

## **Wet Foot, Dry Foot**

By Timothy N. Zeller

I can't remember the dream I was having when I woke up in a cold sweat the morning of my mother's funeral. What I remember was that, at 15, everything I had heard and seen suddenly came together like pieces of a puzzle I had never tried to solve.

I jumped out of bed understanding the words my mother said to the big white concrete box at the cemetery. I understood the taunts from kids at school and the noises from my mother's bedroom when she thought I was sleeping. Without warning, without effort, without invitation, I woke up that day knowing what it all meant. Knowing who her "boyfriends" really were. Knowing what she really was. And knowing why.

When I was a little boy, my mother and I would walk under the hot Cuban sun to the cemetery to visit the white concrete box that held my grandmother. I played among the headstones of the American businessmen and missionaries who were all buried underground and the rows of white tombs that kept Cubans above the ground.

My mother would talk to the white box. "I know you don't approve of my new boyfriend," she would say, "but he's very good to me, Momma, and he brings me things I can't get here. He brings me shampoo that makes my hair smell so good. He brings me colorful jewelry and expensive tampons. And Momma, he gives me money. I tell him I need it for your treatment. He thinks you're still in the hospital. He says he loves me and that the money is a gift, not to be repaid. He also gives me money so I don't have to work between his visits, so that I can spend more time visiting you. But still I go back to threading tobacco and working in the cane fields as soon as he goes back to Canada. And I haven't spent any of the money. I'm saving it all so I can take Andreis to America."

While she talked to the box, I played in the dirt, pulling at the sparse grass. Sometimes when my mother wasn't looking, I would find Santeria dolls that were left as curses near some of the graves. I picked them up and twirled them around, bashing their heads into the concrete. I never really listened to my mother's talks with my grandmother except when I saw her crying. I had heard the same conversations over and over about different boyfriends, different gifts, and different reasons why it was proper to take their money. But I never put it together until that morning when I woke up in a cold sweat. My mother was a *jinetera*, a prostitute. The names they called her at school were not just childhood games, as I had been told. They were the words they heard their parents say about my mother.

As the pieces of this unwelcome puzzle came together, my grief did not subside or turn to anger. I knew even then that she did it all for me. She wanted me to go to America. She gave herself not for the money, but for my future. Every night she told me that one day I would be a doctor or a scientist or whatever I wanted to be. She would tell me that one day I would own a house and a car and have a family.

"And when you do," she said, "you should remember to invite me over every Sunday to share dinner and play with my grandchildren."

It was a beautiful fantasy when she talked, but we knew no one who had a car, and everyone we knew worked in the fields or factories, except for my teachers. We were poor and my father died when I was a baby. There was no house in my future.

But the morning of her funeral, I woke up knowing it hadn't been a fantasy to my mother. It was her dream for me. Her plan.

I washed my face and dressed in a clean white shirt that Alba brought and pressed for me. Alba was an old woman who lived in an apartment that looked exactly like mine, but was in a building in another part of town—bland concrete apartments with bare wires, dark stairwells, and

occasional plumbing. When I was little, Alba used to watch me while my mother worked in the cane fields.

On the morning of the funeral, she was in our apartment. She made me a breakfast of rice and fruit and told me that I looked very handsome in her son's shirt. Then she walked me to the house of the undertaker.

Only a few visitors came to visit me and see my mother lying there. When it was time to leave, the undertaker told me that a local church had paid for most of his expenses, but that I still owed him a small amount and could pay him when I had the money.

When he said this, the cold sweat started to grip me again but I shook it off. The money, I thought. My mother had told the white box in the cemetery that she had saved all of the money from all of the boyfriends to take us away. It must be hidden somewhere.

Alba offered to let me stay with her until I finished school and had a place of my own. I'd have to be out of my apartment by the end of the week, she told me.

I ran home replaying my mother's words in my head. "Momma," she had said, "I have almost \$3,000 saved." And the next year, "Momma, I have more than \$5,000 now. Soon I'll have enough for the smuggler to get us to America."

"Don't worry, Momma," she would say with her hands caressing the top of the white box. "They will drop us off near the shore and all we have to do is put one foot on dry land, then we can become Americans!" Then she would giggle. "I know, it's a silly rule—wet foot and we're Cubans, dry foot and we're Americans."

When my mother became sick, the boyfriends stopped coming and she stopped working in the fields. She grew thin and tired for two years before dying.

I thought of her words as I ran up the four flights of crumbling stairs to our apartment. I went into my mother's room tearing apart every box and bag. When I was sure the money wasn't in

her room, I did the same in the tiny kitchen, the sparse living room, and even my own room. The money wasn't there.

The next day, Alba came while I was still in bed. I had not slept. I had only stared at the pockmarked ceiling asking my mother over and over where she had saved it. Where was it hidden?

Alba brought empty feedbags to pack my things and we spent the day cleaning the apartment and sorting through my mother's things. When we were done, she fed me yellow rice and black beans from her kitchen. She said I could stay with her for as long as I liked.

In my new room, she showed me a shelf with her son's clothes and told me to try them on and keep anything that fit. When she came in my room the next day, she said that I had slept for 15 hours. I ate a piece of bread and butter and some mamay fruit with milk before leaving to see my mother at the cemetery. She was now in the same box that my grandmother had been in, but my grandmother's remains had been scraped down and placed in the smaller family box that stood at the other end.

I didn't know what to say to the box, but I started to talk.

"Momma, I know what you did," I said. "What you did for me, I mean. I will make it to America and have a house of my own and a family and grandchildren for you. I promise. I know what you did, Momma. Thank you."

