

Cuba Bound

by Deborah J Ledford

“It’s the only chance I may ever get to see it again,” I tell my father, not daring to meet his frantic eyes. “Who knows what will happen after the regime officially changes.”

“But why Cuba, Carlos?” My father, in his rumpled Cubavera shirt and oversized eyeglass frames slid low on his nose, paces around my cramped bedroom, picking his way around piles of scuba gear.

He flips through the slick brochure announcing the upcoming CUBA SCUBA tour. “You go back in a month, can’t you find something to do here in Miami? Visit friends, spend time with your mama?”

I glance at my mother who sits on the edge of the bed. Elbows resting atop bobbing knees, her left hand wrapped in a frayed dishtowel, like tape awaiting boxing gloves. A fighter preparing to brawl.

“I’ve got six weeks left on my leave. I’ll only be gone eight days. I promise to spend the rest of my time with the two of you when I get back.”

My father stops mid-stride, his mouth dropping open. “What’s this I read? You must go to Mexico first?”

I nod, stuffing gear in my bag.

“But why?”

“The embargo, Dad. You know this. There’s no direct flight from the States. First I fly to Cancun, then the yacht takes us near the coast of Cuba.”

The blood drains from my father’s face. “What part of Cuba?”

“Southwestern edge. Just off *Maria la Gorda*.”

“How long on this yacht?”

“The whole time. We even sleep on it. Small boats take us to the diving locations.”

“They will feed you?” my mother asks.

“Yes, Mama. I’ll be well fed. There’s a kitchen on the boat. The guys at the scuba shop say there’s always a great cook onboard.” I take her hands in my own. “Imagine, Mama, fresh fish pulled right out of the sea, caught with my own spear!”

Mama smiles.

I turn to my father. “And conch coaxed from their shells.”

He closes his eyes and sways his head. I imagine the childhood memories replaying in their minds.

“Will you wear your uniform?”

I laugh. “I thought you wanted me to be safe.” I shake the dog tags around my neck clinking them together. “This is as close to a uniform as I dare.”

My father snorts and says, “See, you know the risk. And still you want to go.”

“I can take care of myself. Believe me. The dive shop’s been doing this trip for years without incident. No one’s expecting any trouble or they wouldn’t offer it.”

“But you stay safely on this boat, no?”

“Yes, Mama. Except for the day trip.”

“What do you mean?”

I hesitate—sorry I even mentioned it. “We spend one day in Cuba.”

“That’s it! You are not going,” my father rages, his voice on the edge of dismay.

“I’ve already paid for the trip and the airfare.”

“No doubt they know you’re Cuban. Just a ruse to get you back so they can take you from us forever.” He shakes his head and clicks his tongue, looking at me like I’m a fool.

“Dad, stop. There’s no conspiracy, okay? Just relax. I’m going there to dive in the most pristine coral reefs ever found before they’re destroyed.” I fight to keep my anger down knowing a calm head is the only way to deal with my emotional father. “It’s not guaranteed that we’ll even set foot on Cuban land.”

“Because of the danger,” my father says defiantly.

“No Dad. Because of weather. It’s the rainy season, don’t you remember?”

The muscles in my father’s jaws jump. I can see the throb of his heartbeat in the jugular that has popped out on his neck. “I remember it all. Do you hear me? All of it. That’s why we’re here in America.”

Returning his glare for freakin’ ever, I’m grateful to hear my mother’s voice.

“Where in Cuba?” This time my mother’s face has turned a sickly yellow.

“Viñales Valley. Then Pinar del Rio.”

“Home,” my mother whispers.

“This is your home, Yelina,” my father roars, tossing the brochure at my shrinking mother.

“Quit yelling at her,” I say, ushering her past him into her sanctuary. In the kitchen, she begins making coffee with shaking hands.

“Mama, it’s late, you don’t need any more coffee. Go to bed.”

When she turns to me, I see tears glistening in her eyes.

“I’ll be fine. I swear you’re worrying more about this than when I’m over in Iraq.”

My mother holds my gaze a long time before she says, “You will never know the worry. Even when you have your own son.” She turns from me and heads out of the kitchen. “The worry of a mother is one, I heaven thank, you will never know.” I barely hear her last words as they trail behind her.

