



Tears in my eyes, smile on my face, memories flashing in my head, heart beating.... This is a guest post by my good friend. I wanted to share it because it is my story, my sentiment, as well. And it is the story and sentiment, I know, of so many of you, my friends.

Grateful, by *Barbie Rodriguez*

Cooler weather, Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas. New Year's, the Rose Parade and Valentine's Day. Love, love, love. It has been a pretty good year for me, 2015. Some minor health bumps, all manageable. Still love my job, still in my little cocoon. The garden is a bit, well, okay, a LOT, raggedy. I am in the middle of an out with the old, in with the new furniture project. Life is good. Except for those presidential candidates, but, hey, they are politicians, one cannot expect them to not be annoying. I really got into the political arena for a few weeks there, then decided it is way too early and way too contentious and really not a productive setting for me. So, I am back to Hallmark movies and my usual peaceful, artsy-crafty routine. This past week, actually, this past Friday, however, I got really, really angry. Not a pretty thing. Took a political move personally and let's just say, well, I was not a happy camper.

The United States Embassy re-opened in Cuba on Friday. It brought back a lot of memories. Not all of them good. Some of them sweet, innocent. Others bloody, humiliating, violent. Repressed for years. All back in a second. I understand we must move forward, not live in the past. Yatta, yatta, yatta. But there is one very wise saying about if we forget our past, we are bound to repeat it. I do not, cannot, am unable to, understand how the flag of a country that stands for democracy, for justice, for freedom of thought, freedom of speech, can be raised in a country where those very rights so many of us here take for granted are brutally squelched. I felt like the President disrespected Cubans, our history, our struggle, our roots. The sacrifices my parents' generation made. The lives lost, at sea and in the country itself. All those deaths by firing squad (after trials that were anything but). It forced me to remember my father being taken away to jail, because he had been a member of the Batista army. His words to the militiamen that came to get him "Please, don't handcuff me in front

of my daughter.” The many times they banged on our door demanding to be let in, any hour of the day or night, to search our house. Turning everything upside down and leaving a mess for my parents and grandparents to clean up. Not that they ever found anything and thank the Father in Heaven they never planted anything either. They were particularly fond of conducting those searches at night, after midnight, when everyone would be sound asleep. Those searches became so routine that when we’d hear the pounding fists on our front door, I would automatically grab my little pillow and blanket and head for my grandparents’ room. I remember my grandfather putting the mattress on the floor, don’t know why he did that. Maybe in case bullets started flying. I remember one night they were searching for our neighbor’s son who had taken part in an anti-Castro rally. He was in his house, next door, ran and they shot him, right in the middle of the street. I remember the shots. I remember the militiamen tromping through our vegetable garden and me yelling at them to “Be careful with the baby plants!” and my grandfather putting his hand over my mouth and telling me to be quiet.

There are good memories too. Family memories. Particularly of Christmas holidays and dinners with everyone sitting at the table, talking, laughing, singing. The men in their pristine starched guayaberas, smoking their cigars and the women beautifully dressed, jewels twinkling as they danced to old Cuban music. La Orquesta Aragon, Benny More. A huge Christmas tree in the living room merrily twinkling with a thousand fairy lights and another tree in my bedroom. Nativity scenes with real grass and mirrors taking the place of lakes. Entire miniature towns with marketplaces and people. My Mom taking me to school on my horse. The school was just a few blocks from our house. But I wanted to ride him. The nuns, being terrified of the Mother Superior who was really quite kind, but I thought she had a direct line to God and would tell him I bit my nails. Going shopping with my Mom and my aunt. Playing in my godmother’s closet and flapping around her house in her heels. My cousins who danced ballet, I thought they were fairies come to life. For some reason those memories come to me on lemon-scented waves, I remember a round crystal bottle with bees on it, light green label, on my parents’ dresser. Maybe that is why I am so fond of bees. Our family was never the same after leaving. Maybe it was because we were scattered all over the U.S. I don’t know. I just know that one day everything was fine and the next, it had all

changed. We had to watch what we said. People searched our house any time of day or night. My Dad was taken away and although my grandparents and Mom tried to make it all normal and would send me to my room to read, I heard things and knew my Dad was somewhere, the grown-ups just did not know where. There was one day I woke up and my Mom was already gone. Night fell and she still had not come home. My grandparents and I were in the living room watching television and suddenly it all went dark. We heard airplanes flying low overhead. The front door flew open and there was my Mom, who went straight to the kitchen talking over her shoulder, saying she was hungry and she did not know. The “did not know” was about my Dad. Years later I found out she had been trying to find out where he was, but they kept sending her from one place to another.

Then one morning I heard his voice outside and ran to see him. Did not look like my Dad. He was skinny, bearded and filthy, but it was his voice and I latched on to his leg, you know, like you see on the commercials and in the movies, where the kid latches on to the guy’s leg? He kept yelling “Don’t touch me, don’t touch me, I’m dirty!” and “Abuela, Abuela, it’s me, it’s me!” Because my grandmother kept yelling “Get away from that man!” She did not recognize him. But I knew my Dad was somewhere inside that dirty, skinny, bearded man and darn if I was going to let go. My poor father was unable to go into the bathroom for months without me standing watch by the door and periodically going “Are you almost done?” and “Okay, come on, I am waiting!” After he came home he had to roll my bed into their bedroom for months on end. We slept with mosquito nets over the beds and he had to poke his arm out of the one over their bed so I could fall asleep holding his hand. Mosquito bites and all, I didn’t care, I was holding on to my father.

