

THE BOY WHO SAID NO

AN ESCAPE TO FREEDOM

HISTORICAL FICTION



Patti Sheehy

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FIRST EDITION

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This book is dedicated to my husband, Robert Hunter,
and to my daughter, Patricia Larson, the bravest woman I know.

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I would like to acknowledge Frank Mederos for his brilliant storytelling and his depiction of people, places, and events that form the basis of this true-life novel. His ability to convey detailed information in a language other than his native tongue was truly inspiring. Without him, this story would have never been told.

Books on Cuba, too numerous to mention, informed this narrative, but two were particularly helpful: Hugh Thomas's weighty tome, *Cuba: The Pursuit of Freedom* and *Fidel Castro* by Robert E. Quirk. I highly recommend them to anyone wanting to gain a better understanding of Cuba's complex history and culture. I would like to credit both gentlemen for their contributions to the details that enhanced or clarified this book. Any errors regarding the history and politics of Cuba are mine, not theirs.

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PREFACE

The Boy Who Said No is based on the life story of Frank Mederos, who was born and raised in Guanabacoa, Cuba. Through a number of childhood experiences and the influence of his grandfather, Frank grew to despise the policies of his government.

As Frank matures, he falls in love, is drafted into the army, and becomes a member of Castro's special forces, making him privy to top-secret military information and placing him in direct conflict with some of the most powerful people in the Cuban military. He becomes an Antitank Guided Missile operator, defects, and escapes from Cuba in the manner described.

After being introduced to Frank by his daughter, I began to write his story as part of his family's history. But after several meetings with Frank, I decided that this story was far too compelling not to share with a wider audience.

To advance the plot, I have fictionalized some descriptions and dialogue based on interviews with Frank and with information he obtained from his family, friends, and fellow soldiers after the fact.

Since these events happened several decades ago, and since Frank does not have firsthand knowledge of certain events and conversations that occurred during his absences, I am calling this a "true-life novel."

With the exception of the name of Frank Mederos, all names have been changed to protect the privacy of family members and individuals still residing in Cuba. The material is presented as well as Frank's memory serves.

We are an army of light
And nothing shall prevail against us
And in those places where the sun is darkened, it will overcome.

—José Martí
Cuban poet

THE BOY WHO SAID NO



CHAPTER 1

My grandfather loved to fish.

He fished for tuna, yellowtail, red and black grouper. Sometimes he'd catch octopi, pound them on rocks, and hang them up to dry before bringing them to his home on Pepe Antonio Street. He lived only two houses from my family's simple bungalow, the one my father supported on his meager wages from the fertilizer factory in Havana. *Abuelo* liked the solitude, the peacefulness of fishing. "Gives me time to think," he said.

Abuelo was always ruminating about something, his thoughts fueled by various radio broadcasts and his daily ingestion of news contained in the pages of *The Havana Post* and *El Diario de la Marina*. His was the only house in the neighborhood filled with books, fat tomes on history, philosophy, and religion that sat helter-skelter on tables, some opened to the page he was reading, some underlined and bookmarked with bits of paper, some coated in a thin layer of dust. The neighbors all looked up to him. He was revered as an intellectual by those who knew him.

By the time I was four, *Abuelo* had declared me his "official fishing partner." This made me feel very special. I was his oldest grandson, and he was my hero. When I was around him I felt safe in a way that was hard to explain. I think it was partly because he was a strong man with a soft heart and partly because I thought he was the smartest man in the world.

Abuelo and I fished off the shoreline of the small village of Cojimar, where Ernest Hemingway kept the *Pilar*, the famous writer's boat.

Sometimes we'd fish from the dock. And sometimes we'd hop into my grandfather's old fishing boat and head a little way out from the coast, gazing at the rum and sugar fleets in the distance and listening to the calls of seagulls and the waves lapping gently against the shore.

I loved the smell of gasoline and the white burst of smoke that appeared when Grandpa yanked the cord on his small outboard motor. I was fascinated with how the clear blue water churned bubbly white around the propeller.

Occasionally, Abuelo would take me for a walk along the Havana harbor, a place teeming with fish and clotted with lights, a place where painted ladies in fine fur stoles and glittering jewels teetered on spindly heels so high they could barely walk. These were the wives of rich Americans and Europeans who frequented Havana's lavish hotels and brightly lit casinos, not people we interacted with, not people we knew.