It’s well past midnight before my father’s voice softens through the walls. He urges her to speak English around me, but when they are alone, they fall into their native tongue. She coos to him. Then silence.

Lying on my bed, my eyes find the gear checked and packed in a neat row near the door.

Knowing I probably won’t sleep from the anxiety I have caused my family, and excitement for my trip, I change into my travel clothes: khakis my mother has creased, putting a knife’s blade to shame, and a Hawaiian shirt covered in red hibiscus flowers. I whistle at myself in the mirror.

“*Hola, Turista.*”

I cross the room and tumble to the bed deciding to rest for a little while, but soon my eyes grow heavy.

A knock startles me. Snapping awake, legs immediately slinging over the edge, I fumble for my combat boots.

“Carlos. Are you sleeping?”

Realizing I’m home and not on a cot the other side of hell, I rake hands through my buzz cut hair. “I’m up, Mama,” I call out, opening the door to reveal my mother, clutching her robe. “Come with me,” she says.

I follow her down the hall, into the kitchen, and out the back door. Humid Miami air immediately clings the shirt to my chest. “It’s still dark out. Mama, where are we going?”

She shushes me as we enter the garage detached from our three-bedroom bungalow.

“What’s this about?”

“Over here.” She sits on a folding chair and points to another one across from her. “Come, sit with me.”

I take in a line of boxes, lids open, contents strewn on the concrete floor. “Did you get these out by yourself?” I ask, knowing that spiders in the garage frighten her.

She nods as I sit down. She takes a thick photo album from atop one of the boxes and places it in her lap. “I have something to show you. I find it in the very last box.” Turning and scanning the pages, she finds a photograph and smiles. Lifting the plastic coversheet, she carefully pulls the picture loose from its corners. She stares at the photograph, and then kisses it.

I’m amused and embarrassed at the same time. “Mama, what are you doing?” I look at the fading vision of a man standing next to plants of some kind, towering over him. The red leaves look like dried elephant ears. They bow and hang from their stems, withered, on the edge of dry.

“Who is this?”

“Your great-uncle, Ramon. He’s the only one of my family left. My father’s brother. He was my

favorite,” she says beaming.

“Kissing his picture’s the closest he would ever let me get. He’d shoo me away and say, ‘I’m too ugly to kiss.’” The memory makes her laugh.

Still smiling, she pulls an envelope from the box next to her chair. I notice the colorful foreign stamps affixed to the corner. Fishing out a picture, she hands it to me. I realize it is of the same man, but many years later. His skin is now dark and leathered. Clad in an ivory shirt covered by an oversized red plaid flannel one, unbuttoned at the cuffs, a sweat-stained green baseball cap sits atop his head. A fat, half-smoked cigar is stuck in his mouth. His eyes sparkle, but he seems sad to me.

Pulling a limp tissue from the sleeve of her robe, she mops her forehead and dabs her neck. “He worked in the tobacco fields. His job was to talk to the leaves. All day long he would coax them to grow, telling them stories and singing to them. He was in charge of the special plants that made the *Cohibas*.”

“Really?” I’m amazed, never having heard this story. My mother’s secrets have always come out slow, sweet, and rich, like the coffee she serves at brunch.

“When was this taken?”

“An old neighbor sent it a few years ago. I don’t know when it was snapped. He still stands in front of the cigar factory all day long, telling stories of how he spoke to the finest plants Castro smoked for anyone who will listen.” She tisks and shakes her head. “They say he’s loco. And that he’s treated badly, taken as a fool. Such a shame.” She pats away her tears with the tissue.

“Is he still alive?”

She shrugs. “Maybe you could find him? The factory is called the *Francisco Donatien*, in Pinar del Rio.”

I know the tour includes a visit to a cigar factory in the same town. “That’s where we’re going! Mama, I’ll find him for you and make sure he’s all right.”

“This would relieve my mind, *mi amor*.”

With a mission now at hand, I glance at my watch and calculate how long before I leave.

“We fear for your safety, Carlos.”

“I promise not to cause any problems. I won’t even speak Spanish.”

“Yes. Promise me.”

