

Back and Forth

By Daisy Abreu

It is almost midnight on New Year's Eve and I am rushing from my little kitchen to the living room, passing out the red seedless grapes I sorted into baggies and glasses of cheap champagne to the handful of friends I have invited over to celebrate the New Year with me.

"What's this for? What do I do?"

It's Patrick who asks the question, reminding me that not everyone is familiar with my family traditions.

"Twelve grapes, one for luck in every month of the coming year." one of my other friends explains. "It's a Daisy thing."

I tell him that the grapes should be eaten within the first minute of the New Year. It's the Cuban tradition for luck, something my family has always done on New Year's Eve, no matter where we are. It's the thing that somehow keeps me connected to them, even though I haven't rung in a new year with my parents and siblings in over a decade. Twelve grapes, twelve wishes—one of which was always, "El año que viene, estamos en Cuba." Next year, we will be in Cuba.

What I know about being Cuban is that there is longing; this inexplicable desire to visit a place where you have never lived and be with people you don't know, even though they are your family. I am an American Born Cuban, an ABC, a Cuban girl raised in West New York, New Jersey, an area second only to Miami in Cuban population. I am a member of the Latin American Dream generation, tied to others like me and the place our parents left so many years before by language, food, music, photos, and our parents' hope that we would grow up to be first-rate

American citizens. Our parents fled Castro's Cuba in the 1960s and we are the first to be born in America, youngest siblings with brothers and sisters five to fifteen years older. We are the ones destined to make good on the promise that things will be different in America, the dreams of our parents and those they left behind pinned to us like the *azabache* charms we wore as babies to protect us from the evil eye.

When I tell people I am Cuban, the same questions come up.

"Have you been back?"

"My father took me to visit when I was eight."

"Are you going to go back when things change?"

"I don't know. I don't think about it."

"Why wouldn't you want to go back? Things are changing..."

It's not their fault, these people asking me the questions. I may be the only Cuban they know. To some of my friends, I am Cuba, the same way my parents and siblings are Cuba to me. But for me, there is no "going back," not the way they mean.

I am a Cuban from New Jersey and all I can tell anyone about Cuba is what the three weeks I spent there when I was a little girl felt like. My father took me there in 1980, the summer I turned eight.

I wear a striped turtleneck and pigtails for my passport photo. Even as a little girl, I know the formula for this particular journey, having overheard it when people talked about their trips; 21 + 54 + 1. Each traveler may visit the island for no more than twenty-one days. Travelers may bring one suitcase weighing no more than fifty-four pounds and one carry-on bag or purse.

Once friends find out we're making the trip, my father is given letters written on onionskin, envelopes heavy with cash and amber bottles of medicine with requests that these

items be delivered to relatives. My powder blue hardback suitcase holds multi-packs of Doublemint chewing gum, bottles of pain reliever, Band-Aids, iodine and soap tucked in with my clothes.

The airport customs officer calls us over to his station for baggage inspection. He has dark slicked back hair and wears a short-sleeved light blue button-down uniform shirt and dark trousers. My father greets the officer with a smile and offers up my bag and ticket for review. Daddy wants to keep things light and get through this process with every item intact. I do not know then that my father had been put on trial in 1968, months before leaving the island, because he did not agree with the Communists. In the months before they escaped, my father was sent to work camp where he cut sugar cane and lived in poor conditions. I imagine now that having our papers checked made him uncomfortable, even though he and my mother made sure everything was in order.

Mixed in with my frilly underpants, sundresses and sandals are two packets of boys white cotton underwear briefs, junior Jockey shorts for my baby nephew. The customs officer pulls them out of my suitcase and looks at me, then at my father. Daddy offers up another smile and explains, hoping the man understands. The customs officer returns the briefs to the bag, closes the case, stamps my paperwork and sends us on our way. We made it.

Walking off the plane into the heat of Havana, I am Dorothy in the Emerald City. I have only ever seen black and white photos of Cuba and convinced myself that everything there was, obviously, black and white. The towering green palms, the translucent blue water crashing along the Malecón wall and the buildings in peeling paint pastels made Cuba real to me in a way that those old photos couldn't.

My half-brother, Papito, and my mother's brother Lucas meet us at the airport. It is my

father's first visit to Cuba since he fled with my mother and my siblings in December, 1968. In the years since he left, Daddy's first-born son has grown up, married and had a son of his own. I look at Papito; see my father's dark, shining eyes and wide grin in his face and, just like that, I have another brother.

