



### **Guillermo Ricardo Paz Vazquez**

The year was 1958, I was 8 years old and my life from my perspective was good. I had two wonderful parents and a loving sister who was 2 years older than I. My father was a self-made man who arrived in Cuba at the age of 14 from Spain and after many years of sacrifices and hard work became the owner of two jewelry stores located in Havana. He was a very decent and proper Spaniard who taught by example. My mother, who was also raised in Spain, was a very loving and caring mother. She carried an aura of optimism that would radiate and when she smiled the whole room would light up. She was pure sunshine. Her whole world revolved around my sister and me. She always made sure that all of our needs were met. My typical days consisted in getting up in the morning and after having my usual *café con leche* and Cuban toast I would wait for the school bus in my front porch. The bus would take me to “Las Escuelas Pias de la Víbora,” the school that I attended since the first grade. After school I would do my

homework, and then it was playtime or “mataperrear” on the streets! On my block I had a lot of friends: Jose Manuel (Tito), Emilito, Paco, Albertico, and Julito. We would play baseball on the streets, make club houses from scrap wood, make and fly our own kites, ride bicycle, have soda cap wars, an occasional fist fight with some guys we called “las ratas” (the rats) down the street, go lizard hunting with our pellet rifles, play marbles, top spinning, making *carrionas* with old skates, gamble with baseball cards, exchange comic books and the usual hide and seek at night. I could stay out and play until I heard “el cañonazo de las nueve”, which was a canon fired from el Morro at 9:00 p.m., I could stay out that late as long as I kept my end of the deal of not letting my grades fall, which I never did. I always carried a nickel in my pocket for an occasional “Ironbeer,” Coke and/or a slice of mortadella from the corner bodega. Almost every weekend and specially during the summer months I would spend my time at the Club Bancario located in Santa Maria del Mar, a breathtaking beach with beautiful fine white sand and clear turquoise blue waters located about 12 miles east of Havana along the Via Blanca highway. My prized possessions included my Niagara bicycle, my pellet rifle, my marble collection, my Union #5 roller skates, my collection of comic books, and my collection of baseball cards. As I stated before life was good!

1959 started with a lot of fanfare. When Fidel with his *barbudos* entered Havana I found it fascinating at the beginning. They would show me their weapons and would give me bullets as souvenirs. It was like living in a real adventure movie much like the TV shows that I loved to watch such as The Lone Ranger, Rin Tin Tin, El Zorro, Westerns, and World War II movies. The fanfare was short-lived. Soon my favorite TV programs were been replaced by public trials resembling the Roman Coliseum with spectators chanting “Paredon” (to the wall) followed by executions by firing squads. I heard of mobs sacking houses of Batista sympathizers. Envy seemed to be running wild in the streets and anyone could label you a Batista sympathizer. Even though my family was not involved in anything that had to do with politics, for the first time in my life I began to sense

and feel fear. I remember my father telling me that I should not repeat anything that I heard in our house to anyone and if someone asked me “whom do you belong to, Batista or Fidel?” my answer should be “I belong to my Father and Mother”. Shortly afterwards the “Comité de Defensa” (Defense Committee) was established in the next block from my house by the most envious undesirable individuals of the neighborhood. One day a member of the “Comité” asked the question that my father had prepared me for and I carefully answered my canned response while my sister, my self-appointed defender, simply told him to go to hell and to stop bothering us. On another occasion another member of the same committee was posting signs stating “Fidel Esta Es Tu Casa” (Fidel This is Your House) all along a masonry wall that fenced our corner house while my sister was carefully removing them and tearing them up behind her. When confronted, my sister told her, “You are posting the signs on the wrong house; this is not Fidel’s house. I know because I live here!” I am pretty sure that we were labeled “Los Gusanos” (the worms) of the neighborhood after that.