“I do, Mama. I promise. But I’ve got to go. You understand, don’t you?”

“Tell me why, Carlos.”

I lean close to her. “I need to get their screams out of my head. Even if it’s just for a little while. The only place I’ve ever found complete silence is under water. And why not Cuba? I was only three when we left. I don’t remember anything.”

My mother shakes her head and says, “No excuse you ever make will be good enough for your *papi*. He will agitate the entire time you are gone.”

I sit staring at the picture in silence.

Eyes to the ground, she asks in a soft voice, “Was it bad, Carlos?” I know she fights back tears.

I debate about telling her. Then the words tumble out. “It’s the little kids I can’t forget. Ten minutes earlier, at the gas depot, just outside Kirkuk, we were handing them candy. Then *boom*. The biggest explosion you can imagine. We were almost a mile down the road by then, but I knew what had happened. I even think I saw the guy who did it standing inside the station. Something didn’t seem right about him. I thought I was just being paranoid. Now I don’t think so. I’m sure the bomb was meant for us. Who knows why we were spared.”

“*Dios mio*,” my mother utters, still unable to look at me.

“By the time we got back, there were bodies everywhere. I’m used to men’s screams. But not kids. They keep coming back to me.”

When my mother lifts her head, her horrified eyes stop my words.

“I’m sorry,” I say, ashamed, feeling like a little boy who has said too much.

“Then you must go. The beauty of our motherland will help heal your pain.”

“I hope so, Mama. I hope so.”

We move from the sweltering garage to sit in the kitchen. We talk for hours, gazing at the pictures in

her photo album until I hear the taxi’s horn, alerting me that my journey has begun.

* * *

My mind and body weary from lack of sleep, the short flight from Miami International to the bustling Cancun airport is a blur. After being warned of bandits, our group of thirteen huddle together guarding our oversized gear bags and each other while we wait for the bus that will deliver us to the yacht.

Groups of loud American college kids crowd the airport bar. They ignore everyone and everything except their little clans, sharing only ugly behavior. Many are already drunk, sucking down dripping, fifty-cent *cervezas* as fast as they can buy them.

I’m their age but they seem so much younger. Holding a rifle, eyes darting to the ground before every step in search of hidden mines, ages you. I feel old and anxious to be away from them.

Finally our bus pulls up and we’re hustled into air-conditioned comfort. Bearing into traffic, I wish for seat belts as the driver moves us into danger at every turn. The chaotic drive through the bustling city of Cancun excites me and I listen to conversations drifting around me. The divers on this trip have all traveled together before. I smile politely when they glance at me. One hundred feet underwater you learn fast who you can trust. I know I’ll have to prove my capabilities as a diver.

At the sight of the ocean as we crest a hill, my heart pounds in anticipation. From the parking lot, I recognize the docked yacht from the brochure my father mangled.

The dive master, Charlie, tells us, “Okay, everybody grab your gear and wait for instructions.”

Under the stench of garbage and the port-a-potties leaning in the sand nearby, the smell of saltwater brings my senses alive.

“I know you’re usually told to keep your passports on you at all times, but on international waters you’re required to relinquish your passports to the captain of the ship.” Charlie raises his hands at the sound of grumbles. “I’m sorry, there’s just no getting around it. They’ll be kept in a safe in the captain’s quarters. Nothing to worry about.”

I wasn’t expecting this as most of my diving experience has been in fresh water or just off Florida’s coast. Loss of my military ID would be grounds for harsh punishment in the Army’s eyes. I am beyond reluctant.

Standing on the dock, we line up to board the yacht and meet the dark brown faces of the crew. All are friendly, and helpful. The bags belonging to the two ladies of the group are grabbed immediately. Muscles bulge their white T-shirts as the young men heft overstuffed bags. Too many arms reach out to receive the curvaceous women onboard. The male divers are left to their own devices; we’re forced to find our sea legs without assistance.

The captain, cook, and Mexican dive master speak English; the other four don’t speak at all. “Passports please,” the captain says, showing us his palm.

When it comes my turn, I hold my identification a moment too long. The captain tugs it from my grip and gives me a harsh look. He immediately opens the cover and scans the first page.

“You are Cuban?”