From there we could see the Havana Yacht Club where the wealthy Americans who ran the United Fruit Company entertained each other on their expensive boats. Nattily dressed men smoked Montecristo cigars and gulped shots of Dewar's White Label, while their women sipped daiquiris decorated with tiny paper umbrellas. Abuelo told me that Fulgencio Batista had been blackballed from that club because he was uneducated, a *mestizo*, and a former cane cutter. I thought it strange that the president of the country could be kept out of any club, even if he did have mixed blood.

Early one evening when the air was rich with the scent of jasmine and Abuelo's boat was bobbing beneath us, my grandfather put a hand on my shoulder and urged me to look up.

"I want you to get to know the sky, Frankie. And to learn about the wind."

"Why?" I asked, sensing his seriousness.

"Because if you pay attention to those things, you can predict the weather. And predicting the weather can be very important in life."

I nodded and trailed my fingers in the water. Abuelo ran his hand over the stubble of his beard, making a rasping sound. I liked that sound,

the sound of a man. The back of his hands were furred with curly black hair speckled with gray and riddled with flat, white scars. But his fingernails were invariably clipped and filed. And impeccably clean.

Abuelo was always trying to teach me things, practical things, like how to tie different kinds of knots and how to sharpen the blade of a knife. We rarely engaged in idle conversation. It was as if he was trying to impart everything he knew to me before time ran out, before it was too late.

“Do you see those clouds, Frankie?” I looked up to see purple striated clouds in the gloaming.

“Look at how they’re formed, how they move. Different shapes mean different things. I’m going to teach you about them, and I want you to pay close attention. And more importantly, I want you to remember what I have to say.”

Abuelo looked at me, and I nodded to let him know I was listening. We sat in silence for a moment. I wasn’t sure whether the conversation was over. I hoped it wasn’t.

Abuelo coughed. “You’d be surprised what you can tell by watching the clouds.”

“Like what?” I wanted Grandpa to keep talking. He looked at me and laughed at my earnestness.

“Like whether you and Gilbert will be playing baseball together tomorrow,” he said.

I smiled. Grandpa always brought the conversation down to my level. It was one of his talents.

“Look. Do you see the boat drifting?”

I looked at the movement of the boat in relation to the shore. “The boat is moving with the current,” said Abuelo. “You must know the direction of the current, how strong it is and how fast it is.”

“Why?”

“Because the current will take you where *it* wants to go. If you want to go in the same direction, it’s your friend. But if you don’t, you must work very hard to defeat it. Nature is very powerful, Frankie.

Never forget that. But if you pay attention and know what you're doing, you can use the clouds, the wind, and the currents to your advantage."

I thought for a moment, feeling the breeze on my face. "What about the stars, Grandpa, what do they tell you?"

"The stars are very special, Frankie. You have to know the stars like the back of your hand. If you know the stars, you can tell direction, you will know where to go. In the olden days, men crossed the oceans by reading the stars. That's how Christopher Columbus found Cuba."

"Oh," I said, mightily impressed by the power of the stars.

"Do you remember what Columbus called Cuba?"

I thought for a moment, making sure I got the words right. "He said it was the most beautiful land that human eyes had ever seen."

My grandfather nodded, proud of me for remembering. "That's right, my boy."

We sat quietly for a while, and I knew Abuelo was hoping I had taken in what he had said. The water was very still, the way it sometimes got once the sun went down. A dragonfly skated by, its long, slender body barely creasing the water. In the fading light it took on a peacock sheen.

We looked up at the twilight sky suddenly darkened by a flock of wild ducks. They honked plaintively. My grandfather raised a finger skyward.

"Look, Frankie, do you see that constellation? That's Orion, the great hunter of Greek mythology. It is said that Zeus placed him among the stars. If you look carefully, you can see his bow."

I looked where my grandfather was pointing. I felt very grown up gazing at the stars that way. The boat rocked slightly, underscoring my excitement.

"Will you teach me the constellations, Grandpa?"

Abuelo chuckled. "I'll teach you all I know, my boy. Mark my words—someday it will come in handy."

From the time I was a small child, my grandfather would sit me on his lap, his breath fragrant with smoke, and read the Bible to me. His was a hefty book with a cracked leather spine and pages as thin as gossamer. He told me about Moses and the parting of the Red Sea, about the leper Lazarus being raised from the dead, about Noah building his Ark. He taught me about God and the lives of the saints.

