

THE DAY THE NOTICE CAME

My heart pounded in my throat, pain seared through my skinny, little legs but I kept pedaling as fast as I could until I got to the house where my dad was working across town. We lived on a street lined with mango trees that created a thick, low hanging canopy providing welcomed shade from the hot summer sun. At the end of the street, going towards town, there was a vast boulevard lined with magnificent palm trees on both sides. The palm trees were tall and allowed the sun to shine through them. In my mind, I always see myself riding my bike from darkness into bright light. The sun blinded me for a second but I kept going. I had to get to my dad fast.

I threw my bike down and ran to my dad. He knew what I was holding in my hands before I said a word.

"Llego." he grabbed the notice from my hands and tears filled his dreamy almond shaped brown eyes. He had a melancholy look with an M shape hairline that made him look like Jose Marti, Cuba's most beloved patriot. My father's name was Emilio Oscar Fernandez. To me, Papi, as I always called my dad, was the handsomest man in the world and that day I felt more proud of him than ever before. He was going to save us and take us to a place where everything was better, a magical place. We were going to *'los Estados Unidos'* (the United States). Our exit visa had finally arrived. I will never forget that moment.

"I have to go. My wife needs me at home," he lied. His supervisor probably guessed why my dad needed to leave work in the middle of the day but he knew better than to ask any questions.

My dad picked up my bike and we started walking home in silence. At home, my mom, Aleida Alba, was waiting for us with my little brother and sister. I had many so many questions I wanted to ask. But, I was old enough to know not to ask. In our country, the less you said and the less you knew, the less chances that you could say something at the wrong time or to the wrong people. Any misstep and my dad could end up in jail, or my family could get stuck on the island forever if the exit visa was denied because of something I said. We lived in constant fear. For example, a simple kids' fight could mean big trouble for the parents.

One day my brother Emi and I were walking home from school and some kids started teasing Emi. Emi had a bad temper and he was not afraid of anybody. He fought back even though the other kids were much bigger than him. They couldn't treat my little brother like that. I had to help him out. I started throwing punches, kicking and pulling hair. I was a lioness defending my brother. Some woman broke up the fight and brought us home. I think she expected my mom to react and cause a scene so she could accuse my parents of teaching us anti-revolutionary ideas. My mom did not take the bait. She stayed calm and respectful. She thanked the woman very kindly for bringing us home and took us inside. The woman was disappointed that there was no argument, no anti-revolutionary action to report. Inside things were different. My brother and I got in big trouble that day but I think my mom was proud of me for defending my brother. He and I were a team and nobody was going to mess around with us.

My dad had been working for a while at the construction site where I went to get him. He had never worked in construction and did not know much about the trade but he was a quick learner and eager to do a good job. The men at the construction site would gather around him at lunch to hear him talk. It did not matter what the subject was, my dad could tell a good story. He had traveled to Spain and studied for years to be a priest. He knew his way with words. He was much better with words than with hammers, saws and construction materials. He was not made for construction labor but it was better than working in the farm where he had been sent to work before he got the construction job. As soon as my dad announced his decision to leave the country and applied for an exit visa, he lost his office job. He was an accountant and for him those days at the farm had been horrible because he had never worked in the field. He would come home exhausted, full of ticks and sunburned. After he lost his administrative position with the government, we lived in fear that they would take our home too. It was a government owned house. The administration had given it to us when my dad took the job with the communist regime at one of the offices for land reform. He must have pulled some strings to manage it but we kept our home until the day we left the country.

My dad was like that. He could move mountains to keep his family safe. I had just turned ten and felt very grown up to have been the one to deliver the good news to my dad. I was determined not to be afraid although the idea of leaving my house and my friends was terrifying. I did not even want to think about what

it meant to travel to another country. I had never been anywhere except to visit my grandparents in a nearby town. Years later, I realized how close Cuba was to Miami but at that moment, I was sure that it was a million miles away. I worried about how my mom would react. Would she refuse to leave her mom and her brothers and sisters?

