

The background of the cover is a painting of a tropical night scene. A full moon hangs in a dark blue sky filled with stars. The moon's light reflects on the calm water of a bay. On the left, the dark silhouettes of palm trees and other tropical vegetation are visible. In the foreground, a wooden raft with several large, light-colored cylindrical floats is on the water. The raft has some wooden planks and ropes on it. The overall mood is peaceful and serene.

MISSION LIBERTAD

LIZETTE M. LANTIGUA

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By Lizette M. Lantigua



1 UNO

The smell of wet grass filled the dark night. Fourteen-year-old Luisito picked his way along the path by the light of the full moon, the only sound the squelching of mud beneath his feet. It was June 10, 1979, and he was on the run.

His heart beat so fast he felt sure the sound would alert the police. He could barely see his father's silhouette in front of him. He grasped his mother's hand firmly and led her along the path. Luisito swatted at mosquitoes and other bugs that smacked his face as he ran. At the end of the path a man, whom Luisito could hardly make out in the dark, pointed to the ground. There, hidden in the bushes, lay a homemade raft. Wordlessly, the man helped

Luisito and his dad drag the raft into the quiet waters. He then patted Luisito's dad on the back. "*Buena suerte*," he whispered, disappearing back along the path. *Good luck*, Luisito thought. *Yes, we will need it.*

Luisito and his parents climbed aboard the raft. It was a flimsy little contraption. Would it actually take them the ninety miles across the ocean to the United States?

Luisito felt a knot of fear in the middle of his stomach and an urgent need to go to the bathroom, but there was no time. Elena, Luisito's mother, wore a look of quiet determination. Her dark brown eyes shone in the night, her face pale with anxiety. Now it was she who grasped Luisito's hand. He noticed that her palms were sweaty.

He could only imagine how he looked. The left sleeve of his cotton t-shirt had been torn on a branch as he ran along the muddy path, and every time he touched his dirty blond hair gnats would pop out.

Miguel, Luisito's father, pointed to the oars. They didn't want to use the noisy motor just yet. Luisito, imitating his father, used his oar to push the raft out of the shallow area and into the deep ocean. Luisito remembered his father mentioning in the past how rafts were hard for the radar in Cuban patrol boats to detect. This brought him a sense of relief as they slowly rowed away from shore. At first, their rowing was awkward, but soon Luisito and Miguel developed a comfortable rhythm. They rowed farther and farther away from shore and into the vast dark ocean.

"Let's take a break," Miguel said, whispering even though no one was around for miles. They drifted aimlessly as they stretched their arms. The ocean was still

calm, and Luisito's heart started to beat normally again. His stomach began to relax. He tried to make sense of what had just happened.

A few hours ago, his whole life had changed. He had been sleeping on the sofa bed in the living room. It had seemed like just another hot summer night in Havana. Luisito had spent all day waiting in line with his grandmother to buy bread and rice. By evening he was exhausted. He expected that in a few weeks he would be sent to work in the sugar cane fields. Every summer Cuban children twelve years and older were required to leave their homes and were sent to the country to cut sugar cane and teach poor children to read. The idea had seemed noble at first, and he and his friends had been excited. But after a grueling month at the camp cutting cane under a melting sun, with hardly any food to eat and a combination of dirty mattresses and filthy bathrooms, the novelty had begun to fade. Luisito had come to dread the idea of going back.

Tonight, he had gone to sleep early. It felt hot and stuffy on the sofa bed. He tossed and turned. The mattress made an irritating squeaky sound. He was afraid he would disturb his grandmother. They shared the living room, while his parents had the only bedroom of their tiny apartment. He remembered finally mustering the energy to get up to open the living room window. He felt his way in the dark. There had been another power outage in the neighborhood, and it would probably last until dawn. The cracked marble floor felt cool under his bare feet as he walked past the bookcases and right by his grandma, or *abuela* (ah-BWAY-la), who was sleeping

on her *pin pan pun*, a simple cot. Luisito loved to say the words. They sounded more like a noise than a noun.

“Go back to bed, Luisito,” Abuela whispered, startling him.

“It’s hot, Abuela,” Luisito protested.