In his living room was a picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. He was depicted with a loving face, wavy hair, and fire leaping from a red puffy heart. After a cup of rich Cuban coffee, Abuelo would hold his fist to his chest, look at the picture and say, "Dear Jesus, save me from this heartburn!" I figured heartburn was something Jesus and Abuelo had in common, and that's why Abuelo asked for His help.

When I got a little older, Abuelo regaled me with tales of heroes such as Antonio Maceo, José Martí, Calixto Garcia, brave and honorable men who had fought for Cuba's independence from Spain. His eyes glowed when he spoke of them. He told me incredible things, like how Cuba's national anthem, "El Himno de Bayamo," was composed from the saddle of a horse. It was my favorite story, and I pleaded with him to tell it to me again and again. When he described the 1868 Battle of Bayamo, I felt like I was there. When he was finished, we'd break into song:

*Hasten to battle, men of Bayamo!
That the homeland looks proudly to you;
Do not fear a glorious death,
Because to die for the fatherland is to live.*

*To live in chains is to live
In dishonor and ignominy
Hear the clarion call;
Hasten, brave ones, to battle!*

Then Abuelo would tickle me, and we would laugh.



When I started school, Abuelo helped me with my homework before we went out fishing. Sometimes he would try to tutor Gilbert and Luis. But they were not academically inclined. And Luis tried Abuelo's patience with his constant fooling around. After a while, he only helped me.

Three years my senior, my cousin Luis spent a lot of time at my house in Guanabacoa, a district of Havana. He was lively and fun and my family liked having him around. He and my cousins Tato, Gilbert, and Pipi spent so much time at our house when I was young I thought they were my brothers. Pipi was not his real name. It was just what we called him. Nicknames were common in Cuba.

Luis had his own way of thinking about things. When he got to the fourth grade, he just stayed there. For years. I told him he had to move on, but he stubbornly refused—even though he could.

"I like the teacher and I know the school work so it's easy for me," was his excuse.

"But, Luis, you can't stay in the fourth grade forever."

"Why not?"

"Because it's stupid, that's why."

"It makes me happy."

"You're happy being held back?"

"It's not being held back if you do it on purpose."

"Aren't you bored?"

"No. I know the fourth grade material so well now the teacher says I can help her teach next year. So I'll be smarter than you—I'll be a teacher."

"That's crazy, Luis. You won't be a real teacher. You'll just be a big fourth grader. If you know the material, why don't you just take the test?"

"Because I don't want to take the test, and I don't want to go to fifth grade. I'm happy where I am. I don't think that's stupid at all."

I just shook my head.

• • •

Gilbert had his own little quirks. For the first two years of school he rarely washed his feet. His mother would reprimand him. But nothing worked. Like Luis, Gilbert was stubborn.

Gilbert liked to take his socks off in school and show off his pitch-black feet as if they were a badge of honor. Then he'd scrape the bottom of his feet on the floor beneath his desk to scratch an itch.

The girls in the class would wail and complain, but that just encouraged him. I felt sorry for any girl who sat next to Gilbert. Not only did she have to smell his feet all day, but when he took off his shoes and the odor grew worse, he'd shamelessly blame the smell on her. Gilbert loved girls, and this was his way of getting their attention.

There was no end to our boyish pranks. Some days we got together with our friend Jabao and rigged the blackboard so it would fall down when the teacher touched it. Then we'd all laugh so hard, we'd be sent to the principal's office. Some days Pipi would bring his pet parrot—the one he had taught to swear—to school in a brown paper bag and hide it under his desk. When the parrot let loose with a string of expletives, he'd blame it on someone else. Then we'd all laugh so hard, we'd be sent to the principal's office. Some days Gilbert would put glue on the teacher's seat and blame it on some hapless girl. Then we'd all laugh so hard, we'd be sent to the principal's office.

We drove the principal crazy. He was a strict disciplinarian who demanded to know the perpetrator of these acts. No one would ever snitch. Except Antonio.

Antonio was a slightly built boy, a fearful kid, the type of child other kids pick on. To make matters worse, his older brother was always beating him up. Antonio often showed up to play with a swollen lip, a black eye, a bruised arm. He always claimed to have fallen down.

On warm sunny days when the sky was dotted with fat white clouds, we'd all play hooky and go skinny-dipping in the area's rivers,

marshes, and streams. We would play tag, merrily skipping from one warm river rock to the next, our arms outstretched to keep our balance.

