The Long Goodbye

WAVES trailed behind the cargo ship as it sailed out of the Port of Havana. My grandparents and infant mother were on it. So were countless families of political prisoners.

Hundreds had flooded Havana's Malecón to bid farewell. For some, it would be the last time. My grandma's godmother and a friend stood among them as they all waved white handkerchiefs. The only life my grandparents had ever known was coming to an end. Home slipped farther away until Cuba vanished from view.

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My grandparents' life together started five years earlier in a small town far from the capital of a very different Cuba.

One day in 1958, my grandma, whom we call Ama, went with her friends and family to a celebration commemorating the anniversary of Santa Lucía's sugar mill. They walked uphill to the town center, which was filled with people, among them a young man who worked for a local brewery, Cristal. The man, who had studied communications, held a megaphone and called out for people to try the beer.

Sometime that afternoon, he met Ama — she does not recall exactly how. They ended up spending the day together once his work was done. They talked and danced. And at the end of the day, he bade her farewell and went home to the nearby city of Holguín.

Ama returned to school in the same city, and over the next two years, they saw each other from time to time. She was studying to be a teacher and believed that a serious boyfriend would be a distraction.

Later, she would say, "I thought, 'Well, if it's meant for me, it will be.'"

The young man would visit her at her grandma's house where they would talk. They went to the movies together and attended Mass. When Ama finished school, she was ready for the young man to become her boyfriend. It was 1960, and Cuba was transforming around them.

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Fidel Castro had by then been in power for over a year, having overthrown the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista on New Year's Eve 1958. Castro's government had enacted its first land reform law limiting landholdings to 993 acres. He had initiated public works projects and nationalization plans. This was to be a new Cuba run for Cubans, by Cubans. "*Cuba Sí*," went the catchphrase of the revolution, "*Yanquis No.*"

The new government was cracking down on political opponents and arresting hundreds of those it deemed counter-revolutionaries. Castro's foes began armed attacks throughout Cuba. In time, they established guerilla bases in the mountains.

Meanwhile, Ama and the young man would climb the steps to the park where they had first met. He recited poetry to her. She liked that.

The government, however, had plans for the young man. They had a use for someone with a truck and a megaphone. He was sent to the city of Varadero to assist with crowd control. But before he left, he had a question for Ama: would she marry him?

She accepted. But the engagement came with one condition: if she married him, she would have to leave Cuba with him.

"I want you to be my wife, but this is Communism," he said. "Things are going to get really ugly here. There isn't going to be food. Things are going to be scarce."

He wasn't the only one who wanted to leave. About 200,000 Cubans fled Cuba for the United States immediately after the revolution. Most of them landed in South Florida and set up their temporary lives. They told themselves Castro would be removed from power soon. They would be able to return home. "*Ojalá*" became their motto. Hopefully.

Ama's father also wanted to leave and told her that getting married was her chance to get out. He promised he would join them as soon as he could — as would her sister and mother.

So Ama agreed. But leaving was not so simple.

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The young couple spent most of the year of their engagement apart. They wrote letters to each other while he was away. They spoke on the phone when they could. They saw each other whenever he had the chance to visit. The government requisitioned his truck when they no longer needed him, and he started a new job at a radio station.

Ama and the young man we call Abu were married in Santa Lucía on December 3, 1961. Ama recalls everything about that day as beautiful. A small group joined the newlyweds for the reception that took place in her backyard. There

was roast pig with rice and beans, a Cuban tradition. "We didn't have money for anything else," she says with a sigh.

They left for their honeymoon after the reception. They headed to Havana with Abu's cousin and wife, stopping at a roadside motel for the night so that Ama and Abu could have their first night together as husband and wife.

"I got married a virgin, without having been with any other man before," she says, glowing with pride.

They spent their honeymoon with two other couples — the one who had driven them to Havana and my grandma's cousin and her new husband. This was common for them. They often hung out with their families.