I remembered my mom's mother, Abuela Mimi, and held back the tears at the thought of leaving her. I loved my grandmother on my father's side but Abuela Mimi was special. She was short and when I hugged her, my arms could not circle all of her. I loved to bury my face against her soft stomach. She had round friendly eyes and jet black hair. She always pinned her hair back with two barrettes on each side and wore thick wooly socks that came to her knees. Her house was always full of people who would come for her food or for her prayers. Both could salve the soul and make everything feel better. She would make the best frothy *ponches* (shakes) with milk, egg and cinnamon. Delicious. It was worth getting sick just to go to Abuela Mimi's house so she could nurse you back to health. Her prayers were able to reach us even when we were far away. When I was around her, I felt happy and safe. Many considered her a healer because she knew of so many home remedies and potions to cure all ailments. For me, she represented warmth, love and safety. Would her prayers be powerful enough to reach all the way to the United States?

Growing up I heard the story of how my dad had met and won my mother's heart. It was their own romantic fairy tale and I loved picturing it in my head. I can see my dad getting off a train at the sole train station serving the one street town where my mom and her family lived. He is dressed in a white suit, white hat and even white shoes. He's like an angel coming to see my mom who is waiting for him in the big porch that surrounds my Abuela Mimi's house. She's on tippy toes looking beautiful in a flared skirt, a belt cinching her small waist. The street was not paved and it had been raining. My dad sees my mom from the distance and waves at her. He did not notice a horse drawn wagon coming very close to where he was before it was too late. Poof! He's on the floor and the spell is broken. I remember my mom telling me of the disaster that ensued. The horse got spooked and so did my dad. He fell back into a big mud puddle. He arrived at the house with his suit filthy, the mud beginning to harden. My grandmother quickly found him clothes to wear while she washed, dried and ironed the suit by hand. There were no washers, dryers, or even electricity back then. I imagine my dad

and my mom sitting on two of the four the dark rocking chairs that dominated the living room. Above them, the sepia colored portraits of dead relatives. Perhaps they risked a furtive kiss or the touch of their hands while Abuela Mimi chaperoned. I dreamed that one day, I would find someone just like my dad to love and marry. I had always dreamed it would be someone from the town where we lived so my story would be similar to my mom's. But, what would happen now that we were moving to a whole other country? Would my dream of my mom's love story becoming mine come true? I don't know why but at ten years old, I worried about this. There were so many questions going through my head, I thought my head would explode.

Before we left Cuba, we gave away what we could. We had to make sure that when the government inspectors came to take over the house, nothing of value was missing. If they knew you had something of value, they expected to find it in the house. And, they knew everything everyone had. When they did the final home inspection, if something was missing, you would have to pay an exorbitant price for whatever was missing or worse they could throw you in jail for anti-revolutionary activities. It is hard to imagine how a child would have to worry about such things as being an anti-revolutionary but I did. Every action, every word could be interpreted as being anti-revolutionary and there would be consequences, real or exaggerated but in my mind scary enough to make me very careful and afraid.

We did not have much anyways. We lived in a two-bedroom house where I shared a bedroom with my brother. My little sister slept in a crib besides my mom and dad. The refrigerator at the corner of the living/dining room dominated the house. It held our most valued possessions: steaks, eggs, and milk, all brought into the house in mysterious ways. I knew my friends did not have such luxuries in their refrigerators. I never asked where the food came from but I knew my mom was not getting it through "*la tarjeta*," the government issued food card that allowed each family to buy a meager portion of whatever food came into the store that week. My mom made the line each week to buy our ration but there was always much more in that refrigerator. That was because of my father's mom, my Abuela Amparo.

