

## chapter one

# A Cuban Childhood

The airliner dipped below the clouds, and gradually the lights of Havana came into view. My heart pounded. I had waited for this moment since leaving Cuba as a boy of ten, twenty years before. I reached for my wife's hand and we looked into each other's eyes for a brief moment before I turned again to peer through the darkness outside the plane's window. Below me, the city began to take shape, somewhat familiar in memory, and yet alien in reality. Excitement, expectation, fear, and anxiety fought each other for places in my head. I clutched Emily's hand tightly. I was coming home.

For the past seven years, I had been working to get permission to visit my homeland. It had been seven years of waiting and hoping, requests and denials. Finally, through a miraculous series of events, permission was granted, and I was returning as part of a

team of pastors and evangelists. I had also invited my close friend, Steve Peterson, to accompany us. For seven hours, we waited in Cancun for a connecting flight to Havana; hours that had seemed like a lifetime. The last leg of the trip from Cancun to Havana had taken only forty-five minutes, but it, too, felt like an eternity. It seemed that all my life I had been waiting for this moment, and now, finally, as our Aero Caribe Airlines plane touched down on the runway of Havana's José Martí International Airport at 8:00 p.m. on the night of February 13, 2001, the moment was here.

After four more hours of waiting, undergoing interrogation, and having our papers checked and rechecked, Emily and I and my friend Steve were ready to walk out of the Havana terminal, and into a life and a world that I hadn't seen since I was a child. Would I be able to find the people and see the places that were still so vivid, so fresh, in my memory? Would any fragment of that old life still be there?

My memories of growing up in Cuba are a whirling kaleidoscope of colors, smells, tastes, activities, and music, combined with a constant sense of fear and tension. Being a Christian in communist Cuba was difficult, and, even as a little child, I felt it. I can remember being spat upon, laughed at, and singled out for ridicule wherever I went.

My parents did everything they could to shield and protect their children from the harassment and physical threats that they experienced every day. An incident that happened before I was born illustrates the kind of world we lived in. My dad, a young church pastor, was locking up the church late one night. My mother, then about twenty-four years old, and pregnant with me, was with him. A band of young communist thugs surrounded them.

"So you're a Christian!" one of them snarled at my father.

My dad quietly replied, "Yes."

"We've never been in a church, but we understand Christians

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get baptized,” the gangster said, moving closer to my parents. My mother, growing more frightened, moved behind my father.

“How can I help you?” Dad asked.

“Are you planning on baptizing that child your wife is carrying?” the young man asked.

“Yes,” Dad said, and the communist stepped forward and spat in his face.

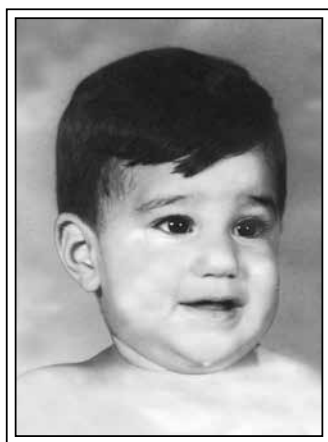
“Baptize him with that,” he sneered, and the gang turned and disappeared into the night.

My family lived their lives quietly, but somehow people always knew we were Christians—probably because we didn’t do anything to hide it. My mom tells me that my sister, May, and I used to sing hymns while traveling on the public bus. She hated to tell us to stop, but Christians could go to jail for singing hymns. May, who is three years younger than I am, called our mother “Mima” from the time she could talk. The name stuck. Our mother is still “Mima” to May and me.

Music was always important in our family. Singing and playing instruments are among my earliest memories. I am told that my mother bought me a little plastic eight-key saxophone at age three, and I immediately began learning church tunes.