As time went on, I began to realize that I was witnessing the beginning of the end of an era similar to watching a video of a flower wilting in fast forward. I still had my nickel in my pocket but there was no Ironbeer, Coke or mortadella to buy at the *bodega* and Chiclets were nowhere to be found. People standing in line to buy groceries became a common sight. Even in Varadero you couldn’t get *mermelada de guayaba con queso crema*, which was my favorite. My father, who used to sit on the front porch after work reading the newspaper, was now in his bedroom listening to “La Voz de Las Americas” behind closed doors on a short-wave radio in an obvious effort of obtaining unbiased information. The squelching sound emitted from the radio as he tuned-in the station is unforgettable. One night, I entered his room as he was listening to the radio; he sat me down, turned off the radio and calmly proceeded to explain the theory of communism and its ramifications. I was also told not to worry since the Americans would never allow communism within 90 miles from their shores and that it was all a matter of time

before all of this madness would end but that I would be traveling “al norte” (north) in the near future on a temporary basis until the dust settled.

One night while I was playing hide and seek, a half a block away from where I was, someone had placed on the door of the “Comité de Defensa” some anti-Fidel propaganda. The “miliciano”(militia) who was in charge of defending his post upon seeing the sign ran to the middle of the street with his rifle to see if he could find the guilty party, and who does he see running in the street? Me! He then yells, “Halt!” Now mind you that I did hear the command to halt but I had been hiding in a bush in front of a house where a very cute girl lived and I thought that it was the girl’s father yelling so I ran even faster towards the “base,” which was this huge old tree by the corner *bodega*. As I am running towards the base, the miliciano raises his rifle, has me on his sights, and as he squeezes the trigger, I trip on the tree’s roots and fall. By an act of God the bullet flies over my head and strikes the tree. My father, who had been sitting in our front porch, witnessed the whole event except for the fact that he thought that I had been killed. He ran towards the miliciano, disarmed him and threw him to the ground ready to kill him screaming, “He is just a boy” over and over and over. After seeing that I was unharmed, he stopped the physical attack on the miliciano but continued with the longest verbal attack that I have ever witnessed. This was the last night that I was allowed to play on the street. The streets, the playground that had been so dear to me, were no longer safe.

I guess that my father knew more than he was letting me know, for he decided that we were going to take a trip from “El Cabo de San Antonio to La Punta de Maisí;” in other words he wanted me to see all of Cuba before I left, and I did.

All Cubans know that October 10th also known as “El Grito de Yara” signifies the day when sugar mill owner Carlos Manuel de Céspedes and his followers proclaimed Cuba’s independence from Spain. To me, it signifies a lot more, for it

is also the day of my independence from communism. It is the day that I left Cuba. On the morning of Tuesday October 10th, 1961 I took a very slow deliberate walk around my house and the neighborhood, paying full attention to every detail with the full knowledge that I wouldn't be there the next day, but little did I know that it would be my last. Back in my room, my mother had been putting the finishing touches packing my luggage, which she had been working on for the last 3 days. As I entered the room she asked me if I wanted to put anything else into the luggage. I figured that I was leaving on a temporary basis so I said no. She then handed me a drawstring bag she had made from an old curtain remnants containing my marble collection and said that she would like for me to take it along. When I asked why, she said, with a half smile, that it would be a good idea. I placed the bag inside my luggage and closed it.

Neatly placed on top of my bed was a new dark blue suit that my mother had bought for the trip. After dressing I looked in the mirror and the reflection that came back was that of a full-grown man like my father. At the time I did not understand that at that moment my childhood had ended and that the reflection was of what I had become. Before leaving the house, my father quizzed me on my home address and on all the phone numbers that I should remember. To this day, these numbers are still engraved in my mind.

The trip to the airport was non eventful mixed with an occasional "mira la vaquita" (look at the cow) bit. Obviously my parents and my sister were trying to mask their feelings by casting a positive tone on the situation. I had mixed fillings. On the one hand I was going to the good old USA on a temporary basis, I was going on my first plane ride, and I was ridding myself of all the oppression that existed in Cuba. I was going towards freedom! On the other hand, I was leaving behind my family and everything that I knew towards an unknown.

