

LAST FLIGHT

*from*

HAVANA

*A Memoir of Cuba, Family, and Faith*

# Contents

<b>Preface: Starting Over</b>	<b>xi</b>
<b>Chapter 1: The Last Delta Flight from Havana</b> <i>November 23, 1961</i>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 2: White Dress Day</b> <i>Tú eres fuerte. You are strong.</i>	<b>9</b>
<b>Chapter 3: Two Separate Cultures, Two Separate Worlds</b> <i>As we struggle to define who we are, we must ask who we are meant to be.</i>	<b>19</b>
<b>Chapter 4: Reuniting and Letting Go</b> <i>Nada se borra. Nothing is erased. Nada se acaba. Nothing ever ends.</i>	<b>29</b>
<b>Photo Album</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>Chapter 5: Choices Are Never Easy: Starting a Career and a Family</b> <i>If you want to be happy and fulfilled, you must find meaning in your life.</i>	<b>59</b>
<b>Chapter 6: An Unexpected Twist</b> <i>Sometimes we are called to play a part in something big.</i>	<b>67</b>
<b>Chapter 7: Little Pearls of Wisdom</b> <i>Life's biggest challenges can also be its greatest gifts.</i>	<b>73</b>
<b>Chapter 8: Reconnecting</b> <i>Revisiting your past can help you find what you left behind.</i>	<b>81</b>
<b>Chapter 9: Life Is Made for Dancing</b> <i>It's not what you do; it's the people you touch along the way.</i>	<b>91</b>
<b>Conclusion: Three Lessons By Which to Live Life</b> <i>Trust that you can start over, be true to yourself, and live your legacy now.</i>	<b>99</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>105</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>109</b>

## PREFACE

# Starting Over

**F**rom the moment I fled my native Cuba in 1961, I have lived a life I did not plan . . . but it has been exactly the life God intended for me to live.

Along the way, I have been on a journey of transformation as my identity has shifted, and my family and my work have changed. I've grown apart from some people and closer to others, both losing and deepening relationships. And through it all, I have become better at finding blessings in every moment of change.

I strongly believe that people get to where they're supposed to be. They may think they're not supposed to be there, but everything happens for a reason, and I am no exception. I have struggled to manage the unpredictable and unexpected. We often think our lives are going to turn out one way, and then they turn out very differently. At that point, it is incumbent on us to bravely forge ahead and create a *new* life—to learn from the pain and start over.

Fear. Shock. Uncertainty. Doubt. Those were the early themes in my young life. Time and again, I had to start over, whether in a new country, new school, new job, or new relationship. This theme of “starting over” also defined the lives of my parents, two people who were forced to leave the country they loved. They had to learn a new language, a new culture, a new profession, and new ways to cope. They had to learn how to breathe, how to let go, and how to trust in God. And, as their eldest child, I watched and learned from them as they accomplished all of these things.

But of course, as everyone does, I would have to go on my own journey to absorb these lessons completely.

I was born in Cuba, grew up in a small Cajun town in Louisiana, and moved to New Orleans for high school. I studied to be a psychologist and a social worker but then changed careers many times. I have had the privilege of assuming leadership roles across diverse domains, spanning technology, sales, marketing and communications. My journey has taken me through the corridors of Corporate America and into the realm of entrepreneurship as a consultant. Remarkably, I proudly held the distinction of being the highest-ranked Latina executive within both a Fortune 50 and Fortune 500 company, a testament to my dedication, perseverance and resilience. In one unpredictable twist, at one point I even left the country to help track down a kidnapped child and rediscovered parts of myself and my identity I didn't know I'd missed.

Likewise, my personal life was marked by seismic change. I was married for twenty-three years and had three children. While we were in the midst of a painful divorce, our son was diagnosed with mental illness. I suddenly became a single mom, parenting twins who were in high school and a son who was in and out of hospitals and facilities. I had to become a domestic and professional Holy Trinity of my own: the breadwinner, the mother, and the caregiver. And once again, I found myself having to start over and learn new ways to provide for my children.

Every day, I engaged in this process of relearning how to manage my life, family, and career. Lessons I thought I'd mastered years earlier were thrown out the window as I was forced to figure out how to better take care of myself, my children, my parents, and my employees.

Then, in 2012, my father died. He had always dreamed of going back to Cuba, but he never had the chance. We couldn't even grant him his final wish: to be buried in his own country. My father's death ripped me apart. Suddenly, all the memories of Cuba that I'd forgotten, and the life I'd left behind, came flooding back.