On my next visits, talking to the box became easier.

"Momma, remember when you used to talk to Grandma? You used to tell her your secrets while I played in the grass and you would yell at me for picking up the Santeria dolls and smashing their heads against the concrete boxes, but when you saw the seams ripped apart from their striped fabric legs and their polka-dot arms, you would start laughing and look around to see if anyone was watching. And remember the time there was a funeral over there and the two women started

fighting and pulling each other's hair? And the time I snuck up on you while you were digging to plant flowers near grandma's box? I scared you and you chased me around with a handful of dirt."

I stopped talking for a moment and put my hands on the box. "Momma," I whispered, "why were you digging for flowers? There were never flowers here, it's too hot, and there's no water. There are only plastic flowers. Momma, why were you digging holes?"

I turned around and ran to the caretaker's shed to find a tool. It was locked, but I found a mason's trowel with no handle next to the door. I took it to the box and began digging where my mother dug. The trowel blades cut into my hands as I stabbed and pried at the hard ground. Sweat and dirt stung my eyes and the wounds on my hands, but I kept digging until I found it. It was a metal box as big as a dresser drawer. I cleaned off the top and opened it to look inside. There were ten stacks of money. I stood up and looked all around to make sure no one was near. Then I knelt back down in the dirt and reached for the first stack. When I grabbed the money, it crumbled in my hands. The harshness of Cuba's climate had taken the money just like the harshness of life in Cuba had taken my mother.

I lifted handful after handful of the money high into the air and watched it turn to dust and blow away. When I was done, the only thing in the box was a laminated photo of a young man. I knew immediately that he was my father. I stuffed the photo into my pocket and began walking.

Alba's eyes widened when she met me at the door. She pulled me inside to a chair and began to clean the dirt and blood from my hands. She dressed the cuts with something that stung even more than the dirt, but I sat silently. When I was finally clean and feeling better, Alba came into my room and sat on the bed next to me. "I know I'm not much," she said, sounding older than ever, "but I'm here."

"*Dime!*" she said. "Talk to me."

For the first time since my momma died, I began to cry.

“I promised her,” I said through my sobs. “I promised Momma.”

Alba held me against her. “I told her that I would have my own house and a family in America,” I said. “I promised.”

I calmed down and Alba pulled me away to look at my face.

“Andreis,” she said, “I made the same promise to your mother. I too promised her that you would make it to America and have a house and a family. I promised this on her last day.”

“Your mother and I had many secrets,” she said.

“I know her secrets,” I told her. “I know everything. I know how she made her money and how she got her jewelry and shampoo.”

Alba let go of my shoulders and turned toward the window. She put her wrinkled hands on her skinny brown knees and gripped them like she was going to push herself up.

“Andreis,” she said, still looking out the window, “what did she tell you about your father?”

“She told me that he died when I was a baby. I wanted to know more about him but she would always start to cry, so I stopped asking.”

Alba turned back toward me again, still gripping her knees with both hands. “Andreis,” she said, as if she didn’t already have my attention, “your father’s name was Luis. The white shirt you wore to your mother’s funeral was his.”

“I thought the shirt belonged to your son,” I said.

“It did, Andi. My son is your father.”

Now the puzzle had grown larger and new pieces had been added from new places.

I stood up in front of Alba and reached in my pocket for the photo. I wiped the dirt and blood from the picture and looked at it. I noticed his white shirt for the first time. I handed it to Alba.

“Luis ...,” she said with a smile.

Alba looked up at me and then back at the picture.

“He didn’t know that your mother was pregnant,” she said. “They were together the night before he got on a boat that he and his friends made. They were going to Miami. It was a boat they made from scraps. They worked on it for more than a year. Each of them brought a few pieces of wood home every day from a construction site until they had enough. He told her that if he made it he would send for her and buy her a house in Florida.

“Then he drowned,” I said.

“We heard a few days later that the U.S. Coast Guard had found their boat with no survivors. By the time we found out what really happened, you were almost old enough to walk. I received a message from a cousin in Miami that Luis and one of his friends had made it to shore. When I finally heard from him, it was to tell me that he had found a job and that he had met a girl and planned to get married.”

“Your momma didn’t want you to know that your father had left you and her behind. We agreed to tell you that he had died and to never tell your father that you had been born. We promised each other.”

“Why are you telling me this now?” I asked.

“Andi,” she said, “your father lives near Miami. He is married and has a family. Three kids. It’s been hard to communicate with him over the years, but every now and then an envelope arrived with a little bit of money and sometimes a letter. I always gave the money to your mother to help pay for things for you. But when she got sick and I knew she was not going to live, I used some of the money to call him. It was the first time I had heard his voice in more than 15 years. I told him about you. I told him about your momma.”

It was too much, and I sat again on the bed. We both looked straight ahead for a while without talking. Then Alba said, “He wants you to come to live with him. He wants us both to come.”

“It’s not possible,” I said. “Momma’s money is all gone. I found it, but it was just dust.”

“Andreis,” she said, “listen to me. Your father has met with an attorney in Miami. It is possible because he is your father and he is my son. He is filing a petition to get us green cards. He is sending a letter with some money and instructions. We have to get our passports and papers. We have to have interviews in Havana and medical exams. We have to get our birth records. It may take some time, but he will take care of everything. Your father wants you to come home.”

I slumped against my new *abuelita*, my grandma, and felt her arm grip my shoulder.

“Andreis,” she whispered, “you will have your house someday, and your family. And on Sunday afternoons, you will invite me over to play with my great-grandchildren.”