

Freedom that Came with a Price

Elsa McClure

Oh, how I yearn for my home faraway! My family moved to the U.S. when my older sister Maria was nine years old, my brother Pedro was five years old, and I was seven. We missed out on the love and care grandparents give their grandchildren. We don't know what it is like to have an aunt spoil her niece or nephew. I always wondered how much fun it would have been to go shopping or have lunch with one of my aunts. So many weddings were missed, so many cousins unseen. How wonderful it would have been to play and run with our younger cousins in our backyard in Cuba! We didn't get to spend time under the Cuban sun. We were not able to enjoy the warm and sandy beaches that strangers get to enjoy. Those are events that my family and so many other Cubans didn't share in, but someday hope to experience.

Our lives changed because of one man—Fidel Castro, communist revolutionary and dictator of Cuba. He was born on the Las Manacas sugar plantation, a 26,000-acre estate. Growing up as a wealthy plantation owner's son, he noticed the differences between the haves and the have nots. He wore shoes to school, for example, while most of the other students went barefoot. Castro's father was a rough and deceitful man from the impoverished north of Spain. Castro was a perversely captivating combination of seductiveness and violence (Baumohl 58).

As a boy, he tried to burn down his parents' house and burn his father's car, and he regularly hung over a canyon on the railings of the railroad while trains thundered by. Above all, he was always the perfect Macho, naturally mastering every technique of political, physical and, above all, psychological control over not only the Cuban people, but elitists across the world (Baumohl 59).

Castro marched into Havana in January of 1959, and almost immediately began his unique system of revolutionary replacement. First, he moved out the upper classes, then the middle classes, through a tactical combination of seizing their lands and privileges, and simply terrorizing them. Throughout his whole life, he has simply gotten rid of any competitors to power, either by sending them to places where they would surely die, or by executing them. While all the other charismatic dictators have fallen or died after infinitely fewer years in power, he remains solidly ensconced in his palace in Havana. Foreign visitors who see him describe him as a little like Howard Hughes, with long nails and a thin beard. Others call him a "quirky grandpa" or classic "sick leader."

Castro, in one of his speeches, gave the Cuban people permission to leave Cuba if they wanted. He didn't realize that so many people would take those words to heart and act on them immediately, before he had the chance to change his mind. In 1962, I was only a few months old when my dad requested to leave Cuba, and he submitted documents required for our family to leave. Castro got really upset when he realized how many people wanted to leave the country. He quickly decided to make things harder for those making that request. He put some regulations into effect to discourage them from leaving. One of the requirements was that if you were a young man of military age, you had to serve in the military first before you could leave. My dad happened to fall under that age group, and was told he had to serve in the military, so he did, and he wasn't allowed to leave at that time.

When my dad had finished serving in the military, he reapplied to leave Cuba once again, but this time he was told he had to work in the sugar cane fields (which were more like prisons) for two to three years before he would be allowed to leave. The men who decided to do this to gain their freedom had to leave their families and go away to work in the fields. In these camps, they were given very little to eat, watered down beans, and old bread. Sometimes, if there was any rice, they would get some. This was their punishment for wanting to leave the communist dictatorship in Cuba.

The men got meager wages for working in the fields. This was what they had to do to earn their freedom. Meanwhile, their wives and children were taken care of by other family members who provided food and support for them while the husbands were away working and not able to provide for their families. In our family my Mom's dad, my grandfather, Antolin Machado, was the one who always made sure we had plenty to eat. My grandmother, Elvira Machado, helped my mom raise my brother, my older sister, and me.

Every fifteen days, the men were allowed to visit their families, but only for two days at a time. Then they had to return to the camps to work. Their wives and family members cooked their favorite foods so they could have something healthy, tasty, and full of nourishment to eat. The wives also cooked some extra snacks for them to take with them to those camps. This routine went on for years. I'm so amazed and proud of these Cuban men who sacrificed so much to gain not only their own but their families' freedom as well.

When the communist government became aware that the paper work required to leave Cuba had been approved and cleared, they came to the house and took an inventory of all the furniture, dishes, pots, pans, clothes, and everything in the house. Then two or three days before the actual departure day, these men would return to the house again to make sure that everything that was listed on the inventory was still in the home. If any of the items listed on the inventory were missing, the people were not allowed to leave until the items were returned to the house.