Once at the airport I was familiar with the routine since we had previously accompanied a neighbor who had departed to Miami about a month before. Since we had arrived early, to kill time, my mother took me to the gift shop and bought me some maracas, one with HABANA and the other with CUBA engraved on it. At some point I was told that it was time to enter the glass enclosed gate waiting room also known as “la pecera” (the fishbowl). I knew that this was the point of no return. So with my best stiff upper lip I hugged and kissed my parents and sister goodbye but also made sure that I was the last one to enter. Once inside I could see my parents and sister through the glass but could no longer talk to them or touch them. Now I knew why it was called the fishbowl. You felt like a silly goldfish! The fishbowl had a Machiavellian physiological effect. You were still in Cuban territory so you were at their mercy while your parents watched but could not defend you. It was the communist’s last insult. As I heard the order to board the plane, my eyesight locked-in on my family who were standing on the other side of the glass doing their best to look cheerful. They hand signaled that they were going to the second floor balcony. I nodded my head, blew them a kiss and entered a room where they opened and inspected my luggage. They didn’t find anything that they wanted to confiscate, which could have been just about anything, so I was released to proceed down the tarmac towards the plane. On my way there I looked back up at the balcony and saw a multitude of people waving white handkerchiefs. I couldn’t point out my family but I knew they were there, so for their sake I smiled and waved back as if I had seen them. Once on the plane, I was lucky to get a window seat. I instantly glued my face to the window to see if I could see them, but my view was away from the terminal. After what seemed like an eternity, the plane started to taxi towards the runway. On its way there I could see the terminal again this time at a much greater distance but you could still detect all those white handkerchiefs waving good-bye in the distance, and I knew that at least one was for me.

After the plane took-off I kept looking out the window attempting to memorize all the splendor of the Cuban landscape but as we approached the coastline an eerie feeling came over me. I was not sure if I would ever see Cuba again or when I would see my family. The only thing I was sure of was that I was on my own. I was still bouncing those thoughts around in my mind when I heard the announcement that we would be landing in MIA and to please fasten your seatbelts. As I walked down the staircase from the airplane the eerie feeling changed to a sense of accomplishment and relief for I was finally in the USA and free from all of the communist oppression. I took a long deep breath, savoring my freedom, and proceeded towards the terminal. There, someone led me to a small sterile room containing some chairs, a desk, and an American flag on a pole standing by the corner. Hanging on the wall behind the desk was a large framed picture of President Kennedy. Alone in the room I kept looking at the flag noticing that both the Cuban and the American flags were red, white and blue. The Cuban represented my homeland but this one symbolized my freedom. I was still admiring that beautiful flag when a black man entered the room and said something to me in English. I responded, "me no spic ingli". After he realized that I had no idea of what he was saying, he smiled, gave me a pack of Juicy Fruit chewing gum; then left the room. The next person to enter was a friend of my family, Serafin, whom I immediately recognized. After some small talk, he explained that my family had made arrangements for him to pick me up at the airport and to take me to a camp called Kendall. The word camp sounded great, so I said, "fine, let's go."

I left with him to claim my luggage and proceeded towards his car. The poor guy was driving a 1952 Chevrolet that looked like a reject from a demolition derby. On our way there, he kept apologizing for the car saying things like "I know that it looks like a rust bucket but it sure has a good engine". When I inquired why he had so many gallons of water in the back seat, he told me that they were there for when the engine overheated. I nodded while thinking; I thought he said that it

had a good engine! I was beginning to understand what life as an exile would be like. Out the window, everywhere I looked, I would see gravel and lime rock with overgrown bushes. I kept wondering, "How on earth do they grow anything around here with no topsoil? Where are the tall buildings? Why don't the streets have curbs? Where are those beautiful scenic views of the countryside that I had seen in books? Is this all there is? Noooooo, this had better not be all there is to the USA." Well, I didn't say anything but I was sure thinking it! After traveling for a while on a solitary road leading to the middle of nowhere and just as I was convinced that Serafin was lost, we finally arrived at the Kendall camp.