Abuela Mimi was soft and loving but, my Abuela Amparo was cold and hard as granite. She was all business and you didn't mess with her. She was the one that

always managed to find a way to get us food. My grandfather was a smart businessman but Abuela Amparo, ruled the Fernandez household. She had beautiful, piercing green eyes. If you ever did anything wrong, she did not have to say a word. One look with those eyes would make me shudder. She was the strong, powerful, confident matriarch of her family. She traveled all the time trying to “*resolver*” (take care of things) for the family. She was not very maternal but she was efficient. She took care of my brother Emi, my sister Ampí and me when we were small. She would tie us to a rocking chair so we could not get away and get into trouble. Today that sounds shocking but I know that was how she showed her love. Amparo managed Abuelo Manolo’s money, got her all of her kids through secondary school, and people knew not to mess around with Amparo. The name means mercy and it did not fit her. My mom was a little frightened of Abuela Amparo but she was thankful to have someone looking out for us. She knew she could rely on Abuela Amparo to keep the refrigerator well stocked and take care of all our material needs. I was thankful she would also be traveling to Miami one day and be there to take care of us.

We were not allowed to open the refrigerator while the neighborhood kids were there. Sometimes we were allowed to invite our little friends who lived across the street to stay and eat with us. They lived in a great big two-story house with green pastures surrounding it. The house had belonged to a rich family prior to the revolution. It had been given to our friends’ family by the revolution because they belonged to one of the defense committees, (“*Comité de Defensa*”) that had been put in place by Castro’s regime to keep an eye on what was going on in all the neighborhoods. Their function was to spy on their neighbors and report any suspicious activity. They wielded a lot of power and everyone was afraid of them. They were the reason why home inspectors knew everything that was going on in everyone’s life and everything they had inside their house.

Our little friends’ mom and our mom had worked out an unspoken deal. Revolution or no revolution, they had to feed their kids. On the days our friends came to play, they would stay to eat dinner at our house. The next morning, my brother would be allowed to go to our friends’ house and fill his milk bottle to the rim. They were lucky to have a cow and Emi loved milk. He was strong as a horse and the milk Abuela Amparo would smuggle was never enough to satisfy his appetite. That was fine with me. I did not like milk. That is, until the time when we were staying at a shelter because a hurricane was coming.

The shelter was a big, sprawling two story house but there must have been at least a hundred people there. It was noisy and crowded. There were kids running all over the place, some laughing and some crying. The windows had been shut and it was hot and dark. You could hear the wind howling outside and it was very scary. My mom tried to keep us close to her but my brother kept trying to get away so he could play with the other kids. When the woman in charge, came around with a big pitcher full of milk, the milk looked delicious to me and I decided at that moment that I loved milk. There was no fresh milk so they had prepared the milk using condensed milk and warm water. There were not enough cans of condensed milk to make enough milk to feed all the kids. The milk mixture was supposed to be for the smaller kids. Emi was a toddler and Ampí was an infant so they got their ration of milk. I was too old. "But Meri, you've never liked milk," my poor mother tried to console me but I would not stop crying. She took a little bit from Emi's bottle and gave it to me, which set him off crying. She was exhausted. It was hard enough for her to care for the three of us under normal circumstances. Here at this shelter filled with strangers and three little kids her nerves must have been at their wits end. My father nowhere to be found. He was probably outside talking with the men. He should have been there with us. He should have known better than to leave us alone. At one point, a rumor spread like wildfire through the shelter and all the kids grew quiet. A little boy had gone outside and had drowned when he fell into an open pit. Emi and I were so afraid we stayed close to our mom after we heard that. In the United States, our promised land, there would be plenty of food in the refrigerator, lots of milk for my brother and I, and our father would always be at our side to protect us. That's how it was going to have to be if we were going to make this big trip that would change everything.

Our life in Cuba was probably very similar to most Cuban families living there in the 1960's: a daily struggle for sustenance, constant fear for the future as people saw more and more of their liberties taken away, lingering envy for those that had been lucky to leave, and the never-ending hope of those left behind for the day when their departure would come.

Now, it was our turn to leave. It took us five years to leave the island after my father filled out the paperwork seeking an exit visa. One of my father's brothers had left in 1962. Based on the laws in place at that time, family members already

in the United States could sponsor immediate family members who were still in Cuba. As soon as my uncle had enough money, he filed for travel visas for all of his brothers and sisters as well as my grandfather and grandmother. I did not know exactly what was going to happen but I knew we were going on a wonderful place. A place where they had "*chicles*" (gum) that our uncle would send us in-between the sheets of his letters. He also sent me black shiny shoes "*de charol*" (patent leather) for my Holy Communion and medicine for my cousins who were always sick. We were going to a place where pacifiers would fall on the floor and land right side up so the tit would not get dirty and where there was plenty of food and toys and cousins to play with.

