

Acknowledgements

This book has been in the writing for over thirty years. It is the result of many notes taken since July of 1955 to the present, and vivid memories of my most unforgettable character. I was very fortunate to live just blocks away from him. I was his first grandson, and from the time I was old enough to remember things, until age fifteen, I gathered mentally, thousands of moments that encapsulated the person he was, and the person who made my life up to that moment, the most fascinating experience I could ever imagine. His memory lives in me as fresh as when I was a child, and his personality, and character have influenced me throughout my adult life. As I near the age at which he died, it seems fitting that I now undertake the writing of this book, and although I have never written anything of any significance before, I have in the person of my grandfather an inexhaustible source of information about the life of one of the most remarkable persons I have ever known, and one whom I am convinced, would be of interest to many others who did not have the fortune of knowing him, and can now read about him.

As I started to write down the first lines of this book, something that had never occurred before, began to happen. I was filling page after page with incredible ease. Memories I had held in my mind for years, just seemed to take a new life. Before I realized, I had several chapters finished, and although I knew I would have to go over them to smooth out the original rough format, I was very pleased with the results. I had a feeling of deep wellness and peaceful gratification about the writing and I knew that it was a good thing to do. Of course, as we all are aware, no undertaking of any kind or size ever attempted by anyone, could ever be successfully completed without the apt and opportune assistance of others. I am no exception to that condition, and thus, I owe a well of gratitude to some people without whom this book would have never been completed.

Firstly, I have to thank posthumously, my grandfather. He was and is, the sole reason for this book. Then I would like to express my infinite gratitude to the persons who read the first few chapters and encouraged me to continue. Without their sincere support and honest opinion about what I had written until that moment, the rest of this book might have never existed.

To my son Raymond, whom I named after my grandfather, and who was the first to read the beginnings of the book. Thank you for your warm, caring and sincere comments. I knew then that if I could get that reaction from a seventeen-year-old boy, there was a strong chance I could be in the right path.

Secondly, to my dear friend Phil Nolen. A savvy matter- of- fact individual, whose sincerity and bold frankness were of the utmost importance to me as I gave him a copy of the first three chapters to read. Thank you Phil. Telling me you could not put it down and asking when I would have the next few chapters ready, brought tears to my eyes, and reassured me of the merit of my undertaking.

And then, to another dear friend whose courage and character have always been an inspiration to me, and whose personal accomplishments are deserving of the highest respect and admiration,

and whose candid and sincerest comments about my initial writings, dissipated any doubt I might have had at that point. It was an honor to me to had him dedicate time out of his busy schedule, to read my writings for which I will always be obliged. Thanks, Tim.

Lastly, to Ward Hall whom I met in the Summer of 1988, under rather curious circumstances due to the auspices of the Internal Revenue Service, and which in turn, unbeknownst to them; proportionated me with, first his account, and then with his trust, and friendship until this day; and for which I consider myself honored, and at a definite gain. He is a person who belongs to that era which I described in my writings. It is therefore befitting I asked him to read my draft. He, more than anyone I know, could understand what I wrote, and give me a solid, and no-nonsense opinion about it. As I expected, he did. If this book is ever published, it is to Mr. Hall that I would owe a debt of gratitude.

And of course, to would be readers. I sincerely hope that those of you old enough to remember how life was in the fifties, will appreciate the simplicity of life then, and the character of folks of that era who seemingly had a better grip on common sense. To younger readers, who see the fifties as a backwards time; I hope they are open enough to realize that those folks had their time in the sun, and that they forged their way single-handedly with little or no help from any government agency or private institution, and where self-respect; and respect for others was paragon.

July 19th, 1955

It is commonly said that all things on our planet have a time to live and a time to die, man inclusive. For man, what he does and accomplishes in that span of time, becomes his legacy as a result. In 1886, the man who would become my grandfather, was born. Sunday, July 19th, 1955, was his time to die. His death was abrupt in an absurd automobile accident that logically never should have happened, but it did. As he died, he took with him an era, a way of life soon after only to be found in books. I grew up in that aura of life, in that romantic era in which all things had a place and they all made sense. I got used to that and it served me well; it made me happy. I knew what I was and who I was, and what I was supposed to do. As a child I had limitations, when I crossed the line, there was a price to pay for the transgression and I had no problem with that because I knew I had done wrong. Right and wrong were real, self-accountability was real, responsibility for one's acts, was real, and it all made good sense. One could be disciplined by any member of the grown-up family, and it was accepted, because one knew it was for the best. Respect was the basis for all actions. It was demanded and it was given. It was the catalyst that kept the family strong, the friends true, and the rest in check. My grandfather was responsible, as patriarch, to lead the family and teach by example. He never abused his position nor faulted his duties. If he ever sensed fear, no one knew it. All of us were strong in his strength.