“I’m an American soldier.”

Charlie rushes over to us. “Is there a problem?”

“Castillo is a Cuban name,” the captain says.

I shrug. “I’m American.”

“How long?”

“Forever.”

The captain looks at me with wide eyes. Ramrod straight, I think of him as my drill sergeant, looking past him, just over his left shoulder. The captain goes to the oldest of the crewmembers. They mutter between themselves, both looking from the credentials to me, and back again.

“Please tell me you’re not Cuban,” Charlie whispers.

I don’t answer and avoid everyone’s embarrassing, impatient stares.

Finally, the captain returns and stuffs my identification into a small lockbox. “Next,” he says, waving

me aside.

“Thought we were going to have to smuggle you onboard,” Charlie says, nudging me with his elbow, eyes dancing. Nothing will rattle this guy. I feel safe under his watch and hope he’ll be my diving buddy.

Charlie leads the way down a winding staircase so small my shoulder skims the wall. We break off into twos. As the thirteenth diver, I bunk alone. Turning into the farthest room, the size of the berth surprises me. Smaller than my bathroom at home, it includes a tiny sink basin and single-size bunk beds hanging from the wall. Thankfully, my diving gear is stowed topside.

The boat’s motors rumble to life as I unpack swimming trunks, shaving kit, towels and the paperback *Master and Commander*, then stuff them into a cabinet meant to be a closet.

Leaving my quarters, I overhear the captain tell two of his crew to prepare for rough passage. In Spanish he tells them, “Don’t alarm anyone. Jorge, prepare sandwiches. No hot food until we reach Cuban waters.”

Predicted as a three hour boat ride, our voyage becomes eleven hours of roiling sea passage. Throughout the night I hear the moans of my fellow travelers hoping to live through seasickness. Some beg to be thrown overboard.

I’m not affected at all. Retreating to my cabin, I lay on the lower bunk. My mother’s words remind me of our boat ride with seven other families from Cuba to the Florida coast. Often she would boast of how I had been the only one not to suffer the sickness. “Three years old, my Carlos helped the captain steer us to freedom.”

I wake up from a sleep free of children’s cries, refreshed and anticipating the adventure awaiting me. The smell of coffee hits me first, followed by wafts of bacon cooking. Twenty hours since my last hot meal, I salivate and hurry to the empty living quarters that also act as an eating area just off the galley.

“Morning, *señor*. Coffee?” Jorge, the cook, asks.

“*Si. Por favor*,” I reply without even thinking.

Jorge pours and asks, “You speak Spanish?”

The promise I made to my mother rushes to my mind. “Umm. *Uno porquito*,” I reply, hoping the misuse of proper Spanish convinces Jorge of my ignorance.

Taking a sip of rich Mexican brew, I walk onto the deck. I stop mid-step when I see her looming on the horizon. Cuba. Swimming distance away, she rises from the calm turquoise sea.

As my fellow divers trail out, battling effects of their illness the night before, they nurse their coffee and nibble dry toast. They too seem captivated by the breathtaking sight. We stand in a row along the railing just staring.

“We dive in ninety minutes,” Charlie shouts.

Claps and whoops of excitement break out. Everyone rushes to their bags and start preparing their gear. Choreographed chaos ensues as the buzz of two small boats split the air, ready to take us to the dive site.

“This is Miguel, our Cuban dive master. He knows every cave, bed of coral and sea sponge along this piece of coast. He was Fidel Castro’s personal dive master, isn’t that right, Miguel?” Charlie says grinning.

Miguel’s smile confirms Charlie’s words. He stands like a soldier; open-stance, knees slightly bent, hands clasped in front of him. Bald, with skin dark as his eyes, Miguel exudes confidence.

“Carlos, you’re with him.”

When I nod once at Miguel, he scans me head to toe, then returns the nod.

Diving needs no words or translation. Underwater, all commands are performed with hands and body. Miguel’s language is a dance underwater. He leads me places I’m certain no one else has ever seen, encouraging me into caves and crevices with the sweep of his hand. This magical world is a swarm of sea creatures that burst into color when our beams of light hit them.