We spend that first night in Havana and have breakfast in the fancy hotel dining room. There is white china, cloth napkins, scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, plenty of orange juice and cafe con leche. My Uncle Lucas has hired a cab to take us to Camajuani, the town where my mother was born. That the cab is probably thirty years old and Camajuani is 173 miles from Havana makes for a long ride. I sit between my father and brother in the back seat of the yellow 1950s Chevy taxi as we ride through the countryside, fields of sugar cane on both sides of us. The dirt roads are bumpy, but I do drift off to sleep on my father's shoulder, lulled by the men's conversation and exhausted from the excitement of this adventure.

We arrive at my maternal grandparents' house after dark. I can hear children gathered on the front porch calling, "Están aquí!" they're here, before the cab comes to a complete stop. My father lifts me out of the car as my mother's parents come out of a single story blue house to meet us, shouting greetings as they come down the concrete steps onto the dirt road. My legs are wobbly from sitting so long and I lean into Daddy as we are surrounded by people I only sort of recognize from photos, my little body pressed against his leg.

My Abuela Consuelo is a tiny white-haired woman in a flowered housedress and glasses. Her skin is the same smooth paper-bag brown my mother always says mine is and when she smiles at me, her dark eyes disappear into a squint the way my mother's do. Abuelo Paulino is tall and slender, with a pot belly that makes his powder blue shirt puff out a little over his belt line. His hair is combed back from his high tan forehead in a neat white cloud. He takes me in his

arms and hugs me, calling me "mi niña," my girl.

Word spreads that we've arrived and the house fills with neighbors eager to give Daddy a welcome home hug or handshake. The prospect of going on an adventure with my Daddy, just us two taking a trip together was exciting, but now it is clear I am going to have to share him with lots of other people. They are all hugging and kissing me too, commenting on how my eyes are the same almond shape as my mother's and my chubby cheeks are just like my father's. I am used to being somewhat invisible, the little girl daydreaming or reading in the corner while the adults talk and drink and smoke. Now I am part of the main attraction, a center of attention. All of the faces and voices overwhelm me. The noise is different than when I join my parents on their social visits. This is subdued hysteria, not an evening out for cocktails and conversation. Domingo has come home and brought the little gringa to meet everyone! I don't know if I want to stay.

We are led through the living room to the kitchen. I have only ever lived in an apartment, so the house feels large to me even though it is filling with people. The living room is neat and spare, with a couple of fabric settees, a carved wooden rocking chair in one corner and a small rabbit-eared television set in the other. There is a portrait of my brother, Pedro, hanging above a console table. It is a grouping of five baby photos and, in its ornate gold frame, is the focus of the room. I look up at his familiar grin and wish he was with us, if only to take some of the attention off of me.

I sit at my grandmother's kitchen table, feet dangling over the edge of the straight back chair, my eyes following my father around this room of strangers. He laughs and embraces people he has not seen in over a decade. His friends slap him on the back and gently poke at his belly, telling him it appears that life in the States agrees with him. He glances over to check on

me every few minutes, reassuring me with his smiling eyes, letting me know he is still there.

When someone asks me a question, it is as though I have never heard Spanish before. There is no mixing in of English to break up the Spanish, no one is taking a breath to allow me a moment to process. Everyone has the same opening question, so eventually the repetition helps me sort out what is being asked of me.

"Tú sabes quién yo soy? Me conoces?" Do you know who I am?

I understand but can't verbalize anything so I nod in response. I think I know some of these people because I have seen photographs, but I am unsure what their relation is to me. The words have left me, except when I speak to my father.

Daddy sits down beside me and I tug at his arm. He leans forward to hear me over the commotion and I tell him I am hungry. He relays the message to my Grandmother Consuelo.

"What am I supposed to feed her? She's American! She only eats hamburgers and hot dogs!"

My grandmother has forgotten that her daughter is the person in charge of feeding this little American. She does not know that my Mami considers hamburgers and hot dogs a snack, not a real meal. A real meal is a tender oxtail stew with the meat falling off the bones or tamales, those bars of golden corn *masa* speckled with pieces of pork and wrapped in foil that, as adults, my siblings and I horde in our freezers. My father smiles.

"What do you have in the house?"

"Rice, black beans, pork and fried plantains."

"Put a plate of that in front of her and see what happens."

My grandmother goes to the stove and takes the lid off of a large cast iron rice pot. It is just like the one we keep on our stove at home, black on the bottom from so much use, but still a

shiny silver on the top and sides. My father tells her that I like the "raspa," the crispy bits of rice that are stuck to the bottom of the pot, so she scrapes the large metal serving spoon around the inner edge, loosening the rice from the bottom and making sure to get some *raspa* on my plate.

