

## Sailing to a Better Life

I was not about to farm tobacco until I died. My name is Rafael and my wife had passed away fairly recently from malaria. Now with twice the workload, I could not keep up in the struggling economy. My wife and I had always dreamed of leaving the country to be with my cousin in America. I was an older man living in Cuba, and the United States wasn't very far away. It is what my wife would have wanted for me anyway.

Since I was nearing the age of sixty, the trip would be harder for me than the countless young teenagers who had made the trip before me. Their trips however, had proven to me that sailing from Cuba to Florida is possible. Years of working on the farm has kept me fit and I knew that friends in the nearby town would have one reason or another for wanting to leave as well. My hopes were simple, I wanted my last years to be happy ones, without working from dusk until dawn.

I started to discuss leaving the country with my friends. They all agreed that they would be better off in America, but they were unsure if they could make the journey. Many people had drowned at sea. While they were reluctant at first, they began to welcome the idea when I told them my plan. Alejandro was one of such friends and he worked as a carpenter. He would be able to build the ship parts in his back room to be assembled later. It was illegal to leave the country by boat, so this was all done in secrecy. I had five friends joining me. There were two farmers, one fisherman, one person with underground market connections, and one was a tailor. They all agreed that migrating to America would improve their economic situation. I was glad most of my friends were younger than me as well. Leaving for America sooner was better for them.

We hastily constructed a boat for ourselves over the next thirteen months. Alonzo had located a phone with a GPS and a battery to charge it. This meant we would be able to navigate to America without becoming lost at sea. We planned to sail for six days and had stocked up on food and supplies. Everyone prepared themselves to face the hardships to come, and to leave everything else behind. It was the eleventh of April and the next six days would shape the rest of our lives.

The previous day we had moved all the ship parts to the coast in my wagon, disguising them under a tarp and hay. We had assembled the boat with only minor issues. It wasn't the greatest, but it had enough space for everyone to lie down, just not very comfortably. It was before dawn when we set off, leaving behind our past lives and setting sail for a new life.

The first day was tense as we searched for Cuban ships. The mere sight of one could mean disaster. We were not used to the sea, and with it came seasickness. As I fell asleep, I heard the sounds of others vomiting. With every heave, some of our food left us. The next morning I arose to the crash of a wave. Water slammed into my face as I shot up, immediately alert. We were going through some rough waters and water was pooling in the ship. I grabbed a bucket like the others around me, and started to throw water back out as fast as I could. The waves battered our boat for hours before they calmed down, but when they cleared we spotted our stop along the way, Anguilla Cays.

We steered the ship over and landed our Craft. Abelardo managed to catch us fish for dinner that day and we all enjoyed the meal. I felt free. I did not need to work all day to be able to eat dinner as I would have in Cuba. I could feel the wind on my face and I felt young again. I was out in search of a better life and felt reinvigorated after the ordeal at sea. We decided to leave the same night to save time. The next few days were terrible. The waves and wind were

ever-fluctuating and I was beginning to tire. When we neared our destination, we were ecstatic. We knew however, if the Coast Guard caught us they would send us back and we would be worse off than when we started. We sailed in the cover of darkness. We took down the sails when we spotted another ship, which delayed us. This happened twice, and we thought we would be spotted for sure. The silence was suffocating as we waited for the boats to pass. We finally reached land and navigated to a local dock. The sensation of being on dry land after three days was invigorating. We headed over to the main road with our belongings and, sure enough, we saw the name of the dock in English. We walked over to a public phone, and like many others before us, immediately dialed 9-1-1, something we learned through the underground network. The person on the phone spoke Spanish and they sent help.

They brought us into the city where we were given food and a place to stay. They openly welcomed us and spoke fluent Spanish. I was sent to my cousin, who had left many years before me and was living in the Florida Keys. It was the happiest moment of my life. He had applied for the Cuban Family Reunification Parole, which let me stay in the United States and work before I had my visa. However, I would still have to overcome language barriers and learn the customs. Many Cubans had come before me, and it was clear to see where most Cubans lived. People of other races seemed almost tired of the amount of Cubans that had migrated here. Since I did not know English well, communicating with these people was also very difficult. I was hopeful however, I had reached America and had no plans of going back anytime soon. I was determined to live long and retell my story to others.

I ended up working in the Florida Keys in a local restaurant as a waiter, and even had a small apartment to myself. I had a steady income and did not live the difficult and tiring life I had once lived. I found love in the arts and took up painting as a hobby. My paintings reflect my hopes for a happy future that have stayed with me. They reflect the hardships I faced, and the dream of a better life that I was able to achieve. I painted a scene of Cuba, as seen from when I was sailing away, as I hope to remember and pass on my story to others.

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