When I was about five years old, my mother, realizing that I had an affinity for music, asked me a very serious question. “Osito,” she said. (Osito was my childhood nickname. In Spanish, it means, “little bear cub.”) “What instrument would you like to play?” We decided on the violin. Mima was an accomplished musician herself, playing the violin, the piano, the guitar, the accordion, and, in addition, composing music. She was determined that I would make the most of any talent I had. My parents, at great sacrifice, bought me a tiny quarter-size violin.

And so the lessons began. Twice a week, every week, Mima and May and I rode the bus an hour each way to my violin lessons. The bus was always jam packed with people, and it was nearly impossible



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**Baby Jaimito**



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**Little Jaime in a special outfit made by Mima**

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to find a seat. Sometimes it was difficult just to get on the bus. My teacher's name was Adolfo Guimbarda, and although I didn't know it at the time, I now realize that he was a great teacher. How fortunate I was to be able to study with him from the very beginning!

I don't remember much about those early lessons. What I do remember is practicing! I had to practice every single day. As far as Mima was concerned, this was not negotiable. At first, I was thrilled with my new violin and enjoyed practicing, but soon the honeymoon was over—and I began what was to become a life-time habit of trying to get out of my daily practice as often as I could. But Mima stood firm. And she stayed firm, through all of the changes that would come in our lives, for the next fifteen years. When I tired of practicing alone, she would accompany me on the piano. Although she made my early efforts sound so much better, our house was small, and our neighbors were close. I can only imagine the pain I caused those good people with my practicing!

Mima never wavered. “The Lord gave you a talent and you have to use it,” she told me. She was equally insistent with my sister, when May was old enough to start piano lessons.

In Cuba, the state forced every child to go to school. We went to school for only four hours every day. Some kids went in the mornings, and some in the afternoons. For some reason, I was always assigned to the afternoons. I'd do my homework in the mornings, and every single day when I came home from school, first I'd practice my violin, and then, if there was any time left, I'd run out to the neighborhood playing field and try to get into a baseball, soccer, or volleyball game.

Growing up in a Cuban *barrio* in the 1970s was tough for a Christian kid. Our neighborhood had once been part of the campus of an Adventist Christian college called El Colegio de Las Antillas, until Castro took it over and changed it into public housing. Because of that, there were several Adventist families living

in the neighborhood, and together with other Christians, we were laughed at, mocked, and mistreated.

“We don’t play with Christians; get out of here!” the other kids would say. I remember one particularly frightening incident when a bunch of older kids surrounded me after a ball game. The biggest, a foul-mouthed bully named Alexis, poked me in the chest. “You believe in God, don’t you?” he asked.

In a squeaky voice, I replied, “Yes.”

“There’s nothing but a bunch of stupid stories in the Bible,” he said. “If there is a God, he’s going to have to help you now, because we’re going to kill you and cut you up in little pieces. Let’s see if your God can put you back together!”

I was sure I was going to die. Even though my parents had taught me to trust in Jesus, I knew these were the same kids I had seen hurting animals and throwing rocks at people. I had even seen them kill a little cat. These were mean kids, and there was no doubt in my mind that they meant to kill me. Before I died, however, I figured I would pray to Jesus and ask Him for help. I closed my eyes. *Jesus, help me*, I prayed. When I opened my eyes, I had lost my fear.

I raised my chin and looked Alexis in the eye. “I’m not afraid of you,” I said, my shaky voice growing stronger. “My God is powerful, and if you guys kill me and cut me up, He can put me back together. Anyway, Jesus is coming real soon, and when He returns, I’ll be put back together, and I’ll live again.”

I will never forget the look that came into Alexis’s eyes. Like any bully, he had expected to intimidate me into denying my trust in Jesus. He looked down, moved back, and slowly he and the other boys opened up the circle around me. I picked up my bat and ball, and, as they stood and watched with their hands at their sides, I turned for home. As long as I lived there, that group of bullies never bothered me again.

Many times since, I have thought about this experience. Living in the United States now, where we don't have the same anti-Christian pressures, I've tried to remember that kid who stood up for Jesus and was willing to die for Him. If only I had always had that simple, childlike faith!