We swim to meet the others, and follow as a group to an enormous reef of white and gray coral. Brilliant sky-blue fish dart through spindly arms. Three-foot tall sea sponges, the color of rust and emerald, rise from the sea floor like huge blobs of mold.

Miguel gives the thumbs-up motion and we follow his slow ascent to the ocean’s surface.

Reading my air gauge, I'm shocked to discover my tank is nearly empty. Thirty minutes have passed quickly as seconds.

Back at the yacht, I notice conch shells big as basketballs resting on the deck. I smile thinking of the fresh ceviche drenched in lime Jorge will make from them.

The next three days follow the same routine: meager breakfast, followed by a dive, an enormous lunch, siesta, another dive, late dinner, card games usually involving some form of drinking, then off to bed.

By the fourth evening, I'm beginning to think we've missed out on our day trip to Cuba when Charlie announces, "Our tour's finally been approved. We leave at seven a.m."

Lying in my bunk, I stare at the photograph of Uncle Ramon my mother has given me. Tucking it into the bedspring above me, I drift off. When I wake, he's the first thing I see.

It's another glorious day sitting in the cramped powerboats as we're shuttled from the yacht to the island. Everyone is excited, necks draped with cameras, clutching daypacks, shouting questions and answers to each other.

Stepping onto the dock, a knot in the pit of my stomach grows larger, and I find it difficult to swallow. Doubt overcomes me. I consider retreating with the Mexican crewmembers to the safety of the yacht.

"Let's hit it, soldier," Charlie says, wrapping an arm across my shoulders. I give him a nervous smile and follow after the others to an awaiting tour bus.

Sitting alone on a comfortable seat behind the driver, two rows back, I watch a pretty young woman greet us as we settle. "My name is Lola Garcia, I'll be your tour guide during your visit to Cuba. How many of you speak Spanish?" she asks in a pleasant voice, with only a slight accent.

Everyone turns to their seatmates then back to her, all heads shaking, no. Lola looks directly at me. I feel the blood rush to my face. I wonder, Is this a trick? My father's words of caution and lifelong hatred for Castro make me suspicious. A soldier never volunteers for anything. These days, first and foremost, I am a soldier. Avoiding her, I turn toward the window.

Lola says, "We will be traveling along the Viñales Valley to the town of Pinar del Rio. You may ask me questions about what you see along the way, but please, nothing that may get me into trouble."

Someone shouts from the back of the bus, "Where's Elian?" Everyone laughs. She speaks Spanish to the driver, "Eight years, and still they ask of Elian." The driver shakes his head.

Lola rolls her eyes, but smiles. In English she says, "And please also, no questions of Elian."

I was born in Cuba, but I am not Cuban, I remind myself lurching along the two-lane highway. I'm an American. I chant the words for the thousandth time in my head as we stream past tropical greenery reminding me of pictures I've seen of a rainforest.

Plots of land alternate from lush, huge leafed plants to barren fields as we near, and pass tiny villages. Dotted close to the road are shacks in various degrees of disrepair. All have tin roofs. Most lean oddly to the right. I'm puzzled that they have few windows and each seem to be shuttered closed. It must be so hot in there.

Was it only five days ago I listened to the pleas of my father not to visit this mysterious country? I sneak a look at Uncle Ramon's picture.

Pulling into Pinar del Rio, I'm astounded by how clean it is. A group of very old men pick up litter with long, pointed sticks. Kids wave as we pass, but townspeople ignore us. I wonder if they've been told not to notice us. Ancient cars, their paint faded or dotted with Bondo, are parked in front of brightly painted shops; each structure, a different shade of turquoise matching the sea, fire engine red, or vibrant yellow.

The bus comes to a halt in the heart of the city. Lola ushers us off the bus and points to a courtyard. "Our first stop is the Francisco Donatien cigar factory. During the tour, you'll be able to watch workers roll the cigars one by one. There's a shop where you can purchase them, but as you know, you cannot take any back to the United States with you."

I don't hear anything else Lola has to say as she leads us to the factory's entrance. I'm searching for

Uncle Ramon. I recognize the location where the photograph I hold in my hand must have been taken, but no one stands there. Then, as if by magic, an old man rounds the corner and leans up against the wall. In disbelief I stare from him to the photo and back again. It is unmistakably Uncle Ramon, wearing a similar outfit and baseball cap, half-smoked cigar stuck in his mouth. No one approaches him; no one seems to even see him.