Our last stop before we left was to see my Abuela Mimi in the little one street town where my mother had grown up. The bags with our meager belongings were in the car. We were dressed in our finest clothes. I do not remember anything between the time the exit visa arrived and our last days in Cuba except having to give up my most valued possession, my rag doll Ana. I left her with one of my cousins. I was going to a place where I would have many dolls but still I cried when I gave her up. "Take care of her. I want her back when I come back." I did not know that I would never see Ana nor my cousin again.

"Don't say goodbye. You will be back in no time," someone said and all the well-wishers that had come to say goodbye repeated it. My mom's youngest brother, Eddy, was taking us to Varadero for our flight to the United States. I ran around with my cousins and friends not realizing this would be the last time that we would play together.

I think the only one that knew she would never see us again was Abuela Mimi. She could see things others could not. I can still remember the night my mom's dad, Abuelo Alba, died. He was in the room next to where I was with Abuela Mimi. All of a sudden, she screamed. I got very frightened and she held me and told me not to be scared. She had seen my grandfather's spirit pass in front of the bedroom door and through the living room where the portraits of the old, dead relatives hung. She was pretty shaken up but certain of what she had seen. "*Tu abuela está un poco loca,*" she whispered in my ear. She did not want me to worry, she was just a little crazy, she said. That's all she needed to say and I knew there was nothing to fear. Years later, I do not recall that incident in a frightening

way but just as a vivid recollection that my grandmother saw my grandfather's spirit that night. I am certain of that and I am not afraid.

Abuela Mimi always seemed to know what was going to happen before it did. Once she told me not to hold a butterfly by the wings because it would die and it did. Whenever my mom was not feeling well, she would send my aunts or cousins to help her with us kids and to clean the house even before anyone had told her that my mom needed help. Abuela Mimi had the power to say her prayers and they would travel all across the savannah to the little town where we lived. Her prayers always worked and made us feel better. There were no rivers between the two towns that could carry the prayers in their current. Now there would be a whole ocean between us. How would she be able to protect us?

I worried about our life without Abuela Mimi. My mother was the nervous type and this trip really tested her willpower to remain in control of her emotions. Growing up, I had learned to behave and pray hard so that things would not upset her. When something upset her, she would lose it and someone would have to come and take care of us. I did not know until I was much older that she had suffered a mental breakdown shortly after I was born. I was born July 23, 1957 two years before Castro's revolution. The revolutionaries had been trying to overthrow the Batista government since 1953, and July 26 of 1953 is marked as the beginning of the revolutionary movement. Every year around the 26th of July, the revolutionaries would set bombs and start fires to demonstrate against the Batista government until Castro finally won in 1959.

One day while still recuperating from my birth, my mother heard shouts and saw people running past her window. Someone had set fire to a building nearby. Someone rushed into the house and screamed in horror that my dad was trapped in the fire. It was not true and my father was fine but my mother never recovered. She went into a deep depression and was treated with electroshock therapy. After that, her moods could be extreme. When she was in a manic mood, she would chatter endlessly and would not be able to sleep for days. Our whole world flipped upside down. When she was fine, she was a loving and protective mom, totally in love with my dad and dependent on him. She would believe anything my dad would say so it is not surprising that she agreed to leave her family behind. He was her protector. She owed him her life.

I was at school when it happened but one day my mom had been frying green plantains and the oil in the frying pan caught on fire.

She ran from the kitchen screaming, "Emilio, Emilio."

The flames grew and engulfed her around her stomach as she ran for help. My dad had been outside the house and he heard her screams. He rushed inside, grabbed one of the curtains hanging on the living room front window, and wrapped my mom with it. If it had not been for that, she would have burned to death along with the whole house. They rushed my mom to the hospital and treated her for third degree burns.