My mother was largely responsible for instilling a strong faith in me. My pastor father was often away from home, struggling to keep the little band of Christian church members together, but Mima had morning and evening worship with May and me every single day. Today she laughs about my performances at those worships. "Jaimito," she says, "you loved to be the musician, and the preacher too. First you'd play your violin, then preach a sermon, and then pray, every night. You'd pray for everyone and everything, including the appliances and the furniture." May, too, learned to pray in the same way.

I cherish the memory of the happy hours our family spent in those worship times, learning songs, memorizing Scripture. I have no doubt that that early training made a huge impact on my life. Later, when I became rebellious and turned my back on the Lord and the faithful teachings of my parents, that training helped to bring me back to Jesus. "Train up a child in the way he should go," the Bible says, "and when he is old, he will not depart from it."

The church we attended was an hour away by bus, and each Sabbath our family made that trip. We had no car. The church, like our house, was made of concrete. To me, it seemed very long and narrow, with two rows of pews, and a big pulpit at the front. The building held about 250 people, and I remember that it was always full.

At church, I played my small violin in the orchestra. An amazing number of people played in that orchestra. Later I would learn that in Cuba, Christians couldn't go to college. Many of them studied music instead. We had violinists, wind players, and brass players in the church orchestra, and I looked forward to playing every single weekend.

My sister Maydelé was born when I was three. I loved little May dearly, and spent hours talking to her. I often sneaked into the bedroom to try to pick her up and play with her, while my mother was giving piano lessons or cooking and cleaning. On one occasion, I had been outside in the *barrio*, holding snail races with some of the other kids. I had dirt and snails all over my hands and arms, and for some reason, I chose that moment to try to pick May up to play with her. Mima came in and saw me just as I stood on the top rail of the crib, snails all over me, and May in my arms.

“Jaimito!” she yelled. I got so scared I threw May right back down into her crib and ran away. Luckily, May survived that incident and all the other adventures to which I subjected her.

When I was a child, our house in the *barrio* in the city of Santa Clara seemed big to me, but it was actually quite small—probably no more than 500 square feet. We lived at the end of a row of houses, all connected together. Across the narrow street was an identical row of houses. Like most of the houses in Cuba, all the houses on our street were made of concrete. Inside there was a small living room that also served as both my mother’s piano studio and our dining room, and two more little rooms—one where we all slept.

The other room was a little storage/office space where my dad had his big desk. As a boy, I idolized my father, whom I called Pipó (still do). I knew that he had a great passion for the Lord. I loved to go into his little office and sit at his desk when he was gone. I liked to try to open the drawers and look at his papers and all the interesting things he kept there.

Our life was simple. We ate rice and beans just about every day. Plantains (a bananalike fruit) formed a part of our diet. Mima served them many ways, but my favorite was when she cut them in thin slices and fried them like potato chips. We also had lots



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of avocados. We had an avocado tree in our backyard, and we ate them in every way possible. Pipo loved them so much that he even made avocado milkshakes.

One of my favorite activities as a little boy was to visit my *abuelo* (grandfather), and his wife, Nena. My biological grandmother had died before I was born, and Abuelo had remarried, so Nena had always been my grandmother. Abuelo had a big house—very large by Cuban standards. He had owned the house before the revolution, and had somehow managed to keep it. I remember that I loved to climb and swing on the iron gate at the entrance to his house, pushing myself back and forth until I was swinging rapidly. He also had a swing just outside the front door. May and I loved to sit there and spend hours swinging back and forth.

Abuelo always had special treats and drinks for us. We loved drinking orange soda, which came in bottles much like Coca-Cola. He visited us often, bringing cheese, guava paste, plantains, toys, clothes, and many other gifts. No matter how scarce such things were, he always found a way to get them for us. Whenever he'd see me, he'd give me a big hug and a kiss—and then he'd nibble on my ear—something I absolutely hated. It embarrassed me, but that's not all. I hated that icky, wet earful of saliva! I'd wriggle and squirm and beg him to stop. But Abuelo, bless him, never changed.