I have always been very appreciative of having been born then and grow up in that way of life. I am quite convinced it made me a better person and a better man albeit not of very much use in today's world. My grandfather took his job very seriously. He would have been very disappointed and confused with today's people, and had he lived a little longer, he could have forecasted our problems of today.

This book is dedicated to his memory and to the life he lived within his span of time as he touched in a very special way, all members of our family, his very close friends and thousands of others who knew him and for whom he always had open arms.

If the size of a funeral is indicative of the character of the one who has died, my grandfather was a man of outstanding character. His, was the largest funeral ever to be witnessed in our town before or after, until the writing of this book. Men wept openly as if losing their very own, his close friends were devastated, and the entire town observed a silence in mourning that lasted for months. Nothing was ever the same, and his death occasioned drastic changes within and without the family. His life and actions were filled with compassion for others. Humor and kindness were his trademark, accentuated only by an unparalleled donating nature that seemed to be his personal responsibility toward his fellow human beings.

It was refreshing to be in his company. He would listen attentively to a twelve-year-old, as he would one of his peers. Although he was a man of means and handled large sums of money and transacted very important and lucrative business deals in and out of Cuba, no one could tell by the way he dressed or the way he spoke. He never owned an automobile or a wallet. He carried his money in his pants' right front pocket, folded neatly and held together with an elastic band around it, the amount of which always exceeded one thousand. His argument was that one never knew when a "good" deal would present itself, and one should be ready to act upon it, if interested. In all the time I knew him he owned only two suits of clothes, and many times would wear the jacket of one, with the pants of the other, and a tie that did not match either. This would always infuriate my grandmother, who would insist he should be a little more careful about his persona. It did not face him. He wore only one kind of shoes. He had them imported from Spain, and were made of very soft leather, lace less with two strips of elastic bands on either side for easiness of putting them on and taking them off, and they were always black. They were not very handsome, but were a blessing to his feet, whose underside were plagued with callous which had to be surgically removed every so often, by a chiropodist friend of his.

I guess what I remember best about him, if I am forced to summarize it into one phrase, is what he used to say to me in reference to men and the world: " Rafelito, you as well as I, are citizens of the world who happened to have been born in Cuba" And he would add: "You have a God given right to live anywhere in the world you want to, no one can hold you from doing this."

I thank you for everything grandfather, and may the Lord who created us all, keep you in His company until my time arrives and I can see you again.

Your loving grandson, Rafael.

Chapter 1 – At the Beach

Dawn slowly gives way to a strong sun and clear blue skies, and with it, appear the first signs of folks rising to meet this day. It is Saturday, July 18th, 1955, and it is a typical, and repetitious summer day by Cuba's weather standards. The exception is that here at the north shore, albeit hot, the constant cool breeze compensates for the temperature and makes the ambiance very enjoyable. We are at the beach house my grandfather had built two summers ago. Ever since the house was finished in the late spring of 1953; it has been used by everybody in the family and some close friends, and that is how my grandfather intended it to be; just as he did with everything he owned. No man I ever knew was more willing to share with family and non-family alike, anything the Lord would allow him to possess, including his money. He was not a religious person and I do not remember him ever entering a church, but his love for other humans was so evident and so real, specially, for those less fortunate; it would have been very hard for anyone not to notice it. He was the absolute quintessence of charity, and humility. My grandmother on the other hand, who was raised by relatives after losing her parents at a very young age, and who along with a younger sister and brother had suffered very poor conditions and done without life's bare necessities in more than one occasion; had real difficulties with his behavior, favoring herself with a more rigid and selfish attitude when regarding material possessions. The interesting thing in this juxtaposition was that the more he gave away, which would logically make the reader think he would end up with nothing or in the very least, with less; seemed to work in reverse for him.

His business thrived, my grandmother's pantry room was bulging with groceries, the house was furnished with the up to-date amenities, and them, and our entire family enjoyed extra luxuries commonly forbidden to most folks of that era, because of him. Despite this, my grandmother failed to see it or simply pretended not to see it so that she would retain her adamant position, and not lose any grounds on her argument.