The six of them saw the capital. They visited Pinar del Río and Soroa. They spent a night at a popular outdoor spot in Havana that was situated atop a river called Río Cristal. They talked. They drank. They listened to music.

They returned to Holguín a week later. Abu went back to work at the radio station which, like newspapers and broadcast stations across Cuba, was now under government control. Ama was ordered to teach the children whom the regime had separated from their parents and sent to work in the sugar cane fields, commonly referred to as "*El Campo*."

Ama and her fellow teachers would take a bus from Santa Lucía to the sugar fields and then walk a mile to the schools. Castro's plan was to make all Cubans literate; almost a quarter of them couldn't read. But the teachers were also directed to spread messages of Marxism to children when they were out of their parents' reach.

The fields were controlled by the government too. The teachers were always watched. But, even so, Ama refused to teach her students the new national anthem. When she was questioned, she said she hadn't learned it.

"They did whatever they wanted," she would later say. "They didn't care about the country. They didn't care about anything."

Then, she added, "I lived in a tiny town, and there, we felt everything."

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Castro had begun his rule two years earlier with a weeklong "Caravan of Victory" from Eastern Cuba to Havana. He and his 1,000 or so guerilla soldiers were greeted as heroes at every stop on their way to the capital. He delivered his first speech to tens of thousands of admirers the day they arrived in Havana. He talked until dawn and then released a flock of white doves to signify the peace he was going to bring to Cuba. One dove landed on his shoulder — a dark omen; the same thing had happened to Spain's dictator Francisco Franco when he took power.

More and more people left. In 1960, the American government waived im-

migration restrictions for Cubans. After the first wave of immigration, 14,000 children arrived between then and 1962. The children had been sent to the United States alone to live in foster homes throughout the country until they could be reunited with their parents. It was called *Operación Pedro Pan,* or Operation Peter Pan.

Ama did not recall Batista's reign with fondness. But under Batista, she felt it was possible to live without fear of the government so long as you were not regarded as a threat. That changed under Castro, as Committees for the Defense of the Revolution appeared in every neighborhood. It was not always clear who the informants were.

"In my town, the light went out, and I can't remember if it ever came back," Ama says.

She got pregnant in 1962 and continued teaching. Abu kept working at the station. They went back and forth between Holguín and Santa Lucía. They were biding their time. Their daughter was born in January 1963. The time to leave was fast approaching, though they did not know it.

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Abu's father was a man with many connections. He had told Ama and Abu years before that they would be leaving soon, but he shared no details. Time passed with no further word on a plan to leave. "Any day now, our time will come," Ama remembers telling herself.

After the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, Castro agreed to send some of the families of the political prisoners he had captured to the United States, in exchange for medical supplies and toiletries.

Churches began sneaking parishioners who expressed their anger at the regime and were at risk of arrest onto the ships, among them Abu's father, who was both an active member of the Methodist Church of Holguín and an opponent of the regime.

One day in late May 1963, Abu's father told his son and daughter-in-law that the time had come. Ama's mom helped her bundle up her infant daughter's clothing. Abu and Ama were allowed to take what they were wearing and two more outfits in their suitcases. They set out for the 10-hour drive to Havana from Santa Lucía. They said goodbye to their families not knowing if they would ever see them again.

At the Port of Havana, government officials checked the passengers for jewelry before they boarded the ship, Morningside. "They didn't take any of our stuff, but what were they going to take?" Ama recalls. "We didn't have anything."

Ama and Abu joined the rest of the passengers in the boat's hold for the overnight journey to Port Everglades in Fort Lauderdale. Their daughter was giv-

en a cot. That night Ama lied on the floor beside her baby and tried to sleep. She couldn't.

As the ship set sail, Abu called to her, insisting she had to see something. She followed her husband topside and saw the crowds covering every inch of the Malecón, waving their white handkerchiefs in the distance as the sun set over Cuba. It was then that Ama knew they were never coming back.

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