

DIASPORA

They only existed in stories. They were aunts and uncles, friends and family, people whose names I only heard in their rushed, Cuban-accented Spanish over the dinner table or on the receiving end of short international calls. They were my family, a family divided by policies cemented in Washington and Havana decades ago. A family that still reached across that narrow strait of water and said “We are here, we exist. Do not forget us.”

I had always wanted to meet them. These faceless names and faded memories my mother and her sisters would talk about and who would be there waiting for the moment one of us went to Cuba. My mom and her two sisters, Martha and Cadige, never returned. They do not plan to. “I don’t want to ruin what I remember with reality,” Martha told me. The three of them raised me. My father worked nonstop to make sure we had a comfortable life and he took care of us. But my mother and my aunts raised me and my sister.

We grew up in Miami, Cuba north. There are over 1.4 million Cubans living in the United States and most of them settled in Miami. They came in waves starting from Castro’s revolution in 1959. My family arrived in ’68. They fled communism. My grandfather saw the writing on the wall and worked towards getting visas for his wife and three children. In the dead of night he woke his children up - it was time.

My sister and I heard their stories growing up. How beautiful Santiago was and how many hills my mother and her sisters had to climb to get to school, to get to piano lessons, to get anywhere. How despite the heat a cool breeze always rolled through the town, so it wasn’t that bad. They told us about the family that was still there, their homes, and their memories. We heard these stories almost every day. The Cuba of their memories was always perfect. But, we could never see it.

Until President Obama normalized relations with Cuba, the idea of going and meeting my family was never more than a pipe dream. “One day,” I would tell my mom and her sisters, and they would nod along “si, un día.” That day didn’t come until I was 30. I decided I would go but had some anxieties. Meeting the ghosts whose names I barely knew, of stepping into the memories of my mother and aunts, of how I would be received, of making photographs of a Cuba that would be very different from the memories my mother and aunts held dear as a place pristine and beyond reproach. I went to Afghanistan instead.

During my time in Afghanistan I saw and photographed displacement and a refugee crisis. I saw pieces of my family and their story. I saw it in the families who still had relatives they could not visit in Pakistan. I saw it in the young men who were planning to take their chances on the migration trail. I saw it on the Greek island of Lesbos as the boats filled with refugees would come ashore. I saw it in the camps they were forced to live in. I realized my family’s story was their story. I planned a trip to Cuba.

At first my mother and aunts were apprehensive about my decision, however once I told them I had bought the tickets and it was time, they called everyone they could on the island to tell them I was coming. Over the years they had sent remittances when they could. Sometimes they would send some cash or some medicine. This time they made a shopping list. They bought clothes, medicines, spices, home goods, shoes - everything they thought would help them. Once everything was packed, I was given 50 pounds to deliver.

As an American I knew I wouldn’t be subjected to the same scrutiny as Cubans are when returning to the island. Once I landed I grabbed my bag, flashed my passport, and made it through Customs without stopping ... and there they were to welcome me with open arms.

Ivan Flores