Everyone in the family stays at the beach house in the summer, with no respite. We take turns which are conjunctively arranged, at somewhat informal family gatherings, which take place at my grandparents' house on any of the four Sundays in April. It is sort of an informal assemblage where there is no set pattern as to who goes first or with whom; and this happens to be our turn. We arrived last Sunday July 12th. We are my grandmother Herminia, my father and mother Jose and Adelina, my older sister Dolores, whom we call Lola, my younger brother Jose R and my cousins Miguel and his sister Consuelo, and of course, me. The house is a simple, but comfortable spacious ranch built of Hatta palm logs. It consists of three bedrooms, one large combination living and dining area and an ample and functional kitchen. The bathrooms are detached due to building codes. It also has what is almost considered a must in Cuban architecture; a long, and wide front porch, where most of the afternoons are spent.

The Hatta palm is indigenous of the Caribbean islands, and it resembles coconut trees except it grows somewhat straight and very tall and bears no fruit. Its wood is very hard, and it is naturally resistant to bugs, sea water, and humidity. Very similar to the Cypress tree in the Florida everglades, although not as voluminous.

The house sits close to the road as all other houses do, and this is due to the fact that there are barely one hundred meters between the ocean, and the inlet on the backside. The road is dirt, and sand pressed down by the transit, and it is the only way in and out of this narrow isle. Despite this fact, I do not recall ever seeing a traffic jam. There are a total of about one hundred houses, which stretch for about three kilometers along the entire length of the beach and built about fifteen meters apart from each other. They are all painted in soft pastel colors and are all of similar dimensions; to preclude building unbalance. Thirty meters or so, from the front of the houses, lies the ocean with its rhythmic, and soothing soft waves, which is typical of the north shore of Cuba, and which are known to put anyone idly sitting at his porch, asleep regardless of the time of day.

The front windows are very wide, and equally high. They set low from the floor, thus allowing the fresh sea air to permeate throughout the entire house, and are screened, as all others are, to keep the bugs out, when we have them. The temperature this time of year is usually a constant thirty-two degrees during the day, but one would hardly notice due to the also constant sea breeze. My grandfather had the roof built from selected palm leaves, very much the same the Cuban natives had done since way before Columbus, came to our shores. Other folks, however, use tin, and then others clay tiles. At the back of the house, and almost to its width, my grandmother has set up a clothesline to dry the wash. I can still hear her words resonate in my ears: "Nothing dries clothes like the sun". However, there is always the chance of a quick shower, which happens with the speed of light, and which causes all who happen to be in the house, to quickly run out and get the clothes in. It is quite a sight, and it happens very rapidly. It always reminded me of some sort of drill. The first person who notices wind, and rain drops; yells rain, and everybody catapults at unison from whatever they are doing, to meet at full run at the clothesline. The next thirty seconds is all about hands, frantically grabbing items of clothing, as clothes pins go flying every which way, at almost the same speed as that of the folks who now have a bundle of clothes pressed against their chests and are dashing for the nearest door.

It is relatively quiet here and all the residents are owners or relatives of owners, or folks from near-by towns, come to enjoy a day at the beach and patron the only two Tiki-bars we have which are located between the road and the ocean, and sufficiently apart from each other to ascertain there is enough business for both. The visitors are never that many in number, so we really do not have any contretemps. Regardless, on Saturdays and Sundays we normally stay pretty much around the house to avoid whatever crowds there are and then, we resume our routine on Monday. There is no electrical service here, thus television is not a component of that routine, but, listening to our battery-operated radio, walking along the beach, fishing, playing

catch, playing monopoly or checkers, running along the shore, flying kites, visiting neighbors, or just lying on the porch or by the shade of a palm tree, enjoying the cool breeze, and of course getting in the water; is pretty much it. The reader may find this monotonous, and not very exciting; but as far as I am concerned, I would give anything today to be back there for just one day under the same circumstances.

It was just a simple healthy way of enjoying nature and being in touch with God's creation. A raw unadulterated form of appreciating the undisturbed beauty of a simple stretch of sea and sand, that gave those who were fortunate to be there, permission to blend in, and benefit from its many favors as if touched by the very hand of God with almost spiritual and physical curatives results.

With the exception of a handful of locals, no one lives here in the off-season which does not have a set time to start, but it is normally the last week in September and stretches until April of the following year. As mentioned earlier, it is in April on Sunday afternoons, that the family gets together at my grandmother's house to chat and drink iced tea or lemonade, while the children play in the backyard; that the conversation about the beach house comes up, and the family visits get liberally arranged.

