

A Close Call

by Christina Delgado Brown

The boards creaked with footsteps across the floor above her. A cool breeze gushed around the house through the open windows. Liliam looked out the window and saw two figures approaching. Mami rushed into the room.

“I heard something outside,” she said as she slammed the windows shut. It was 1960 in Cuba. Fidel’s Communist regime had recently taken power. Political tensions were high. The Communists were imprisoning anyone who did not align with the Party, including the clergy. The Cuban nuns were particularly in danger. Their heads were shaved so they could comfortably wear their habit. Now, appearing in public with their shaved head would put their lives at risk. Hiding a clergy member was punishable by imprisonment, possibly death.

“I am going to make two bowls of beans and rice,” Mami said motioning Liliam to the kitchen, “please take them upstairs to the nuns.” Food was scarce. Families needed to wait in line for hours in hopes of food rations each week.

Bang, bang, bang. Mami’s face turned pale. “Stay right here, Liliam.” Mami opened the door.

Raquel pushed open the door with her pouting son in hand. She and her family were the Communist Party-appointed comité, the neighborhood watch dog. They took their job very seriously to report any neighbor who did not follow the Party’s rules. In return, her family was well taken care of with special treatment.

“Bienvenidos,” Mami forced a smile, “what can I do for you?”

Raquel looked suspiciously around the room for anything she could find to her advantage.

“Your son beat up my son!” Raquel said as she shoved her son between them, “Look at his eye!”

Carlos glared at Mami. His eye was swollen and beginning to bruise.

The floorboards creaked above them.

“Who’s upstairs?” Raquel asked with vengeance in her eyes. A crooked smile crept across her face.

“No one,” shrugged Mami, “the doors are locked. No one has been up there since Juan, my husband, was taken away.”

“Well,” taunted Raquel, “I would like to see for myself.”

“Of course,” Mami obliged, “but I need to find where Juan kept the key. Before I do, how can I right the situation with Carlos?”

“Oh, yes, I would like Miguel to come and apologize to Carlos right now!” she demanded. She patted Carlos’s head while peering suspiciously at the stairs.

“One minute,” Mami went to find Miguel. Miguel came out dragging his feet.

“Look at what you did you little gusano (worm)!” She showed Carlos’s black eye. “Apologize right now!”

“Lo siento,” Miguel apologized, looking at his feet.

“Do you know what happens to gusanos like you?” She jeered, “they get taken away like your pápi!”

Miguel shuttered. Raquel straightened up, pleased by the boy’s discomfort.

“Now,” Raquel pointed her finger, “I want to go upstairs!”

“I’m hungry!” Carlos pulled on Raquel’s skirt, “I want to go home now!”

“Oh that’s right, mijo,” Raquel stroked his face, “I made you a feast tonight.” She smiled looking at Mámi through the corner of her eye. “We were sent two extra rations of meat this week,” she said with a threatening glare. “You had better keep your son away from my son.” She sauntered out the door.

“Mámi,” Miguel asked, “is she the reason why Raul’s pápi was taken away?”

“Yes,” Mámi replied, “Raul’s pápi was taken away because she found out that he killed his pig to feed his family rather than giving it to the community. That is why you need to stay far away from Carlos.”

Mámi went back into the kitchen. She served two small bowls of rice and beans. She placed one sweet plantain slice in each bowl. There was hardly enough food for each person to eat. She might have to go hungry tonight.

She brought the food upstairs.

“I’m sorry it isn’t much,” sighed Mámi.

“May God Bless you,” Sister Angela whispered, “Gracias a Dios for His deliverance tonight.” She and Sister Carmen blessed Mámi. They prayed for Juan’s release and that her family would find refuge in America.