As I walked through my old neighborhood on my recent trip to Cuba, I was thrilled to find some of our old neighbors still living there. Emily and I visited with a communist family who had, at one time, been extremely negative and antagonistic toward Christians, and my family in particular. They reminded me of a story that I had completely forgotten. It seems that the communist government had once fined our church a large amount of money. If the church couldn't come up with the cash, the government threatened to close them down. The members gave all they could to help pay the fine,

and when that wasn't enough, they began to sell their possessions.

My neighbors told me that they remember seeing me walking through the neighborhood, my arms full of toys. In Cuba, the government allowed each child only three toys a year. Once a year, a shipment of toys and games would come from Russia, and they were rationed, just like everything else. We valued those three toys highly, because they were all we had. I sold my toys to help raise money to keep the church open.

"We were so touched," the neighbors said, "to see you and May and the other Christian kids in the neighborhood, selling your plastic zoo animals and your cars and your dolls to help keep the church open." I wish I could take credit for this unselfish act, but all the credit must go to God, and to my parents, who instilled such principles in their children.

We had little money. Like most Cuban women, my mother stayed home and cared for our family, so we lived on one income—the equivalent of about \$10 a month. My mother supplemented my father's meager salary by making plastic flowers, working at this task until late almost every night.

Many people in Cuba made things at home to earn extra money. Mima made her flowers from thick plastic grocery bags, with wire for the stems. Using a pattern, she would cut out the shapes. Then she held the plastic over the gas burner on our stove to soften it and form it into petals. She burned her fingers many times, and often had blisters on them. I remember her saying once that she had singed her eyelashes, bending so close over the open fire.

On certain days, she would go out and sell these flowers. That's how she made the money to pay for a larger violin as I grew, for music lessons, and for the transportation to and from the lessons twice each week. This money also went for extra food and clothing.

In the evenings, sometimes May helped Mima make flowers,

while I practiced the violin. Oh, how I hated practicing! Once I acquired a little tape recorder, and came up with a clever scheme. I figured that I could practice for an hour, with the tape recorder running, and then take the next hour off while the tape recorder played. I remember late one night, coming out of my room feeling proud of myself for getting away with this terrific scam, to find my mother and sister toiling away making flowers.

Mima and May looked up from their work as I came into the room, and I felt guilty when I saw my mother's tired face. I felt even worse, however, when May piped up, in her little four-year-old voice. "We're doing this for you," she said, "so you can have money to pay your teacher and learn even more about the violin."

That cut me to the quick and I determined to practice the violin faithfully. And I did—for a while, anyway.

When I was about six years old, I fell ill with rheumatic fever. I don't remember much about this illness, except for feeling tired and weak. I do recall the sad and worried faces of my parents as they took me to the doctor. It seemed that we practically lived in the doctor's office during that year. Miguel Crespo was our family physician. I was impressed with this tall, stately, dignified Christian gentleman. I had noticed that many of the kids in my school were sick much of the time, with runny noses and chronic coughs. At the age of six, I decided that I wanted to be a physician, just like Dr. Crespo, a decision that was to shape my life for many years.

I recovered from rheumatic fever, but the illness left me with a damaged heart. Dr. Crespo gave me a poor prognosis. He told my parents that I would probably not survive beyond my teenage years. They refused to believe this, and, as always, put my life in God's hands. After this illness, I was unusually susceptible to colds and other childhood illnesses.

School was tough for my sister and me. Every morning our

teachers expected the entire student body to salute the flag. We lined up by grades, in our school uniforms. Every child was required to wear a red scarf signifying membership in the communist party, but no Christian young person ever wore that scarf. Every morning we lined up with hundreds of other kids, our uniforms complete except for the red scarf. May and I were often singled out, brought to the principal's office, and subjected to questioning. The same questions were put to us repeatedly. "Why aren't you wearing your scarf?" "Why are you not a communist?" "You must be a communist—you cannot be a Christian."