Finally the day came when we were leaving. My grandparents were staying behind. They would follow us almost a year later. That day when I woke up my grandfather was already gone. I had slept with him that last night, fell asleep with him telling me one of his wonderful stories about brave princesses and castles. My grandmother lost her voice, she kept hugging me. I remember she was wearing a green dress with white polka dots and her pearls. Ever elegant, my grandmother. Smelling of soap and talcum powder. I remember my parents being taken away for a long while at the airport, I sat in a chair along with other kids also

waiting for their parents to come back. When they returned they were beet red and upset. Years later I found out they were strip searched. Can you imagine that happening here? I remember my mother's blue leather necessaire and a militiaman pawing through it, then taking a knife and starting to peel the backing from it, where it had a little mirror, looking for anything hidden. He looked at my Mom and smiled at her and she told him to keep going, rip it up. He stopped. Closed it and handed it back to her. Smiling all the while.

All of these memories I try so, so hard not to think of came flooding back this week. Memories like mine are a dime a dozen. We were not the only ones that lost. Hell, we were lucky to have each other. Many people my age lost their fathers. Some both their parents. Some were sent away by their parents on the Peter Pan flights and did not see their parents again for years. I have one friend who was told her father had died by firing squad, but her family never saw his body. She told me that for years she always looked for him in crowds.

Memories, so many memories. Of Panama where we spent several months in sheer hell. Of Mexico, where I fell in love with the food and the people. Of arriving in Miami and staying in an old, musty-smelling hotel where my grandmother's best friend from school showed up the next day and said we were going with her to a hotel in Miami Beach she was working at. Of finally arriving in L.A. where an apartment was waiting for us, furnished by friends already living there. So many memories. I felt like the re-opening of the American embassy was like spitting on all those memories, as if our collective suffering did not matter (it doesn't, it won't ... ever). I was angry, offended.

It took me a while to realize I was looking at it from the wrong point of view. Yes, I lost my birthright, I lost my birth country. Yes, my family and world were shattered, beyond repair. My country was broken, my flag and what it stood for was made a mockery. But, you know, same thing has happened to many, many others around the world. And in being angry and negative, I was giving the power to hurt me right back to those who caused my family to leave my birth country in the first place. And I refuse to do that. Humanity is not kind to itself. We hurt, we kill, we torture. Yet, we thrive, we fight on, we overcome. We find beauty and music and laughter sometimes in the most dire of circumstances. We, my parents, grandparents and I, were blessed in oh so many ways and for all that I am grateful. We were

welcomed in this country. People who did not know us from Adam made us feel at home. Americans who did not have a clue as to what this little Cuban family was like, went out of their way and took us in. And we were together. My grandparents lived with us until they died. I lived with my parents until they died. We had many years full of joy, laughter, travels, rose gardens, amazing meals, hugs and some tears. Our house was not the biggest and most luxurious, but it was always first and foremost, a home. We may not have been the richest, but we always were together, had a secure roof over our heads and food on the table, clothes on our backs. We traveled all over this country. Had an amazing circle of friends. Here no one searched our house at any time of the day or night. We were able to worship freely. We did not have to hide our faith. That faith my parents and grandparents embedded in me from the cradle. There is a Father in Heaven. He loves us all. We are all His children, no matter what we look like, no matter the color of our skin, or religion, He loves us all. It is that faith that sustained me during the bumps in the road, during the loss of my parents. That sustains me now.

So, instead of getting angry over something I have no control over, I choose to be grateful. I refuse to give power to those who shattered my world once upon a time. I am grateful for having been given the opportunity to live freely in the U.S. Many have died trying to reach these shores. I am grateful for being given the privilege of becoming an American citizen. My roots may have been seeded in Cuba, but they are firmly and deeply planted in the U.S. Whenever I hear the Cuban national anthem, I cry. Not a pretty cry. I do the full-blown, red eyes and nose, swollen lips, red blotches on face and neck, what Oprah calls the ugly cry. I cry for all that once was, all that was lost. A lost world. Like the movie by Andy Garcia, *The Lost City*. That anthem makes me just unbearably emotional and sad. Whenever I hear the American national anthem, I cry. But they are different tears, oh, it's still the ugly cry. Trust me, I have never been able to do the pretty cry. But, you see, the Cuban anthem brings sweet memories and great sadness, a sense of deep loss. The American anthem brings me also sweet memories, but also hope, gratefulness, a sense of safety, peace. Of freedom. Here I do not have to be afraid of speaking my mind and as anyone who knows me will tell you, that is one of my biggest faults. Very little, if any, filter.

I am grateful for all the rights we are given in this country. Freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of religion. For the right to vote. It really is a privilege, you know, the right to vote. Democrat or Republican or Independent, we are Americans. Some by birth, some by choice. We just have to remember we are one. One country, one people Sounds so simple, doesn't it? When it seems like the world is going to pieces, I pray and pray and then pray some more. I have hope. I have faith. Watching the news, I was surprised to see how many people went up to Kerry and said thank you. Who knows what may come of this development of the embassy re-opening? There is a plan. The Father is in charge. We only see bits and pieces, He sees the whole picture. Be kind to each other, even to those we do not think deserve kindness, sometimes they are the ones that need it most of all. Sometimes not. But, it is amazing what one small act of kindness can do. I always close by saying I am blessed, I am blessed, I am blessed. Today I will close with one of my favorite poems and by saying, I am grateful, I am grateful, I am grateful. Be kind to each other and keep the faith! Until next time.

Cultivo Una Rosa Blanca

by Jose Marti

Cultivo una rosa blanca,
en julio como en enero,
para el amigo sincero
que me da su mano franca.
Y para el cruel que me arranca
el corazon con que vivo,
cardo ni oruga cultivo.
Cultivo una rosa blanca.

Translation:

I have a white rose to tend,
in July as in January,

I give it to the true friend
who offers his frank hand to me.
And to the cruel one whose blows
break the heart by which I live,
thistle nor thorn do I give,
For him too I tend a white rose.

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