

ABANDONED

B E T T Y V I A M O N T E S

This excerpt is from the author's recent novel, "Waiting on Zapote Street:" Love and Loss in Castro's Cuba, which chronicles the experiences of her parents in Cuba.

I WAS NINE YEARS OLD WHEN MY MOTHER, Mayda, left me at an orphanage run by Catholic priests. It was the year 1946. When she and I walked into the building holding hands, I did not know what was about to happen. I caught a whiff of her perfume as she kissed my forehead. "You better behave, Rio," she said. She smelled like a garden of roses and violets, not strong. I didn't care for her perfume, as it always made me sneeze. She wore dark glasses and the black dress she had begun to wear after my father and brother died, two months apart from each other, leaving her with only me, her youngest son. She walked away without looking back, the sound of her heels resonating through the empty hall, followed by her words, "I'll be back later," words that lingered in my ears without my knowing why.

A hand touched me on my shoulder; I turned and saw a tall man all in black, except for the white collar around his neck. He looked neither angry nor concerned. He told me to follow him and led me to the sleeping quarters, a room with about two dozen metal beds distributed evenly on each side, two feet apart from each other, each covered with white sheets that hung down uniformly, and with a thin pillow at the head. Our footsteps echoed on the tiled floors as we walked, an echo I could hear everywhere we went. An antiseptic smell tickled my nose and made the room feel cold and impersonal, so different from the smell of freshly brewed coffee, oregano, saffron, and cumin at home. He pointed to one of the beds, and, in a hushed tone, said, "You can use this one." I did not understand why I needed a bed. He then gave me a set of confusing directions. I was to go down the hall,

turn right, go down again, and turn left. Another director would provide me with a schedule of chores and additional information. I did not understand what was happening.

Gradually, all became clear to me when my mother did not return.

Fifty years earlier my paternal grandmother, whom I'd never met, had left my father in this place, which was called *Casa de Beneficiencia y Maternidad*, or *La Beneficiencia* as most people called it. The massive building that housed *La Beneficiencia* was located in Old Havana on an avenue called *Calzada de Belascoaín*. On the side of the building was a large drop box where an unwed mother could leave her infant and ring a bell to alert the nuns of a new arrival. This method allowed unwed mothers to conceal their identities.

La Beneficiencia had been founded during Cuba's colonial times. In honor of Bishop Gerónimo Valdés y Sierra, founder of *La Beneficiencia* in the 1700s, most male children of unknown parents who were cared for by the orphanage were given the last name Valdes, without the accent on the "e." My father's name, like mine, was Rio Valdes. Like my father before me, I wandered these hallways feeling rejected.

I missed my father and my brother. My father had been a high-ranking police officer for the *Carlos Prío Socarrás* government. I would later tell people that my father had died in the line of duty. I thought it was more fitting of the tough persona he had demonstrated, as opposed to the truth: "He died from a freakish virus that killed him in days." That, in my eyes, made him appear weak, the opposite of whom he was. A similar virus, which caused dysentery, killed my brother a couple of months later. It made me wonder whether it was true what people in Cuba said, that "there is nothing one can do to fight one's destiny; it is written." Where is it written? All I knew was that one day I was at a baseball game with my father and brother, and practically the next day I was in this place. Just like that, two of the people I loved most had been erased from existence. My father often told me that men did not cry or let their feelings be known, no matter how much pain was inside. Following his logic was not easy; carrying it all inside proved to be a heavy burden.

When I first arrived at the orphanage, I did not seek the company of other children. I attended school and Mass, did schoolwork and the chores assigned by the priests and nuns (mopping floors and cleaning toilets), and primarily kept to myself.

The priests taught me to believe in a merciful God and showed me how

to pray. Every night, I waited until the lights went off. I hid under my sheets, hands pressed together over my chest, and prayed for my mother's return. It was either a whispered prayer, one that even I could hardly hear, or a silent one inside my head. I was not sure which method would be more effective or whether my eyes had to be open or tightly closed, so I often switched. Once, I tried it with one eye open and another closed—just in case. It was the meticulous person inside me (or the obsessive one); I did not want to leave anything to chance, not then. As months passed, I began to lose hope. I did not understand why God had abandoned me.