My group moves inside the factory and I'm alone with only the courtyard separating me from the man who must be my uncle. I square my shoulders and approach him.

I clear my throat and say, "Excuse me, *señor*?"

He stares at me with clear, wet eyes.

"I think you're my Uncle Ramon." When he doesn't respond I fear I'm wrong. "Are you Ramon Tejera?"

Without a word, the man bends to light his cigar.

I speak in Spanish this time. "I'm Yelina's son, Carlos. Carlos Castillo."

Lola's insistent words split the air. "Sir, please don't disturb the locals." She blazes a glare at the old man, loops her arm in mine, and steers me toward the factory. When I turn back, the old man has disappeared.

After the tour, I look for the man I am certain is my Uncle Ramon again, but another group of people have arrived, filling the courtyard. I forgo the shopping knowing my father's wrath if I even considered purchasing contraband.

Going back to the bus, I hear a whistle. Turning to the sound, I see Uncle Ramon waving me to approach. My heart pounds as I rush to him.

"It is you," I say, mere paces from reaching him.

Just then, I hear the familiar sound of boots hitting the ground fast and hard. Three Cuban police surround us. Two take my arms as the third faces Uncle Ramon and gives him a shove, spitting words at him.

"Get your hands off him," I shout, trying to pull away. "Leave him alone!"

"Back to your tour," one of the policemen says, tugging my arm toward the street.

Enraged by the policeman's harsh words directed at the old man, I say, "Don't you know who he is?"

This causes them all to stop and turn my way.

"You know of this man?" one of them asks.

"Of course. He's known throughout the United States. Everyone wants Cohiba's because of him. It's what he says to the plants that makes them so special. You know, when he talks to them."

Confusion on their faces, they relax their hold on my arms.

"Don't you know this?" I ask in my most exasperated voice.

By now Lola and the bus driver have found me. They cajole the policemen in hurried Spanish I can't even follow. Charlie charges to us and tugs my sleeve, urging me toward the bus. My diving companions, safe inside, all have their noses plastered to the windows, watching.

"Come on, man. Don't make any more trouble," Charlie says.

As I'm pulled onto the bus I scream, "He's a hero. A national treasure!"

The policemen all turn to Uncle Ramon who is standing proud.

The bus door closes and we pull away from Pinar del Rio. I turn to see Lola Garcia burning holes into me.

* * *

Returning to duty in Iraq, I constantly relive my Cuban memories. If I close my eyes tight enough I can smell waves and hear the enthusiastic chatter from my fellow divers retelling stories of pristine coral, manta rays, and puffer fish. Every mile traveled along the roads of Viñales Valley, each smiling face, beautiful vista, and unfamiliar taste comes to me in minute detail.

A letter from my mother arrives and as always I rip it open, grateful for news from home. A photograph falls into my lap. I recognize Uncle Ramon. Standing in the same spot, his clothes appear

new. He no longer wears a hat and his gray hair is neatly trimmed. A full-length cigar juts from his mouth. The sight makes me smile and I begin to read the letter.

*Carlos mi amor,
Word has found us from my neighbor about Uncle Ramon.*

She tells of the life he now leads. That of the butterfly he has become. What American's would call a celebrity in the town of Pinar del Rio. They treat him with the respect he once enjoyed as he stands watch at the cigar factory.

Now when he speaks of his beloved tobacco, people gather and listen. Even the officials tip their hats. Women offer him smiles. Every day, the boss of the factory presents him with a fresh cigar. Not a Montecristo or a Romeo y Julieta. Cohiba's, my son! Fit for Castro. My heart swells with pride for what you have done. Ramon will be happy until his days are over.

My chuckles alert my buddies huddled over their own letters from home. Few have better news than mine. I lay back on my cot, Uncle Ramon clutched in my hand, and close my eyes. Thoughts of the cool breeze from the diving boat's prow lessens the sweltering desert air.

The children's screams no longer haunt me.
Mama is right. Memories of Cuba heal my pain.