“Don’t touch the windows. Not tonight, Luisito,” Abuela said. In a country where fear ruled, Luisito had learned from an early age not to ask many questions. If his grandmother thought it was best to have the windows just slightly opened, then there was probably a good reason. He tumbled back into his bed, wondering. He could hear Abuela mumbling her prayers in the quiet night. He also heard her snuffle. Maybe it was her allergies again.

Luisito had closed his eyes, and before he knew it he had fallen sound asleep.

“Luisito!” his mother whispered. She shook him awake.

“Luisito, wake up,” Abuela said as well. Luisito opened his eyes. The room was still dark but Abuela held a small lit candle. It was very warm in the room. Abuela looked at him with teary eyes. His parents told him to dress rapidly and to stay quiet.

“What’s happening? Is it a raid?” Luisito whispered. It was not uncommon for the police to search people’s homes or even to take citizens away in the middle of the night to question them.

“Hurry! Get up. We need to leave,” his mother said.

Luisito’s heart pounded quickly as he slipped on a pair of shorts and a t-shirt over his pajama shorts.

“¡Vamos! Come!” Miguel said, grabbing his son by the elbow.

Luisito turned to follow his father and was met by Abuela, reaching out to hug him. Her brown eyes were squinting and her cheeks felt wet as she embraced him. Everything was happening too fast. This felt more like a nightmare than reality.

“*Que Dios te acompañe, Luisito,*” she whispered, her lips trembling as she tried to hold back her tears. She pulled him closer and whispered something urgently in his ear. Confused, Luisito strained to hear. “Don’t forget, Luisito!” she said, pulling away and wiping her eyes. “I trust you. It’s important.”

He nodded to Abuela in agreement. He would try not to forget. He repeated the information one more time in his head.

“*¡Apúrate! Hurry! Hurry!*” Elena said, her eyes red and swollen from crying. At that moment, Luisito realized what they were about to do, and he was scared.

They opened their apartment door carefully, and quietly walked down the steps of the old Havana mansion, which had belonged to his family before the government took it and converted into a four-unit apartment building. Luisito and his family now lived confined to the upstairs one-bedroom unit. Luisito was careful not to make a sound as they passed the apartment of their next-door neighbor, Ofelia, who belonged to the *comité de barrio*. If she heard, she would certainly snitch on them.

The *comité* was the neighborhood watch committee whose members kept a close eye on activities of everyone on the block and reported them to the government. If the Ramirezes were discovered, they would be imprisoned—or worse.

As they walked around the corner they looked up at Ofelia's window. Her apartment was dark. They were safe, for now.

When they reached the main road, Miguel signaled that they should cross the street. They walked quickly behind some buildings. At the next block, a man was waiting in an old truck. He motioned to them to get in. If they had taken their own car, the noise would have awakened the neighbors. Miguel opened the truck's passenger door and the Ramirez family scrambled in. They were quiet all through the thirty-minute ride to the beach. That's when Luisito felt his heart pounding in his chest and sweat trickling down his back. The man didn't say a word, and neither did Luisito's parents, until they came to a stop. The driver parked near some bushes, then led the way on foot through the tall grass toward the sand. There they found a homemade raft.

Luisito thought of all this as he floated with his parents in the ten-foot raft, now a mere speck in the vast ocean. The raft was made of three large Soviet inner tubes, tied together and wrapped in fabric, with wooden planks across the top. The family also had a white cotton sheet to use as a makeshift sail. Wooden oars were well secured on both sides of the raft, and some provisions were securely tied to the sides. A small motor was attached to the raft.

Luisito felt the warm salty breeze as he sat in the raft. Occasionally, Miguel used the oars to guide the raft in the right direction. The waves were gentle. The current was a good accomplice, helping them along their course. As the raft made its way through the dark waters, Luisito thought, *My desk at school will be empty tomorrow. Teachers at*

the preschool will be wondering why my mother has not shown up for work, and nurses will be looking all over the hospital for my father, Dr. Miguel Ramirez. No one will guess we are escaping to freedom.

Either from stress or from fear, the Ramirez family remained silent even now, when no one could possibly hear them. Everything around them looked dark. Luisito wondered how his father had been able to purchase the raft, who had helped him, and how long he had been planning all this. He wanted to ask but didn't know where to begin. All Luisito knew for sure was that his family was headed in a direction where life would be different.