Jabao came up with the idea of playing hide-and-peek by using dry, hollow reeds that grew on the river banks to breathe underwater. For a while it was our favorite pastime. We would sneak up and scare the other boys, splashing and giggling until we almost drowned.

Since everyone in Guanabacoa knew one another, whenever we skipped school we had to figure out how to get back to our homes without being seen. Many limestone caves skirted the port of Cojimar, and a complicated warren of tunnels ran under the nearby *Rio Lajas*.

Always on the lookout for someone who might report us truant, we ran from one tunnel and cave to the next, hiding from prying eyes and enjoying the thrill of it all. Our fear of being caught was somewhat abated because no one knew the ins and outs of these hiding spots better than we.

Mostly I hung out with boys, but there was a special girl in the neighborhood who had stolen my heart. Miriam was sweet and shy and had hazel eyes. My mother said it was just a crush—but it lasted for years. Whenever I was feeling upset about something, I'd talk to Miriam. If I found a caterpillar, I would show it to her, and I was always looking for presents to give her, like shells I had found on the beach or bright butterflies that had lost a wing. On the days my mother made cookies, I would hide one in my pocket for Miriam.

Every night the people on my block would dress up and go for a *paseo*, a stroll around the park. The boys would walk one way and the girls would walk the other, accompanied by stern *dueñas* draped in black lace shawls. The boys would wink and wave at the girls, trying to get their attention without attracting the wrath of the women in charge.

They say a small town is like a big family. That's how it was on my block. The people in my neighborhood knew all the houses and everyone in them. We knew whose mother was mean and whose father

was mad. We knew who was sick and who could come out to play. We knew whose aunt drank cane juice and whose uncle drank rum. We even knew the names of each other's dogs. That's just the way it was.

A lot was going on politically in Cuba while I was growing up, but I was too busy being a boy to notice. I was too busy playing baseball to know that Fidel Castro's poorly armed rebels had led a failed assault on the Moncada Barracks on July 26, 1953, an assault that landed Fidel in the Presidio Modelo Prison for two years, but gave birth to a revolutionary movement that would eventually topple the government.

I was too busy playing marbles to know that although Fidel's forces comprised fewer than two hundred men, they often caused Batista's army of forty- to fifty-thousand to cut their losses and run.

I was too busy sunning myself on alabaster beaches to know that opposition to Batista in Cuba had been growing like rice in China, due to his pandering to the American mobsters and big business interests who controlled most of Cuba's resources and wealth. I was even too busy to notice that the dictator had been forced to flee Cuba on New Year's Day 1959.

But eight days later, I got my first inkling that something was happening in my country. Something Abuelo didn't like. That day, after my grandfather and I went fishing together, we stopped in Havana so Abuelo could get some coffee. We were both very tired.

As we walked down the magnificent *Malecón*, the wide seaside walkway that circles half of Havana, a line of heavily armored trucks rumbled by. This was the first in a column of cars, lorries, and tanks that would carry Fidel's now five-thousand-strong victorious rebels into the city.

Fidel and his men had been traveling for days from their camp located six hundred miles away in the Sierra Maestra, stopping to speak to rapturous crowds along the way. I could hear shouts and cheering nearby. When we turned the corner, I saw thousands upon thousands

of people lining the streets, smiling, laughing and hoisting placards that read "*Gracias Fidel!*"

Many people seemed beyond jubilant, almost delirious. As the chanting grew louder, Abuelo's face grew dark, and he quickly reached for my hand. A number of rough-looking men in olive-green uniforms jumped down from the trucks. They were a tough, dirty bunch with grizzled black beards, waists bulging with guns, and feet shod in mud-covered boots. A tank rolled by with Fidel sitting atop a pyramid of men. Abuelo placed his body partly in front of mine, as if to protect me. I tugged on his shirt.

"What's going on?"

"It's Fidel and his rebels," said Abuelo.

"What does it mean?" I was getting a little nervous, sensing my grandfather's unease.

"There's been a fight for control of the government," he said. "Batista's out and Fidel is in."

I looked at the men who had jumped off the trucks. "Are these the guys who won?" I asked. I could hardly believe that these scruffy, long-haired men could be the victors. But people on the balconies of the modern apartment buildings seemed to think so. They were waving red-and-black flags embroidered with a large white *26 Julio*, throwing confetti and chanting "*Viva Cuba! Viva Fidel!*" Several of the men were drinking Hatuey, a fine Cuban beer. I had never seen anything like it.