So it was amazing that, when I was nine years old, I was chosen to take part in a school competition. My teachers knew that I played the violin, and they selected me to represent the school. I knew that the winner would compete against other schools, and eventually there would be competitions at the provincial level, and even the national level. I passed the first level of competition. The next level took place in an auditorium in my home town of Santa Clara. I had never even been allowed into this auditorium, much less been invited to play there. Ordinarily, children were not allowed to go inside. This hall was the home of the Santa Clara Symphony Orchestra. My violin teacher was the concertmaster of this orchestra. I was very nervous. There were participants from dozens of schools. I played a piece called "La Bella Cubana." I knew that I had played my best. Afterwards, some of the judges took me aside.

"We want you to know that you played so well that you deserve to win first place," they said.

My nine-year-old heart swelled. I was so excited to hear that I was going to get a prize. An evil thought crept into my head. *This is a good opportunity to get Mima and Pipo off my back. Now that I've finally accomplished something, maybe they'll ease up on the practicing for a while.*

Then the judges continued, “Now, we understand you’re a Christian. You know that we cannot recognize or acknowledge anybody that believes in God in this country. If you are willing to renounce all your beliefs in God, we’ll be happy to award you the first place and the prize.”

Instantly I remembered my parents telling me that “it is better to obey God, rather than men.” I knew what my response to the judges had to be.

Looking up at these tall men with their serious faces, I said, “Thank you very much, but no thank you.”

“It’s your choice,” they shrugged. “It’s your loss.”

I went home. I was disappointed. I was frustrated and angry as only a nine-year-old can be. My first competition had not ended the way I wanted it to end. Mima and Pipo were disappointed too, but they helped me take comfort from the fact that I had played my best, and had represented my parents, my beloved violin teacher, and my God, to the best of my ability.

Time went by, and a few weeks later, one of the judges came to talk to me once again. He took me alone into a large room. I felt small, sitting in a big chair, at a large, polished table. The judge took a chair across from me. The very air seemed tense, serious. Outside the room, there were government people. I thought they might be soldiers.

“On behalf of the communist government,” he said, with something like a smile spreading across his face, “we’re prepared to give you the opportunity of a lifetime.” He leaned back in his chair. “We would like to give you a scholarship to go to Moscow to study in the best school of music in the world. All you have to do is to renounce all of your religious beliefs.”

I said nothing.

“This is a wonderful opportunity for you and your family,” he

continued. Even at that age, I knew that in Cuba, sports and the arts were the propaganda machines of communism. Great athletes, musicians, and artists are the pride of the government. They and their families had a better lifestyle and more opportunities and privileges than anybody else did.

He leaned forward and rested his folded hands on the table. His face was serious, but not unkind. "I don't care if you believe in God or not. It makes no difference to me. But I have this document here that you must sign." He slid a piece of paper across the table toward me. "This document says that you are renouncing all of your religious beliefs. You don't believe in God anymore. You believe in Lenin, Stalin, Marx, and Castro. That is your belief system. What do you say?"

"Well," I said, "if that's the condition, I guess you already know the answer."

Suddenly his demeanor changed. In a loud, angry voice, he said, "You're wasting my time and the government's time. You're never going to be a good violinist." Abruptly he rose from the table. "You're free to leave," he said.

I was shaken right down to my toes. On wobbly legs, I walked out of the room. For a boy of only nine, this had been a shattering experience. I knew that I was walking away from what seemed to be the opportunity of a lifetime. But my parents had instilled in me that God is in charge—that all things work together for good to those that love God. I thank God for that training, and for the strength He gave me at such a young age to stand up for Him. I walked out of that room with God on my side, and the amazing thing was that God had something so much better in store for me and my family—better than we could ever imagine. Because, not long after that, we were able to leave Cuba.