Those who left were not allowed to leave their houses or any of their personal items or belongings to any family members. The communist government would keep everything. When we left Cuba, we were not allowed to bring anything with us from—pictures or clothes. The only clothes we brought were the clothes we had on. I don't have any pictures of the first seven years of my life. The only picture I do have is the one on my passport when I was only a few months old, which was taken in '62.

A family member living in the states had to claim the family before they could actually leave Cuba. When my family's paper work got approved to leave, the communist government didn't let my dad leave with us. My Mom didn't want to leave without my Dad, but my Dad told her she had to, and my mom's Dad also told her she should leave. My Mom was scared to come to America all by herself with just her three little children. But in October 1969, my Mom and the three of us made it to America.

Our first destination was Florida. We stayed with some friends that my Mom and Dad knew from Cuba. We stayed with them for three days, and after that we went to our second destination, New Jersey. There my family lived for the next three years. Once in New Jersey my mom had to claim my dad in order for him to come out of Cuba. He had to wait approximately eight to nine months before he was finally given permission to leave. My father's dream of freedom finally came true when he made it to America in 1970 after eight long years of persevering and struggling with the communist government in Cuba.

When Castro came out with the idea of making it mandatory for the young men to serve in the military before they were allowed to leave, many families were faced with a tough decision whether or not to leave their sons behind in Cuba. Many of them did, with family members to look out for them. These families were worried; they wondered if they would ever see their sons again. Castro called the Cubans who left *gusanos* (maggots) and *despatriados* (people without a country). He said that we renounced our country and our flag. Castro made sure that everything came with a price. It has only been recently this dictator has permitted the Cubans who left to go back and visit their families who still live in poverty and fear.

When my dad came to live with us in New Jersey, he started working immediately, and he didn't have time to go to school to learn English, so he bought some records that had English lessons recorded on them; by listening to the records my dad learned to speak English. He also

asked us kids to help him pronounce words that he couldn't say correctly. With a wife and three children, my dad had to assimilate quickly in his new home.

The life experiences that my dad had gone through in Cuba had changed him. I guess it changed all of us, whether we wanted it to or not. My father became a bitter man, not wanting to know anything about Cuba or his family that was left behind. Sometimes, I wonder why this is so. I understand that he struggled and that he had some really hard times, but so did so many other Cubans, and they didn't forget their families back home. My Dad buried Cuba and everything in it when he left to come to America. I wish things could have been better for my Dad, he sacrificed so much for us.

Things started changing for my family pretty quickly. My dad didn't like New Jersey because it was too cold, so he decided to move the family to California. He also didn't like the fact that we were going to church. It was in the church that my mom and we kids felt a sense of belonging and acceptance after leaving all our family in Cuba. My dad couldn't understand that, and in his own way, I guess, he felt threatened that his family was being taken away from him. I don't think he wanted us under any kind of ruling or control system after he had worked so hard for many years to get us to America. And there we were in church under a pastor with some type of control over us. That was my father's thinking. My mom and dad divorced four years later after moving to California. My Dad lives in the Mojave Desert; he has lived there for twenty years. My Mom still lives in L.A. County with her new husband of twenty-six years.

Fidel Castro has surely changed the lives of the Cuban people and continues to do so. However, I know that he will not last forever. Everything comes to an end. The wall came down in Germany giving the East German people their freedom. The African-Americans obtained their freedom through the Civil Rights movement. These oppressions were overcome; Castro too will be defeated. In the meantime, the Cubans are awaiting together the freedom that Cuba will have once again.

We know why the Great Mississippi keeps rolling, but how does Castro—now the longest-serving leader of any country in the world and a man who has but all destroyed his country with his manifold caprices—do it? I don't know, but I do know that the big payoff will come when Cubans are allowed to return to Cuba. It's a country with a strong American legacy. Ernest Hemingway lived there for twenty years, writing classics including *The Old Man and the Sea*. Cuba was the single biggest destination in the Caribbean for Americans. It may yet be again.

5th Grade Teacher, Waterford Middle School