Our weather permits us the freedom of a long warm summer, so accommodating everyone in the family, and some friends, never created contretemps. The kids get the better of the deal because the grown-ups get two weeks each and there are always at least two of them to watch us and so we can prolong our stay the whole Summer, if we so desire. My grandfather is the only one that simply visits on Saturdays and Sundays about twice a month. When he does, in addition to bringing groceries, he loads us up with candy, fruits, ice-cream and the comics and his incessant good humor. He will be here tomorrow, and I can't wait.

There are no real grocery stores in the isle except for a large kiosk opposite the small bridge at the main entrance to the isle; where one can buy limited amounts of bread, fruits, pop, salt, sugar, cheese, ham, spices, candles, cigarettes, and things like alcohol, kerosene, shoelaces, paper towels, napkins and first aid kits, and of course rum and beer which are sold in ample amounts, during the weekends. In addition, once or twice a week usually around noon, vendors on horseback with large burlap sacks across the back of their horses; offer bananas, mangoes, pineapples, guavas and oranges, and vegetables, all freshly picked and at very reasonable prices. My grandmother always buys something. The two Tiki bars sell only soda pop, cold beer and rum and whiskey. We also have a vendor, our favorite; that sells homemade caramel candy wrapped in wax paper and shaped as a cone. Before they harden, he places a toothpick at the broad end to hold it. Sort of a lollipop. He carries them on a wooden board of about two feet square, with holes drilled on it with a circumference of about the middle of the candy. He places them upside down and pulls them out by the toothpick when you buy them. All the kids know him as "Vaya-Vaya" because that is what he yells as he passes by. We each have one of these candies around three o'clock every day, which is the time he comes, responding with alacrity and undisturbed, to our noisily flavor demands, as we gather with disquiet, around him. There is also

a bus which offers limited public transportation to a nearby town where one can buy more significant items if needed. The bus is an older GMC model with its side panels removed, and makeshift benches placed where the original seats once were except they go from side to side. There is a running board on either side that runs the length of the bus which eases the getting on and off it.

Like the natural ingredients of that caramel candy, all blending together to form a delicious treat, everything that happens in this place seems to similarly blend in a softly undisturbed harmonious rhythm, which appears to be indigent to the area, and totally different from the town in which we live. Tranquil, peaceful; and soothing to the body, as well as the spirit. Here, all things seem to take place in a very special and demurely unique time zone in which all that goes on, happens effortlessly as if in slow motion but yet, with a chronometrical order to which, all of us who are here, willingly surrender accepting these offerings with no resistance whatsoever, and in so doing, somehow becoming different, probably better people than we usually are, as we allow ourselves to be strongly influenced by the beauty, mystique and serenity that surrounds this small hidden paradise-like, little isle. We simply rise with the early morning sun, happily adjust to the day as it goes along, and go to bed when it sets tranquilly over the horizon.

We use charcoal to cook since there is no gas or electricity, we wash our clothes by hand and dry them by the sun in the total absence of any contrivance. We mold to the isle's nature rather than force our way onto it, and the only thing we do that may be considered somewhat altering, is briefly lighting our Coleman's lanterns for an hour or so, before turning in for the day. It is quite a sight to look to the left and right and see all these single lights adorning every porch against the total darkness of the night. It is not as striking when we have a full moon, but still something of a sight. Other than the houses that have been built, pretty much the shore remains as undisturbed as when it was first created.

For the last two years that I have come and when I am here, I have often thought about these things and wondered if it would be at all possible to transport the character of this place back to our town and perhaps to all of Cuba, and why not, the entire world. I believe it would make all things better everywhere. I realize the naivety of my thoughts, but I also know that this place is real, and I see what it does to all people here. Every - body smiles, they are cordial and helpful, they are respectful of one another, and their property and it is very pleasant to be around them, and all this, taking place in the total absence of a police force. This transformation is real, and very evident, similar perhaps to what folks experiment on Sunday church service, or during Christmas season. When I reach this point in my thinking, I understand how very lucky I am to have been given the opportunity of visiting this place, of having the grandfather I have, and all the other pieces of the puzzle required to shape into reality, the seemingly coincidental occurrences which permitted the where, when and the how of the family into which I was born.