I realized that I had spent most of my life living in two worlds. At times, I hadn't wanted to connect the two, and at other times, I had so deeply longed for them to intertwine. After all, the world that my parents lived in was so resoundingly Cuban: the food, the memories, their constant talk of the family we left behind, and our fervent hope that we would see them again.

Shortly before my father's death, my mom and I did go back to Cuba. I expected the trip to be life-changing for her, and it was. What I never expected was how much it would change *my* life. I wish I'd known then what I know now.

Like the stories of so many Cuban exiles, my story is complicated and always unfolding. As Cubans, we have not completely come to terms with the injustice of our fate. Since it left so many families and relationships in undeserved tatters, how could we?

I have family members situated just ninety miles from Miami who struggle to live with the dignity and respect every human being deserves. Some of us have lived in the United States for more than fifty years, and today we embrace cousins who visit from Cuba with a bittersweet mixture of loving and painful memories. We ask the same gut-wrenching questions over and over: "What happened to those members of our family we lost contact with?" and "What happened to my grandfather's land?"

As Cubans, we so often find ourselves in a race against time to learn about our past and to find these memories before they are erased. We have learned to persevere through disappointments and to create new lives for ourselves, yet we still find our identities tangled up in the past. We constantly fear that our memories, once so vivid, may be forgotten.

My story is far from unique. Unfortunately, there are thousands, if not millions, of people who've had to leave their country of origin because of political unrest and instability. Many came to the United States with nothing but the clothes on their backs—and ample reserves of hope and faith in God—to start new lives. They lived with gut-wrenching losses of their homes, businesses, and families. When they were forced to relocate to a new country, they had to start over from scratch.

My return trip to Cuba with my mother opened up a world inside me that I had never known existed. When my mother looked out the window of our airplane and saw the Cuban island for the first time since 1961, her lips trembled. "*Mi Cuba*," she whispered. *My Cuba*. She hugged her hands close to her chest and said a prayer while tears rolled down her cheeks.

In life, I believe you are always free to make new choices and to start over. But it takes resilience and trust in a higher power to get you through. For me, it was my faith in God. You learn to use your faith and your inner compass to make tough choices. You learn to embrace your personal freedom and to embrace your past.

That's what this memoir is all about.

When I think about “starting over,” I visualize my mom, my brother, and myself getting on the last Delta plane and leaving Havana in 1961. My parents created a new life for themselves. And, following in their footsteps, I have created new lives for myself a dozen times since.

You have that same power. You can make choices and embrace change. You can push through heartache and loss to find a better, brighter tomorrow. It may not be the life you imagined, but here’s a secret: it may be even better. That has certainly been my experience, time and again.

Marcus Buckingham, the motivational author of *Find Your Strongest Life*, says we need to identify the key, defining moments in our lives and bring power to them. Then we must use that power to gain a better understanding of ourselves. Only when we understand ourselves can we share what we have learned with others.

I want to share the lessons I have learned, and show you how every change, no matter how small, can make a positive impact. I want to show you how embracing the difficult moments in your life will empower you to recognize the opportunities that lie beyond them. I want to share my defining moments that have fueled my strengths. I want you to know that you can embrace the past, learn from it, and become a better version of yourself.

These moments have not only shaped who I am, but also serve as a constant reminder that with God’s help, I can handle whatever comes my way.

And so can you.

## CHAPTER 1

### The Last Delta Flight from Havana: November 23, 1961

The car jostled and jolted, hitting ruts in the road as my grandfather drove my mother, my younger brother, and me to the Havana airport. His hands gripped the steering wheel so tightly that his knuckles shone through his smooth, brown skin.

“*Tranquila,*” my mother said to me, over and over. *Be calm. Don’t worry.*

But she was worried. I could tell.

I was just a young child, but even I knew something was terribly wrong. We were racing to the airport to flee our homeland, to start a new life in the United States. We could no longer stay in Cuba; our lives were in danger. But would we make it out in time? I had every reason to be afraid.

Two years earlier, on January 1, 1959, Fidel Castro had seized power. Our beloved country had been split into two groups: those who supported Castro’s Communist regime and those who did everything in their power to dismantle the new government. Overnight, my pleasant childhood had given way to pain, fear, and confusion as my extended family began to take sides.

In the nursery school I attended, teachers taught songs about Castro and instructed us on why the new Communist government was good for the country. When I told my mother what I was learning,

she immediately enrolled me in a different nursery school.

During the long, sweltering evenings, my mother and grandmother prayed the rosary on the back terrace of my grandparents' house in Jovellanos, two hours outside of Havana. They prayed in secret, afraid of what the government might do if they found out.

