it. The military was involved as well, combined with the school personnel, and they let us know who was in charge. It was a dictatorship; we knew we had better do what they said.

Once a male child reached age fifteen, he was obligated to register for El Servicio Militar Obligatorio, military service, and at age sixteen he enlisted. The government did not allow registered persons to leave Cuba, so as I grew up the window of opportunity was closing on getting out of Cuba. My mom continued to press my dad about leaving, because by the time a young man turned fourteen, if he hadn't already gotten out, he probably would not make it.

SPORTS AND MY WHOLE HEART

Just before we left as refugees when I was fourteen, I was awarded a black belt in judo. I had a great judo professor, El Loco Valdés, and he was crazy like his name. Once he fought a gorilla, just to be able to tell people how good he was. So he was crazy, I mean a gutsy, daring kind of crazy guy. He was the only Cuban black belt in 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 past his limit. He basically turned me into a man, because he had no mercy whatsoever.

I was about six or seven when I started judo. I was small, and I stuttered profusely. A lot of people made fun of me, but after a while, they couldn't make fun of me anymore, at least not without a fight. I was very well-behaved in school, but I would point to a fellow student and say, "I'll see *you* after school!" Then in the street, I would pound on the kid. I got some beatings, too, but I was always fighting.

In the States, I became known as a baseball player, but that was my least favorite sport in Cuba. I learned ping-pong from the Chinese, holding the racket their way, allowing more flexibility and quicker moves. I liked volleyball almost as much as ping-pong, and strove to be good at both. I was not tall, so I wasn't a volleyball spiker, but I was a good set-up man. I was very smooth. I had a good serve from on top or from the bottom and was good with my fingertips. I had the touch.

Sports became a big deal under Castro's rule, and every kid wanted to be in sports. There was great incentive to make the national sports teams, because they traveled outside Cuba. Team members were allowed to buy things in foreign countries that they could never get at home. It was a coveted privilege to bring things back for themselves and their families.

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 ES-PAD, 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.