When my mom and dad returned home, my little brother Emi immediately asked, "Who's going to cook for us?"

We all laughed and that line became part of the family folklore and helped ease the anxiety we all felt. We had nearly lost our mother. I was only eight or nine but I knew it had been serious. The laughter was my mom's way of reassuring us that everything would be alright. That day, Abuela Mimi once again came to our rescue. She immediately sent people to help my mom while she recuperated from her burns. I remembered those moments and worried about who would help us in this new country we were going to live in.

I recall the last time I saw my Abuela Mimi. She kissed me on my head, held my face in her small, fat hands and told me to be good and to help my mom, "*Pórtate bien y ayuda a tu mama.*" (Be a good girl and take care of your mom). I did not see her cry. She stayed inside her house while everyone gathered around the car and gave us kisses and hugs. There were so many people there. I knew many of them but some I had never seen before. They came to say their good byes and to ask my dad to deliver messages and letters to family members in the United States.

"*Suerte.*" Everyone kept wishing us good luck. After many hugs and kisses, suddenly we were off to the airport in Varadero.

We waited at Varadero Airport for what seemed hours or maybe even days. It was common for people to spend days waiting for their flights, going from one

interminable line to another to complete all the required paperwork. People slept on the floor using their bags as pillows. There were mean, serious looking officials all around. Their frowning eyes staring us down. My parents tried to control us and kept us close so we would not call attention to the family. My mother held Ampí in her arms. My baby sister looked bewildered. Her big, blue eyes taking in all that was around her without understanding. None of us understood what was going on. All Emi and I knew was that we had to behave. We worried they would send us back and my uncle Eddy had already left in his car. My dad was quiet and did not say much. We knew this was serious.

When we walked out to the tarmac and I saw that huge airplane, its main door open, darkness inside, I felt I was going to die. I do not know if from joy or fear but I knew that getting on that airplane would change our lives forever. I remember someone giving us balloons and having to give mine up to a little girl whose balloon had popped. I cried and my mother once again comforted me.

“You are going to have lots of balloons, don’t cry,” she said to me as she drew me closer to her. She then spotted my brother starting to giggle.

“Stop laughing,” she scolded my brother, “You can’t look like you’re too happy to leave.”

And like on cue, my baby sister, Ampí, started singing. What was she so happy about? What did she know? At only four, how could she know this was a momentous occasion? My poor mother. She must have been dying inside but on the outside, she looked composed and in control. She never cried. She trusted my father enough to leave her mother, brothers and sisters behind. She trusted his promise that we would return to Cuba in six months. I have always wondered if she would have boarded that plane if she had known that she would never see any of them again. My mom like so many other Cubans that immigrated to the United States firmly believed that they would only be here for a short while. They believed that Castro’s regime would be overturned and every year professed that the following Christmas we would celebrate in Cuba. For so many, like my mom, that dream never came true.

On the trip to Varadero, my mother had been quiet and thoughtful. Years later, she told us how proud she had been that her brother, Eddy, had volunteered to

drive us there. Whenever someone insinuated that her brothers were Communists because none of them ever left the island, she would quickly remind them that by driving us to Varadero, Eddy had taken a huge personal risk because anyone associated with the "*gusanos*" (worms) that were leaving the Island was chastised and subject to government persecution. She left Cuba thinking she would be back in six months. She never saw her mother, brothers and sisters again. The day was September 12, 1967.

My mother and father made a huge sacrifice to bring my brother, my sister and me to the United States. I don't know what our lives would have been like if we had stayed in Cuba. I don't think I knew then what it meant for them to leave everything behind and be willing to start a new life in a foreign country where they did not know the language nor customs. I can only imagine the shock they experienced. Love gave them the strength to carry on and start all over again.

I had no way of knowing how my life would turn out in this new land full of strangers and new experiences. I was a little girl and could not have known the many twists and turns that my life would take. Coming to the United States was an adventure, a new frontier, a great unknown and a blank page in front of my eyes. I did not know then that nearly eleven years later, I would marry Jose on August 12, 1978 and that on that day the story of our love would began to unfold.