"Yes," Abuelo said. "These are the guys who won."

A fleet of long, black Cadillacs drove by. The men in the cars were honking their horns, laughing, and brandishing their guns. There were a lot of machetes on display, a lot of knives, a lot of guns. I was eyeing the cars' whitewall tires.

"Where did Batista go?" I asked.

"To the Dominican Republic. Took his family with him. After that, who knows?"

I looked up as several airplanes thundered by. "Why are there so

many planes?" We had to wait for a minute for the noise to die down before Abuelo could answer my question. I noticed some girls wearing tight red sweaters and short black skirts shouting "Fidel! Fidel! Fidel!" with the kind of enthusiasm young women usually lavish on movie stars.

"They're taking the Americans back to the States."

"Why?"

"Shush, Frankie. Not now. You are asking too many questions. I'll tell you when we get home."

Fidel approached the podium to address the crowd from the terrace of the presidential palace. He had a rosary wrapped around his neck and he was carrying a rifle. A bank of microphones amplified his voice so it could be better heard by us and by those listening to Havana Television and Cuban radio stations throughout the country. I stood on my toes, the better to see.

"Fellow countrymen—" he began. The crowd grew quiet. People looked mesmerized. A car honked in the background and then the sound died away. Fidel's voice rang out. "As you know, the people of Havana are expecting us on Twenty-Third Street—" The audience stood in rapt attention.

I looked up at Abuelo as Fidel droned on. His eyes had narrowed, and he was listening intently while still holding my hand. A few minutes into Fidel's speech, someone in the crowd released two doves into the air. We watched as they winged their way skyward. Then, as if by divine intervention, one swept down and settled itself on Fidel's shoulder—a symbol of universal peace. The crowd went wild.

Abuelo shook his head, and a cold chill ran down my spine. I was a little scared and very confused.

"Tell me," I said. "Are you glad Batista's gone? Was his leaving something good or something bad?"

Abuelo drew in his breath. He let go of my hand and rubbed my head. "Time will tell. Now let's go get you an ice cream cone."

But from the look on his face, I knew it was bad.



CHAPTER 2

It was a bright Saturday afternoon, warm and dry as old crackers. I had finished my chores around the house and was riding my bike down the road with Gilbert. Dust rose beneath our tires and clung to the hair on our legs. Occasionally I had to wipe it from my nose. A lizard darted near my tires, and I swerved to avoid it.

We were in high spirits, headed for a swim in the river, when Gilbert suddenly stopped his bike and waved me forward. I pulled up alongside him, dragging my foot in the dust to bring me to a halt.

“Why’d you stop?” I asked.

“I almost forgot to tell you.” Gilbert took a breath and puffed out his chest the way he did when he had something important to say.

“What?”

Gilbert hesitated a moment for dramatic effect. “We don’t have to go to school anymore.” A smile lit his face, but a trace of concern filled his eyes.

At age thirteen, I was old enough to know that what he was saying was nonsense.

Still, there was something convincing in his tone of voice. I smiled and shook my head.

“Are you crazy, Gilbert? Of course we have to go to school. Where’d you get that idea?”

“Around,” he pronounced mysteriously. “Fidel’s got a new plan to eliminate illiteracy, so he’s going to close the schools. Not just ours— all of them.”

Gilbert was always coming up with strange and ridiculous stories, and I figured his imagination had run amok again.

“That’s totally backward, Gilbert. If you want to stamp out illiteracy, you *open* schools, you don’t *close* them.”

Gilbert smiled smugly. “I know. But they say Fidel’s going to use *us* to do it. We’ll be working for him.”

“To do what?”

“To wipe out illiteracy.”

“How do you figure?”

Gilbert studied the ground for a minute. “They just passed a law closing all the schools.”

“Why haven’t I heard about it?”

“Probably because you weren’t in school on Friday.”

I looked up at the sky for a moment. A brown bird with a red breast settled lightly on a narrow branch and began pecking furiously at his feathers. He looked at us momentarily and then returned to his grooming.

“Well, I don’t believe it.”

Gilbert made a face. “It’s true.”

“What’s the point?”

“They’re going to get every kid to teach *una familia pobre* to read and write.”

“What poor families?”

Gilbert shrugged. “How would I know?”

I laughed, dismissing the idea as sheer lunacy. “We’re going to be the teachers? Us? You are loco, Gilbert.”