This is the Northern coast of Cuba which is constantly bathed with the trade winds produced by the breaking of the Atlantic Ocean through the Bahamas and the Bermudas and its famous triangle, and the ever-consistent gulf current narrowly scurrying in a northeasterly way between

the southernmost tip of Key West, and the northern coast of Cuba. The current hits head on onto the winds coming from the African West Coast, which are during the season, responsible for so many hurricanes. This combination makes this part of Cuba to be under an almost constant, cool breeze that completely pervades the coast. The waters of this coast are rather shallow for a long stretch which makes its beaches attractive to families with young children.

This was one of the major reasons my grandfather bought property here. My father was trying to have him buy over in the Caribbean side, in the South where the waters are warmer but dangerously deeper, the vegetation thicker making the landscape perhaps more picturesque, but my grandfather decided for this side.

Contrary to what the reader may assume, this isle has never suffered, according to the locals, a direct hit by a hurricane. Somehow, the air current from the gulf of Mexico forces the warm air coming from the coast of Africa, and already taking the form of a low-pressure disturbance, to curve either upward over the Bahamas and into the Atlantic ocean; or downward to the East of Haiti or Jamaica, where when hit by warm waters, surges forming an imaginary ellipse that rides up the southern coast of Cuba at a forty five degree angle, dissecting the island and exiting normally over the northern coast of the province of Pinar Del Rio in the West and approximately one hundred and twenty kilometers west of Havana.

In this trajectory, the isle of Key West which is about one hundred-and-ten kilometers Northeast of Havana, and the Southernmost piece of North American soil, gets pretty much spared by the hurricane's path which by now is in the Gulf of Mexico. Once there, there are two possible situations. One, the disturbance may travel on an easterly direction crossing over the peninsula of Florida, or straight north into either Louisiana or Texas. Two, it heads for the Tortugas and Yucatan in the East coast of Mexico, and then normally, back into the Gulf of Mexico, and upwards into Texas and Louisiana again.

Other hurricanes, the fewer of them, take a different trajectory, running north of Cuba over the Bermudas and up along the Eastern coast of the United States, normally hitting the outer banks in North Carolina, and sometimes winding as far north as New York. In any event, there is no official record of a hurricane ever hitting this place.

This Isle is known as "El Salto" (The Jump). It takes its name from the fact that, to arrive here, the natives had to practically jump over a narrow channel to reach the beach. When it was first discovered by the Spaniards, they found natives living in huts along the beach and feeding on fish, crabs and clams and Cassava which is a bread-like substance they made from an indigenous root known as Yuca. Fishing and clamming are still plentiful and so are the crabs.

My stay this year is two weeks and although I like it here very much, I can't wait to get back to my work. I work summers with my grandfather since last year and will do that until I graduate from High School; then I will work for him full time. I am very excited about this. No one in the family ever showed any interest in working with him and perhaps this is the reason why he

looked so shocked when one day last year after school was over, I walked in his bedroom as he took his customary afternoon nap and told him that I wanted to learn his business and was willing to work for nothing.

He smiled softly and asked me why I wanted to do this. I said he was getting older, he did not have anyone in the family involved in the business and if things should continue in that path, Fuster Scrap Metals, LTD. would eventually disappear. My grandfather had started this business just a few years before the start of World War II, and it was already a thriving business before my birth. He looked at me differently, asked me to get closer, stretched out his right hand as if to shake mine and then pulled me toward him, and hugged me as he extolled me. I was very disappointed he did not come with us last week. He changed his mind at the last minute and told us he will be coming next Sunday the 19th. I miss him. My grandfather, of all the family, is without a doubt my favorite person.

Yesterday, late morning, my father had to take my mother back to the city. She has a female problem which causes her to bleed from time to time and now we hear she is in a clinic in Santa Clara, a large city about an hour north from our town.

Before leaving he talked with my sister and me about helping grandma now that she was going to be alone with us, and to make sure we tended to the younger ones.

My sister Lola, at nineteen, is the oldest of the three of us. I follow at fifteen and one half, my brother Jose is going to be fifteen, and my two cousins; Miguel and Consuelo are brother and sister one year apart, at eleven and ten years old respectively. The rest of the cousins are: Teresa, she is the oldest and is already married with two small children, Mercedes who is attending college in Havana, follows Teresa in age and is one year older than my sister. Lillian, Mercedes's younger sister is two years older than me and two years younger than my sister. Raimundo Jr. who is the oldest brother to Miguel and Consuelo, and who is three years younger than me, Benigno Jr., eleven years old, as is Miguel; and Consuelo at ten, is the youngest.