There is a stew pot steaming with black beans that have been cooking all day. Later in my visit I will help my grandmother and aunts sort through dried beans at the kitchen table, picking out any tiny stones before the beans are set to soak overnight with wedges of yellow onion then cooked down to a thick blue-black soup. My blue and white china plate is piled high with food, the smell so familiar I begin to relax a little. Maybe this will be OK. It looks and smells like what I eat at home.

The neighbors are curious to see if this American child will eat. Everyone gathers in the kitchen to watch as I clean my plate. Any anxiety I have about being watched as I have dinner is trumped by hunger. The *mojo* on the pork mixes with the rice and beans, so I get a bit of garlic and lime juice in every bite. The sweet plantains are fried deep golden brown on the outside, a bright marigold color revealed as I cut into them. Everything tastes the same as when my mother makes it. Everything tastes like home. I am comforted to know that this place is like home in at least one way.

“Mira cómo ella come!” Look at how she eats.

When I’ve finished the last sweet plantain, I ask for a paper towel to wipe my hands and mouth. Everyone laughs, including my father. This isn’t a fancy Havana hotel. I lower my eyes and drop my shoulders, embarrassed that I spoke up and asked for the wrong thing.

Over the next two weeks, I meet everyone my father has ever known in Cuba, from his dental tech school classmates to my mother’s favorite cousin Robert. We are rock stars on tour; everyone wants to see us, feed us, reminisce with my father and hear about America. My cousins

pepper me with questions and quickly relieve me of every last stick of Doublemint gum. I know I am supposed to love the attention, but the lack of peace begins to wear on me.

I am taken to meet my sister's godmother, Maricusa, and she shows me the room where my older sister slept when she stayed with her. The room is a shrine, everything that belonged to my sister is as she left it in 1968. Her twin sized bed is in the center of the room, made up with a light white ruffled bedspread and matching pillow shams. Her pastel day dresses, all made for her by Maricusa, hang in the closet and her toys and books are on still on the shelves. Little girl things, all waiting for my sister, now a twenty year-old woman, to reclaim them.

We travel to Remedios, where my father was born, to meet my paternal grandparents Oscar and Cristina and my father's sisters Mimi and Nena. I immediately fall in love with both of my grandfathers, Oscar and Paulino, and hang around them as much as possible, Daddy's girl that I am. I ride shotgun in Abuelo Oscar's orange 1950s American car and fall asleep in his lap as we share his wooden rocking chair every night after dinner. I help Abuelo Paulino feed the chickens in his yard and accompany him on walks to visit neighbors.

"Esta es la más chiquita de mi hija Deisy. La gringa." This is my daughter Deisy's youngest, the gringa, he boasts.

Every night after dinner in Camajauni, all the kids wait for an old man with the cart, pulled by a white billy goat, to give them rides around the neighborhood. My father lets me go on the cart with my cousins. One night, worried that my cousins are late and not wanting to miss the ride, I climb up on the cart with some other kids without letting anyone in my family know. Once he realizes I am missing, Abuelo Paulino jumps on his bicycle and circles the neighborhood to look for me. When the goat cart pulls up in front of my grandparents' house, I am sitting in the back, wearing my champagne colored cap sleeved nightgown and laughing with

the other kids.

I understand how important that trip was now. The more I learn about what Cuba became immediately following the revolution, especially for those who didn't go along with Castro's politics, the more I understand why my parents left. I know that as much as they embraced the American lifestyle, they never abandoned their traditions, not in the life they built for me. They couldn't be in Cuba, so they created as much of that world as they could in America. The food, the language, the music and the social club they belonged to were all there for me to absorb. I soaked it in and take it with me everywhere I go. And every time I hear Celia Cruz sing *Guantanamera*, one of my father's favorite songs, I understand the longing to go home. Not the one in Camajani; that was never my home. The place I long for is the one my parents built for me. The home in West New York, New Jersey that, like the Cuba my parents grew up in, can never be recreated or reclaimed completely.

More than nostalgia or homesickness, it is my identity. Growing up knowing people around me understood and spoke the language of an exile once removed, I fear that time and distance may cause me to lose that somehow. More than physical, the distance I feel from that world is cerebral, emotional. I sometimes crave the reassurance that I am still Cuban, even though the world I live in now is almost exclusively American. When the sadness wells up, I need a "Sana, sana. Colita de rana, si no se sana hoy, se sana mañana" that magic spell Cubans say to their children as they rub whatever bump or bruise has caused them pain. I need to know that someone will always know when to say it to me. To make it better and help me feel less alone.

"Hecha pa'lante" my mother would say, "Move forward." There is no going back. And besides, my Cuba is in New Jersey.