I thought my prayers were answered when my mother reappeared, six months after she had left me at the orphanage. It was a Sunday. I was mopping the floor for the second time that day. I had mopped it earlier, but when Father Rogelio came to inspect my work, he told me that the floors were not clean enough. He lifted the gray bucket of dirty water and threw it on the floor, causing a splash that sprayed my black shoes and white socks up to my knees. He told me to do it again, and to do it right this time or I would spend the day cleaning.

Father Rogelio returned and instructed me to put down the mop and follow him to the entrance. When we grew close, I saw my mother's figure in her black dress, and I noticed her dark glasses. I ran as fast my legs allowed me, and I threw my arms around her. I recognized her perfume. I sneezed. It was the first time I had smiled since she left. She asked me how I was doing. I told her I did not want to stay. I missed her, my room, my things. "Can we go home now?" I asked with exasperation and hope. She said she was only there to check on me. I was begging her not to leave me when she signaled to Father Rogelio. He grabbed me from behind, anticipating my next move. I tried to free myself from him by kicking and squirming. "Please don't leave me here! Please take me home, *Mamá!*" In violation of my father's rule, tears swelled and rolled from my eyes. My mother turned and walked away, again, without looking back.

I stopped praying after that day, but I always dreamed about the day when I could have my own big family. I would never do what my mother had done, and what my father's mother had done. I would *always* be with my children.

In *La Beneficiencia*, I was taught a trade. Early on, I had shown I was good with my hands. I liked to break things apart and put them back together. The priests noticed my abilities and, in addition to the standard school cur-

riculum choices like math and science, they assigned me to work as a mechanic's apprentice. I learned how to fix all kinds of things: car and motorcycle engines, bicycles, television sets. I was detailed, curious, and inquisitive, with a natural ability for understanding how the guts of machines worked. The teachings I received eventually led me to become an industrial mechanic.

When I finally realized I was not going home, I no longer preferred to be alone and I sought the friendship of other boys—although “friendship” is too strong a word. I sought their conversation and the sharing of ideas; friendship required more of a commitment, one that I was unable or unwilling to offer. Besides, I never thought I belonged to this place. I had a real mother and a real home. The other boys thought I was full of it and that I was just like them. That pissed me off and got me into trouble more times than I wish to remember, as my anger turned into punches and bloody faces.

Once it was known I understood the language of fists, the other kids stopped bothering me—for the most part. There was one red-headed kid who was the school bully and much stronger than me, three or four years older. He had blue eyes and a round face, and was big and tall like a giant. What he had in strength, he lacked in smarts. Some kids said he was slow because he fell on his head as a baby. He and his small circle of friends laughed at me sometimes. I knew I could not take him on, so I tried to stay away. If he laid a hand on me, I always defended myself; I didn't care if I got hurt. But mostly I avoided him. He got away with laughing at me many times . . . until the day he mentioned my mother.

I was a few steps in front of him in the cafeteria, refilling a glass of water. He walked up to me and said, as he clutched the crotch of his pants: “I saw your mother last night. She told me she would start to come more often to see *me*.”

Without any thought, I grabbed my glass and swung at him. Water flew across the cafeteria and the thick bottom of the glass hit him on his right cheek. He fell to the floor and emitted a sound of agony. I threw the glass on the table and proceeded to stomp on him while yelling at him, and to everyone: “Don't you ever talk about my mother; don't you even think about talking about her!” No one could talk bad about her, no matter what she had done to me. Father Rogelio grabbed me and pulled me into his office, sitting me roughly onto a chair. He told me, while shaking my shoulders, that I

needed to learn how to turn the other cheek. This was a lesson I never learned.

The months at *La Beneficiencia* slowly turned into years. I did not like the priests; the feeling was mutual. I lost count of how many times Father Rogelio made me clean floors and toilets over and over again or how often I was spanked, first for punching kids when they told me my mother did not want me; later, for playing practical jokes on the nuns—like the day I brought a mouse to class and tiptoed to the front of the room, leaving it on Mother Rosaura's dark wood desk when she was writing on the blackboard. She was a plump, middle-aged woman who wore thick glasses. She had a high-pitched voice and was very strict. I do not believe there was one child in the class, or one priest, who liked her. When she saw the mouse and started screaming and jumping up and down, raising her black uniform slightly to reveal her black shoes and white socks, everyone laughed. Her screams could be heard all the way to Father Rogelio's office. He was not happy.