Things were changing. Private businesses and personal possessions were being seized. Men in military uniforms went from house to house, and when they came to our house, they confiscated our car. We were all afraid. My grandfather was the third largest rice farmer and owned cattle and crops, which meant he and my uncles were prime targets. No one knew what would happen next.

My father was a sugar chemist, and during this time he was the chief sugar chemist at the Araujo Sugar Mill in Matanzas Province. He was very proud to be one of Cuba's elite "sugarmen," who were respected globally as the best plant managers and sugar chemists in the sugar milling industry.

\*\*\*

On April 17, 1961, my father woke to booming cannons and the threatening buzz of low-flying planes. He quickly realized that Araujo was at the center of the battle to overthrow Fidel Castro. The Cuban exiles had landed on the *Bahía de Cochinos*—the Bay of Pigs—only a few miles from where my father was working. He never forgot the terror and near-death experiences he went through that day, and in the days that followed. He knew the trajectory of his life had changed forever.

I was not old enough to read or understand, but my parents remember the newspaper headlines: "1,200 US-Sponsored Anti-Castro Exiles Invade Cuba at Bay of Pigs; Attackers All Killed or Captured by Cuban Forces."

*The Bay of Pigs.* Those four words have become an indelible part of the cultural memory of America. But for my family in 1961, these words did not represent abstract history. They related to real events in our lives that cloaked our days in dread and filled our nights with terror. We saw what had once been private property confiscated by the Cuban government and the lives of everyone around us were shattered as land was taken and people were executed. Chaos and worry were uninvited guests, but always in our homes.

One night when we were all asleep, we heard a knock on the door. It was about eleven o'clock at night. Trembling, my grandmother answered. Three tall men in military uniforms stood on our doorstep, casting long shadows into our house. They asked for my grandfather. When my grandfather came to the door, he was immediately handcuffed, shoved into a truck, and taken away, seemingly for being a property owner.

I was in shock as I watched the truck drive off into the night. I would never forget the look of abject horror on my grandfather's face as they dragged him away from us. My mother and grandmother screamed and wailed as the gravel crunched beneath the truck's tires. We had no idea what was going to happen to him. Would he be thrown in jail? Would he be killed? We had heard terrible stories, and we did not sleep that night. We held onto one another, crying and praying, fearing the worst.

Around dawn the next morning, a truck stopped in front of our house again and the men inside threw my grandfather out onto the street. He was disheveled and his glasses were broken, but he was home. Apparently, Castro's regime had been rounding up suspects all night, and since the prisons were

full, they drove my grandfather around all night and then dumped him back at home in the morning. It could have been a lot worse.

I started hearing sirens at night. The roar of planes flying low over our house frightened me. I stopped eating. I cried constantly. The only way I could dampen the noises was to hide under my bed, where I thought no one could find me.

My mother, concerned about my health, took me to see my pediatrician. The doctor did some tests and couldn't find anything physically wrong with me. He told my mother to take me to a psychiatrist in Havana. The psychiatrist said I was going through a "situational traumatic experience." He prescribed Play-Doh!

The world raged around me as I sat at home with my Play-Doh, pressing it into colorful shapes and figures. Surprisingly, the toy was helpful. The soft dough gave me a way to occupy my mind and hands, a means of calming myself when I was on the cusp of panic. Years later, when I bought Play-Doh for my own children, I would think of it as medicine: a tool to make you feel better, even during the worst of times.

My mother worked hard to keep my mind off the disturbing news all around us. She forbade the adults in our family to talk about Castro or Cuban politics in front of me. She knew that I was like a sponge; I absorbed everything, including all the terror and uncertainty. The adults became more afraid as our situation worsened, and that frightened me even more. It was truly our faith in God that brought us together. Faith gave us the strength and hope that we would find a way through this.

But my mother couldn't shield me from everything. I heard whispers. My parents were becoming convinced the only solution was to take me and my younger brother, Raul, out of the country. Years later, my mother explained to me that the government had ordered children aged eleven and older to be taken away to training camps, where they would absorb the government's propaganda without any parental interference. My parents feared the Communist government would exert this influence over our lives forever.

They felt a great sense of urgency to get us out of the country. My parents and I had travel visas because we had visited the United States before, when my father had worked in southeastern Louisiana during the sugar cane season. At that time, I'd made my first trip to a Louisiana sugar mill, but my brother, Raul, who was only two years old, had stayed in Cuba with my grandparents. Now we had to wait for his temporary vacation visa. It would permit him to travel to the United States and stay for up to three months during the sugar season.