This Saturday, for whatever reason, seems to be going particularly slow. All of us excepting grandma, have been in the water at least four times. Since we are not allowed to go close to the Tiki bars, our playing field is limited and so are the things we try to do. We have chased small crawfish across the porch floor, played monopoly and dug holes in the sand to see how deep we go before hitting water. In the afternoon and after eating lunch, we lie on the porch floor and very easily fall sleep under the caressing cool breeze. I wake up and watch the clouds up above. I have always enjoy watching the different formations clouds make as they move across the sky. Sometimes they resemble animals, that slowly change into buildings, and even faces of people.

The afternoon is finally coming to an end, and soon all the visitors and outsiders will leave. We take a last dip in the ocean and come in to shower and get ready for supper. After dinner we sit on the porch floor, and grandma sits in her rocker as we await the almost every day spectacular sun setting. Even though our summer days are almost always showered with tropical rains, it is

always clear by late afternoon.

Soon, as if a painter were stroking with his creative brushes, a huge canvas, under a peremptory celestial order, the clouds that had been seconds before light gray are now turning crimson red with fading sections of yellow, dark yellow and deep orange. The entire firmament takes on a life of its own, and in the midst of this array of different shades of brilliant colors, the sun, now visible by the naked eye, seemingly descends ever so slowly in all its glorious fury, to mark the end of another day in this tranquil and reposed, tropical paradise.

As far as I can see to either side of our house, people sit quietly in awe, watching an almost incomprehensible sight. I, as do the others, watch in silence what could very easily be thought a mini replay of this world's Creation.

In just a few more hours, it will be exactly four years, six months and seventeen days before Castro arrogantly takes over the reins of our island, drastically changing the make-up of our government, the idiosyncrasy of our country, and the character of our people; but at this particular moment, it is as peaceful and serene as heavens itself.

Before it becomes totally dark, I light the Coleman and hang it on the hook by the wall, as I think of tomorrow, my grandfather and the fun we will have with him.

We all sit quietly watching the moths fly vibrantly around the lantern and wait for grandma to get up which is the sign for us to follow her inside and get ready for bed. She rises from her rocker, and I head for the Coleman. We all follow her but before I do, I take a last look at the sky and the stars. They are so bright and so many and appear to be so close It feels as though I can almost reach them with my fingers. Holding the Coleman with my left hand, I slowly turn the tiny knob at the side of the lantern, counterclockwise with my right hand; until the flame slowly dissipates.

I walk inside, closing the door behind me as I adjust my eyes to the dim lighting emanating from the strategically placed kerosene lamps that sit on small shelves by the walls. I turned the ones on the dining and living rooms off, and head for the bedroom in which I sleep. As I enter the room, I turned the lamp by the door off, and now negotiate the distance between the door and my bed, in total darkness. I get in bed and fall sleep listening to the gentle wind musically weaving through the ends of the palm leaves, as they in turn, gently scrape the eaves of the roof.

I woke with soft, early rays of morning sun on my face, which enter through the narrow gap between the window and the shade. The bed I sleep in and share with my brother, sets close to the window. The other bed in the room is on the other side against the wall, and it is the one in which my cousin Miguel sleeps. Consuelo sleeps in a small bed in my grandmother's bedroom, and my sister sleeps with my grandmother. The third bedroom is empty since yesterday, when my father left with my mother. It is very early and everyone else is still asleep. Except for the faint crow of a rooster in the distance and the soft rhythmic breaking of the waves on the shore;

there is complete silence. I raise myself on my right elbow and reach for the shade. I pull it gently to one side being careful not to open it too much and peeked outside. It is a beautiful morning. I can see the beach and the white foam rolling gently onto the white sand, after each wave breaks to the shore and then quickly ebbs, exposing momentarily, hundreds of small crabs that immediately rush sideways to catch the fleeting water.

The leaves of rows of palm trees along the shore wave slowly as if dancing to very slow tunes. It is so early; I can look directly onto the morning sun without squinting. What magnificent, gorgeous sight I think to myself. What a blessing to be up so early and catch sight of this, before the others and the rest of the people at the beach, disrupt it. It is no wonder Columbus utter his famous words upon landing in Cuba: " This is the most beautiful land human eyes ever saw".