Playing jokes on the nuns made time go faster; at least it felt that way.

I was thirteen when my mother returned to see me. By then, my voice had begun to change. I had already discovered girls, and I had a girlfriend, a twelve-year-old with ghostly white skin and long, black hair. She and I hid behind the church's podium once to kiss. My discovery of girls put an end to my desire to make practical jokes. When Father Rogelio told me my mother had come to see me, I was ambivalent. I still remembered her first visit. I followed him almost reluctantly through the expansive halls of *La Beneficiencia*. My steps grew heavier the closer I came to the reception area.

I saw her. She did not wear a black dress, but one of a blue-and-white floral print. She opened her arms as I walked toward her. I showed no emotion, nor was I interested in running to her. She smiled, told me how much she had missed me, and kissed my cheeks. She was surprised about how much I had grown and said I was handsome, like my father. I had inherited his *café con leche* complexion and brown hair, but I had my mother's amber eyes. We sat at a bench along the wall, and she told me about her success as an entrepreneur. She took her glasses off, and I saw her eyes sparkle when she spoke about her business. Her eyes were brought to life with a thin, brown line drawn along the edges of her lower lids in eye-pencil, making her look like a lioness. Her nails were long and pink, unlike the short and pale nails she'd had when she left me at the orphanage. My father had left her two houses when he died. She had rented them out, even our own home, and

moved to a one-bedroom house in the municipality of Marianao. She had gone on to buy a couple of apartments, and had amassed a small fortune. She was as passionate about her business as I was about fixing things.

She said she had a surprise for me and took a small box wrapped in red glossy paper out of her purse. I unwrapped it slowly, watching the excitement in her eyes as I did.

“Well, do you like it?” She asked. It was a black-faced watch, with a black leather band.

I nodded approvingly. She smiled and squeezed my face hard between her hands, telling me again how much she had missed me. Throughout her visit, she did most of the talking. This time, before she left, I did not ask her whether she was taking me home. By then, I had adapted to my new life and realized she was busy with her business. I did not want to be an obstacle for her.

I did not leave *La Beneficiencia* until I was seventeen. By then, I did not want to go home. My mother transferred the title of one of her apartments to me and bought me a used red Chevrolet when I left the orphanage. She showered me with gifts, as if each one would serve to slowly erase the years she had spent apart from me.

I had my own apartment, a car, and a motorcycle. The motorcycle, I bought myself. I was afraid of nothing and liked to drink and to drive fast cars. The weights I did kept me in shape and gave me a tough exterior that women appreciated. I changed women like I changed my shoes: blondes, brunettes, redheads, it didn’t matter. Those with whom I slept were typically older by about ten years. They knew what they wanted. Women my age were into Elvis Presley and liked to dance. I was okay with the music but not the dancing, maybe because the couple of times I tried to imitate the moves, I looked like an idiot; I was not very coordinated, not in that way. I never understood why the young women melted when they saw the rock ‘n’ rollers on television. The older women taught me things about a woman’s body I would not have learned with someone my age, at least not as quickly. I was not ready to find a nice girl and settle down, not yet.

After a while, I wanted more out of life, an adventure. My opportunity came in 1959, after Fidel Castro’s rise to power. I didn’t know anything about politics, nor did I really care, but in my search for adventure I joined the militia—a paramilitary group trained to respond if Cuba was attacked by a foreign invader. Like my father, I liked guns, and with the training I received,

I became an expert shooter. The idea of fighting in a war was exciting to me then, out of ignorance. I did not have first-hand knowledge of what wars did to men. At the time, joining this group made me feel I was part of something bigger than myself; it provided the opportunity to be more like my father. Little did I know that my support of Castro's government would one day have far-reaching consequences, not only for my country, but for the woman who would become my wife.

This is her story, which would become *our* story.