After the Bay of Pigs shook us all, my father's perseverance helped him to negotiate a contract with Terrebonne Southeast Corporation Sugar Mill, and he went to Louisiana on a work visa. My mother, Raul, and I tried to be patient while he was away, but every day we anxiously awaited any news.

Meanwhile, my mother started making plans to leave. Those who didn't know us well thought we were simply traveling to the United States to be with my father while he worked during the sugar season. They thought nothing was out of the ordinary, but those in our intimate family circle knew the truth.

When my father was granted refugee status in the United States, he obtained the visa for Raul. Then he put into motion the events that would change my life forever: he completed the paperwork

that would bring my mother, Raul, and me to the United States.

\*\*\*

“*Tranquila,*” my mother said, as my grandfather’s car sped over the bumpy road to the airport. She squeezed my hand. “*Tranquila, Tere.*”

“Tere” was the name my father and mother called me. Teresita is my middle name in honor of Santa Teresita.

It was November 23, 1961, the day we left Cuba forever.

The day was full of weeping. As we sped along, my maternal grandfather stopped briefly at the home of my paternal grandparents so we could say good-bye. Only then did they understand the full implications of our journey. My grandmother hugged me to her chest. She smelled of flowers and spices. She cried and cried. Their loss would be fathomless, and they begged us to change our minds and stay.

But they also knew Cuba was no longer safe for us. My brother and I were young, with so much life ahead of us. The country was being crushed by the iron fist of communism. We had to get out.

A short time later, my grandfather announced: “*Aquí estamos,*” as we pulled into the Havana Airport. *We’re here.* I held onto my mother with one hand and my little brother with the other. We stepped out of the car.

The airport was in utter chaos. People were panicking, children clinging to their parents and parents clinging to their children. Men and women staggered out of the airport after putting their kids on airplanes and sending them off in hopes of a better tomorrow.

This was Operation Pedro Pan, the mass exodus of Cuban children to the United States. Later, I would learn this underground operation was one of the largest recorded exoduses of unaccompanied youth in the Western Hemisphere. My heart goes out to all the Cubans who were part of Operation Pedro Pan for all of the painful decisions forced on parents and the journeys of the children who were forced to start over in a strange country without them. Some were never reunited with their families.

My mother later told me she and my father had signed Pedro Pan papers to release their parental rights and guarantee that we could travel unaccompanied just in case, at the last minute, she was unable to board the plane with Raul and me. I’m glad I didn’t know that at the time. My hands were shaking as we walked through the airport terminal where the corridors were strewn with sobbing, terrified families. Raul was crying too. He had no idea what was happening, but even *he* knew our lives would never be the same.

My mother tried desperately to keep her own hands steady. She blinked back the tears. I didn’t fully comprehend it then, but she was leaving her homeland, not knowing if she would return. Would she ever see her family again?

The time was coming when we would have to say one final goodbye. My grandfather knelt and clasped my brother and me to him. His body was racked with sobs as we hugged for the last time. Then he embraced my mother and told her to be strong. He cupped her chin in his hand.

My grandfather waved at us, appearing smaller and smaller as we moved into the line to board our



plane. Tears were streaming down my mother's face.

Two men in dark clothes blocked our path. Their voices were gruff, but they were not wearing Castro's military uniform.

"We need to see your bags," they said.

My mother, terrified, relinquished our luggage. The men were airport officials, we realized, as they began rifling through our things. We were only allowed forty-one pounds per family, and our bags were too heavy. They took out some of our clothes and my mother's jewelry and then made her strip off the jewelry she had worn to the airport. She cried even harder as she unclasped her necklace and removed her bracelet and rings that were given to her as gifts by my father.

They continued to confiscate our belongings, piece by piece, until we passed the forty-one-pound limit. Finally, the men stepped aside and let us through. My mother's neck was beaded with sweat, and her face was wet with tears. We were the only non-Delta Airlines family to board the plane; all the other passengers were Delta employees evacuating from Cuba. Moments after we boarded, the flight crew took their seats and announced that we would be leaving for the United States.

The flight to New Orleans was only sixty minutes, but it was the most significant and painful hour of our lives. I remember it now in a haze, almost like a bad dream. I can no longer recall the scene in vivid colors. It is a blurry, black-and-white landscape of fear and loss.

My mother, on the other hand, says that she remembers every aching detail. She remembers the crying on the plane; she said there was not one person who did not have tears rolling down his or her face. She could tell you the color of the dress she was wearing and the way she had styled my hair. She could describe the scent of her father's shirt as she held him for the last time. She was leaving behind everything she had ever known.

It was the last Delta flight to leave Havana before the planes were grounded, and we had made it on board. We had escaped.

But my journey had only just begun.