I got out of bed with a jump and experience a jolt as my feet come in contact with the cold cement floor under my feet. I walked over to my grandmother's room and quietly open the door just enough to look at the clock over her night table. It is 5:45 am. Before getting dressed, I have the chance of sneaking into the kitchen and break one of my grandmother's golden rules by grabbing a handful of fresh granulated brown sugar. I put it in my mouth and enjoy that juicy fresh taste that only pure Cuban cane sugar has when it dissolves slowly in one's mouth. The thought crosses my mind, that one day perhaps, I will miss It. I put my shorts on and proceeded to walk softly out the kitchen door, closing it slowly behind me.

It is wonderful to walk along the shore with no shirt or shoes on and feel the gentle warm sun on my skin and the cool sea water on my feet. I went as far as the pier from where we dive and fish. I inhale deeply, a luxury I do not always have, due to intervals every now and then, of bronchial-asthma, and fill my lungs with the clean fresh air of the morning and feel in my nostrils the salty smell of the sea.

I think of Hemingway and his " Old Man and the Sea" which I read not long ago. Mariel, where he owns a house, is also on this coast not very far from here. I start on my way back to the house. By the time I get there my grandmother will be up and brewing fresh coffee and boiling milk to make Cafe'-con-Leche.

She probably will ask that I wake the others up and tell them to get ready to receive grandpa and the rest of the family. Slowly, and quietly I open the kitchen door, and slip in. She is busy in her slippers and night gown preparing breakfast for us. The smell of freshly brewed coffee and warm rolls fills the entire house.

My father's mother has always been a remarkably energetic person with a personality to boot. Her life was not always easy. An orphan at an early age she suffered all the difficulties that such situations create. In addition to having the premature responsibility of tending to her younger sister Lucia and even younger brother Federico and being bounced around from relative to relative. She was subjected to the scornful attitude of those relatives, who most probably resented her and her siblings. She grew up fast, and became a scraper, a survivor whose single most important concern

was to have enough to eat for her and her siblings.

Wherever they might happen to be living at any particular time; they all had to do chores to an abusive level, especially my grandmother being the oldest, and she had the scars and callous on her hands to prove it. They washed everybody's clothes, ironed everybody's clothes, cook for everybody and did the dishes and cleaned the house plus ran errands to the grocery store. On Sundays they had a respite, and within reason, that time was theirs to do anything, and they looked forward to this. As a result, their schooling was very poor due to their sporadic attendance, thus they learned only enough to be able to read and write at a very rudimentary level.

On many an occasion, she would hand me a note she had written to get her something at the store, and as I walked away, I would read it only to catch several words incorrectly spelled. I always felt I should correct her, but that feeling would quickly dissipate to allow instead; a wave of sorrow and sadness to take its place, and give me almost instantly, an uncontrollable desire to cry, and go back and hug her.

Later, still very young, my grandmother got married perhaps with the thought in mind of looking for some independence. Lucia did the same short after, marrying a Spaniard who owned a rather large farm nearby the town of Las Cruces. She had seven children and lived there until her death. Federico decided one day he was going to look for his own fortune, and at the age of fifteen left, not to be seen for many years. The man my grandmother married was a descendant of folks from the Canary Islands. A few years later, he left her with six children the youngest of whose was only six months old. Lucia had better luck. Federico got himself a job in a large sugar plantation in the province of Camaguey, in the city of Moron, where he worked his way up to the position of foreman, and lived there comfortably, all his life. He married a wonderful lady with whom he had six children.

I only saw him a few times, and despite his rough time as a young boy and then teenager, his was a very affable, humorous, and sanguine character. He was well liked by his employers and many friends and lived with his wife and six children in the same house, until his death at the age of 84 after a long battle with heart disease.

My grandmother's hardship would continue for a few years more, but in the meantime, she would do what had become second nature to her. She clenched her fists, bit hard on life's grizzle, and went forth with resolution and fortitude. She was too busy, and had too many things to do, then even taking time to feel sorry for herself; appear to be frivolous.

All during the time that I knew her, never do I remember the woman to waste any time. From the time she got up, to the time she finally went to bed, she was always busy with whatever task was at hand.

Should she not finish something she had started during the day, that would be the first thing she would tackle the following day. Even the times she would be in her rocker, apparently resting, she would be knitting or crocheting. She really was a sight to watch, and certainly a credit to her resolve to pull her own weight, and help the family to be, and do better. Her endurance, level of tolerance for hardship, and poise during it; were truly deserving of admiration.