“No, listen. Fidel is forming a literacy brigade. He says a million illiterates in Cuba need to learn to read and write.”

“Literacy brigade? You mean like an army? What will we do? Shoot people with letters of the alphabet?”

“Have it your way. But you’ll see when they send you off to some awful place to teach people to read.”

When I got home from our swim, my mother met me at the door. “I just heard that they’re closing the schools,” she said.

“Gilbert told me. He says we’re going to teach poor people how to read.”

Mima placed her hands on her hips and tightened her lips. “I hear it’s voluntary. Tell me you didn’t volunteer for anything.”

“No,” I said.

She looked at me sternly. “Good, because you are to have no part of this, do you hear?”

“I said I didn’t volunteer for anything.”

Mima gave me a long, searching look and then waved her hand. “All right, go get washed up for supper.”

The following week, soldiers showed up at our school demanding the names and addresses of all sixth and seventh graders. The school was in an uproar, and the teachers kept leaving the classrooms to confer with each other behind closed doors. Their voices were strained and their faces were starchy with concern. I still couldn’t believe the government would send us away.

Just after the bell rang, four soldiers marched into the classroom, telling us about the difficult lives of the peasants—how they never had a chance to learn how to read and write. They described their squalid living conditions and how they couldn’t even decipher a food label. They told us to close our eyes and imagine how awful it would be to be illiterate. A wave of pity washed over me.

Two well-dressed university professors joined the soldiers to announce that all the boys were “volunteering” to join the brigade. Girls could also join if they obtained their parents’ permission.

Our teacher stood at the back of the classroom looking skeptical. She held her lips together the way she did when she was displeased with our behavior. She questioned the officials about where we would go, when we would return, what we would eat, and where we would

sleep. Neither the soldiers nor the professors provided her with satisfactory answers.

Within a week, signs started sprouting around Havana that read: “*¡No creer, leer!*” “Don’t just believe, read!” The slogan signaled not only a new Cuban government, but a new Cuban society. Rumors filled the air about how Fidel planned to wipe out illiteracy in the whole country. People were lauding his plan as a noble gesture, the first step in making Cuba a world power. Newspapers proclaimed the elimination of illiteracy as Fidel’s top priority.

Parents were put on notice that their sons had been selected to participate in the government’s National Literacy Campaign and that any resistance from them—or their children—would result in severe repercussions. Peasant families were told that they would be given ten dollars to take boys into their homes to teach them to read—whether they wanted to learn or not.

On Saturday morning, my mother got up early to bake *pastelitos de guayaba*. She had just lined up the crescent-shaped dough on a cookie sheet and popped the pastries into the oven when Luis ran in the back door, red in the face and panting.

“What’s gotten into you?” asked Mima.

Luis was so excited he could hardly form the words. “It’s time to go,” he said. “Everybody’s getting ready—it’s really happening. Gilbert says they’ll take you so far away you can’t escape—you can’t get home. They’re coming right now *¡Cuidado!*” Then he ran out of the house, the screen door banging behind him.

My mother looked at me in alarm and turned off the stove. She removed her oven mitts and slapped them down on the counter in an expression of rage. Neither of us could believe this was happening.

My hand flew to my mouth as I considered what to do. The knot that had been growing in the pit of my stomach after I saw the soldiers

at school exploded into a stream of bile that burned the back of my throat. I looked around, not knowing whether to run or to hide.

Our neighbors were standing in front of their houses, stretching their necks to see what was going on. Some people were whispering and mumbling to each other. A few women were crying.

A child being taken from their parents was something Cubans had never experienced before. We had lived under President Carlos Prío Socorrás, a man who hosted lavish parties where guests snorted cocaine and relieved themselves in bathrooms outfitted with faucets of gold.

We had lived under Batista, a dictator who hung dead revolutionaries from the limbs of trees and subverted the interests of his nation to those of the Mob. But the idea that children could be sent to some unknown place for the sake of the revolution was totally foreign.

The “volunteers” were ordered to go to the baseball stadium for processing before being taken to the train station in Havana. I looked out over the crowd and spotted my sisters and brothers. Theresa was holding my father’s hand and sobbing uncontrollably. My brother, George, stood with his arms crossed, looking angry and rebellious. My mother was holding my baby brother Raúl.

Anguish filled her eyes. I was her oldest child and the fear of losing me haunted her expression. My throat constricted in grief as I read the sorrow creasing her face. She squeezed my hand tightly and kissed me before I left.