Within the camp stood this elongated one-story building resembling an army barrack with the entrance on one end. We entered the building and went into an office where some paperwork got done. After the formality of the paper work, Serafín left. Someone gave me a tour of the premises and showed me my bunk and locker location. I started unpacking when suddenly I remembered that I had seen a Coke machine by the entrance. I hadn't had a Coke in years so I threw all my belongings into the locker, closed it and went back to the machine. As I stood there, with anticipation in front of that machine, I reached into my pocket, where I always carried my nickel, took it out and as I was going to place it into the slot I realized that the price for my elusive Coke was ten cents. I stood there in disbelief, holding my buffalo nickel in my hand, frozen in time. I kept thinking, "This is not happening. It can't be. For heaven's sake it is made here! If anything it should be cheaper!" I must have looked pretty pitiful standing in front of that old machine holding my nickel because someone tapped me on the shoulder and said; "Coje, asere" (here you go buddy) and gave me a dime. After all those years, I was finally having a nice cold Coke. Wow what a treat! The day turned into night, and I was felling kind of tired due to the adrenaline rush from the day's events. As I laid there on my bunk looking up at the underside of the bunk above me, analyzing my predicament, I could hear the younger kids crying in the

darkness. It was very sad but I knew that I could not give myself that luxury, if I was to survive, so I fought back my feelings and went to sleep.

As the time passed I began to settle in and actually enjoyed my time there. Everyone who worked there went out of their way to help us in any way they could. They would take us to this huge pool located in the Matacumbe camp, where we would swim. I learned how to play a game, which seemed really weird at the time, where you got into a fistfight while you held a pointed ball under your arm. I later found out that it was called football. Then I started to hear rumors that they were planning to send some of the kids up north to orphanages and foster homes. Now, that did not sit well with me, since from my point of view I was already up north. How much further up north are we talking about now? I seem to recall places like Illinois, Nebraska, Montana and Indiana. In addition I previously did not have a problem with the word camp but the words orphanages and foster homes had a negative connotation with me. Now what? Well what I needed was time so on every occasion that I got called in to the office to tell me that they had a “beca” (scholarship) for me, I would tell them that I had just received a letter from my parents telling me that they were going to be arriving any day now. This bought me some time, but after a while my credibility was running thin and I felt like Maxwell Smart with his ‘Well, would you believe’ routine so I wrote a letter to my parents to see if they could come up with plan “B”. My parents, who had never failed me, came up with a plan. I moved in with my godparents living in Hialeah.

My stay there was bitter sweet. I had managed to stay in Miami but I was in no way in a place that I could call home. I didn’t even feel comfortable opening the refrigerator door. I learned to ignore the negative, to concentrate on the positive and to continue on the path that my parents had taught me to follow. During my stay there I attended Saint John the Apostle Catholic School, paid from the money that my parents would send from Cuba.

The 4th of July is USA's day of independence and it is also mine because on that glorious day in the year 1963 my mother and my sister arrived in Miami from Cuba via Mexico. We moved into this small apartment in the N.W. section of Miami known as Wynwood. One of the first things that I did as I entered the apartment was to open the refrigerator door and stand in front of it smiling. When my mother asked me what I was doing, I said, "Nothing" and then I hugged her. I was finally home. In 1965, two years later my father arrived penniless after the government confiscated his businesses. I later learned through my father that my mother cried herself to sleep every night during my absence.

Since then I have lived and made Miami my hometown. After St. Johns, I graduated from Robert E. Lee Jr. High, Miami Jackson High School and the University of Miami.

My father, mother and sister have all since passed away and are buried side by side here in Miami. I left them behind when I left Cuba and now they have all departed and left me behind, but I know that someday we will be reunited again.

I am now married to another Pedro Panner who is the mother of two wonderful sons and the grandmother of three beautiful grandchildren. We are both registered architects practicing in Miami. I will always be eternally grateful for and to my parents, the USA, the Catholic Church and to all the people that God has sent to help me through this winding road we call life. It is sad to see how our beloved Cuba has become an impoverished third world country with no resemblance to the prosperous society of my black and white memories that I hold so dear. I can't even imagine what my life would have been like in Cuba.

Now when a client wants me to design a temporary structure, I make sure that it can withstand the test of time. What is my definition of temporary? Well so far it is 50 years but I am still counting. One final note; I have been able to hold on to my maracas, I haven't lost my marbles and that buffalo nickel-- I still have it!