

A TIME TO LOOK BACK

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Growing up during the Cuban Revolution
A memoir by Anthony Timiraos
(excerpt from Chapter 13 – After the Invasion – 1961)

The day the exile brigade was declared defeated, the line of military vehicles ran up and down the main streets of La Habana in a celebratory mood to the delight of many supporters. Road blockades and vehicle searches were set up all over the city, and private homes were searched to identify and prevent any uprising by the opposition living in La Habana. That day, during the celebrations on the streets of La Habana, a very close friend of my parents was sitting on his balcony, watching the commotion created by the military and its supporters. Suddenly, a stray bullet from a moving truck loaded with military personnel struck him and killed him immediately.

During the early evening the same day, my parents felt obligated to pay their respects by visiting the widow at her home. They arranged for Abuela Teresa to stay with us while they went to visit with their friend who just lost her husband. Since Abuela did not own a car and did not know how to drive, that meant my father had to pick her up, bring her to our house, go out again with my mother to visit the widow, come back home to drop off my mother and pick up Abuela Teresa, drive her to her apartment, and then return home. That was a total of six times my father was stopped, interrogated, and vehicle-searched at various roadblocks that were set up throughout the city. He tried to avoid them by changing routes, but the multiple checkpoints were impossible to circumvent. I remember my father expressing concern about all the driving he did that night and the multiple one-on-one exchanges with the military personnel he could not bypass.

Abuela Teresa was now safely in her apartment and my parents were home with us. It was a lot of traveling back and forth, but it was important to visit a close friend who just lost her husband because of a senseless and irresponsible stray bullet from a military vehicle. My brothers and I were already in bed, but I was awake listening to my parents discuss the evening's events. My father continued to be concerned about all the activity in and out of our home, but he knew there was no way out of it – He felt compelled to visit their friend's widow. I heard him walk to the living room and tell my mother he wanted to look outside through the window. There was a military vehicle parked right outside our front door with several soldiers inside. After a few minutes, the truck pulled out and my father returned to the bedroom. Concerned about all that was going on outside on the streets of La Habana, I don't believe they slept much that evening.

The next morning, my parents acted as if it was normal day. We could not attend school yet until all the military activity returned to normal levels, whatever that meant. My father was dressed in his suit and tie, ready for work. He sat with us in the dining room for breakfast. After we were all done, he kissed us goodbye, not knowing the events that would take place the rest of the day.

It was bad enough that we were not able to attend school, but now we were not allowed to go outside to play with friends. There was not much for three boys to do inside one household. Our housekeeper, Georgina, was always disappointed when she came in and found all of us home from school. We used to tease her and annoy her during her daily chores around the house. So, this time when she entered and saw all three of us at home again, she made the sign of the cross, murmured

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something we could not understand, and continued to the kitchen. Georgina was an attractive and hardworking young woman in her late teens with beautiful dark creamy skin and long, shiny, black hair. She lived about two miles from our house and walked every day to help my mother with the chores of maintaining a household for my father and three boys. That day, we spent most of the morning in the courtyard playing or just being silly, trying to stay out of trouble.

Shortly before noon on the day after the failed invasion, I heard vehicle brakes squealing from several cars and trucks trying to park outside our home. I heard their doors slamming. From the side alley in the courtyard, I could see soldiers exiting a small truck and surrounding our house. I immediately panicked and ran inside the house with my brothers to tell my mother. Suddenly, we heard a strong and loud pounding on the door. She must have also heard the vehicles park right outside, because my mother was already on her way to the living room to open the front door. I stayed in the hallway behind a door looking directly at the men who banged on the door. “*Buenas tardes, señora ...*” (Good afternoon, ma’am ...) two men in dark suits and dark sunglasses presented her with some type of credentials, a badge or license, and said they were there to search the home. They told us to wait in the courtyard and stand against the concrete wall that separated the properties. No search warrant was required by the military.

The thugs entered our home with at least a dozen other soldiers in full combat gear, including rifles, handguns, and ammunition. In a matter of minutes, they turned the entire house upside down. Drawers were emptied and all their contents left on the floor. Mattresses were overturned to examine the space under the beds. Furniture was moved all around the house to look for hidden doors or compartments inside the walls. Kitchen cabinets were emptied and food left on the floor. Several soldiers climbed onto the roof to make sure nobody was hiding there.

At this point, my two brothers, my mother, Georgina, and I stood outside in the courtyard of our home leaning against the wall as we were told and held each other tight. We were all frightened but I tried not to show any emotion that might upset my family and Georgina, who had her hands around my shoulders. I could feel her shaking like she was at the epicenter of a powerful earthquake. She could not hold her nervousness any longer and urinated on the courtyard floor while standing there against the wall. My mother grabbed her and held onto her just as close and tight as her own sons. The soldiers noticed what was happening and as expected, did nothing to assure us we were safe.

This unpleasantness lasted only about 30 minutes, even though it seemed like hours. Luckily, we lived in a small house. When they were done turning the house upside down, one of the thugs with a dark suit and dark sunglasses (which he never took off during the raid) came to the courtyard and asked my mother where my father was. She knew he was expected home for lunch soon, but only told the thug that he was at work and she wasn’t sure if he was coming home for lunch or staying to work in the office.

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The raid produced nothing in our home that was considered anti-Castro. The soldiers left our house, got back inside their vehicles, and raced down the street. I remember my mother trying to compose herself after seeing our house in shambles. The invasion of our family's privacy must have angered her tremendously, although she showed no resentment in front of us. My mother gave Georgina a change of clothing from her closet. Georgina, still physically shaken, changed in the bathroom quickly, reached out for the mop in the kitchen, and, without saying a word or looking at any of us, mopped the courtyard. She returned from the courtyard and began the task of putting the house back together with us. My mother gave us orders to clean up our rooms while she worked with Georgina around the rest of the house.

We all pitched in but before we could finish, my father walked in the house for lunch with a look of shock on his face at the turmoil around us. I think he knew exactly what had happened and was sorry he was not there to protect us. He rolled up his sleeves as well to help return the house to normal while my mother and Georgina finished making lunch. We all sat together at the table, Georgina included. There was no discussion of what just happened as we ate our lunch in almost complete silence. Today, I would love to know what was going through the minds of my parents. It was a painful day we never discussed openly.

It was not easy for my parents to hide their emotions that afternoon. My father still had a serious look of concern on his face after our lunch. We kissed him goodbye as he got in his car and returned to work. What he experienced when he reached his office that afternoon was something I am sure he never forgot.