

Abuelito Fidel,  
Oí las noticias que  
eres ~~muerto~~ enfermo.  
Espero que tu condición  
cambia, si es posible.  
¿Pero, si mueres, por  
favor puedo ir de nuevo  
a la Florida?  
¡Ja, ja! Estoy  
¡EMBROMANDO!  
¡Realmente! Ja, Ja.  
Besitos de:  
Elian Gonzalez

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A Story That Captured the World's Attention

# The Cuban Custody Crisis

When 5-year-old Cuban-born Elian Gonzalez fled with his mother to the US on a rickety boat it was not a particularly unusual story. Even when the boat capsized and his mother tragically drowned it was, sadly, not unusual. However, when Elian was brought to Miami it set up months of acrimonious political battles between the US and Cuba... until the Clinton administration felt compelled to step in and send the boy back. Would the waves of protests, not only from the American-Cuban community in Miami but from across America, be enough to prevent US authorities from returning Elian to Communist Cuba?



## “¡Están aquí!—They’re here!”

The desperate cries shattered the nighttime stillness of Little Havana. Named for the many Cuban-Americans who made their home there, this Spanish-speaking neighborhood of Miami is usually quiet in the pre-dawn hours. But not so, on this Saturday morning.

The relatives of Elian Gonzalez, together with their advisors and friends, stayed up most of the night in the packed living room of their modest bungalow. Some of them sat around the phone, set on speaker, where they carried on heated negotiations—better called arguments—with representatives of the US Justice Department.

In the midst of this, two black-clad federal agents sprang suddenly from behind the fence in back of the bungalow while eight others broke through the front door. With their weapons drawn, they immediately drove the already tense atmosphere into a frenzy of hysteria. Filling the room with pepper spray, they used their boots to open a path among the mass of people standing in their way. Anyone who resisted, or even hesitated, was shoved violently to the ground.

“Don’t try any games!” the agents shouted. “Give us the child immediately!”

Six-year-old Elian Gonzales had only just awoken to this terrifying scene and he clung desperately to his father’s shoulders. His uncle, Lazaro Gonzalez, fought down his rising panic as he tried to use his body to protect the defenseless child.

Donato Dalrymple, the heroic fisherman who had made headlines a few months before when he pulled the child from the angry sea, showed his bravery once again. He grabbed the child, placed him on his shoulders, and dashed to a back room in the tiny home. There he hid with the boy in a closet, ready to fight for the boy’s life with his bare hands.

But they didn’t give him a chance. The agents burst into the room and beat

Dalrymple while they shoved an assault rifle into his face. Then they grabbed the terrified child, crying, from Dalrymple’s arms.

The image of the INS agent holding a rifle in his outstretched arm as he is standing over the boy, soon appeared in every newspaper across America. It would be a while before the public outcry would calm down.

## Escape to America

In a hidden cellar, the anxious faces nodded to each other in agreement. Wary of the presence of an informer who would tattle on them to the heartless communist government, they conferred in whispers and half-phrases. “Enough is enough. We have suffered enough under this hopeless communist system that has robbed us of any hope, any dignity, any chance of change. It is time to leave and search for a better life somewhere else, somewhere where the sun still shines and hard work is compensated for with hope and freedom.”

These were Cubans who had been languishing for decades under the stifling regime of Fidel Castro. The tyrannical ruler had taken over nearly every aspect of his subjects’ lives. There was no opportunity to speak up, take part in the government, or to make any decisions about one’s own life. Everything was decided “for the people’s best” by the person who apparently felt he was the only one equipped to make life decisions.

Thousands had fled before them to nearby America, a land whose freedom beckoned beguilingly to these downtrodden people. Rafael Ramirez and his friends had quietly spent the last few weeks secretly building an improvised boat. They knocked together bits of wood and aluminum, and inflated two tubes to help keep their vessel afloat at sea.

Nobody had any doubts about the dangers of trying to escape to the capitalist land to the north. Everyone had heard the stories of tens of others like them whose boats had not withstood the rigors of the ocean waves. And even to be lost at sea they first needed



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miracles to escape discovery by the Cuban security forces. Anyone caught attempting such “treason” would spend the rest of his life barred from all aspects of Cuban life, to die in hunger, shame and disgrace.

Even those who made it safely across the waters of the Atlantic had to face the possibility of being caught by the US Coast Guard cutters. Under American law, Cuban nationals caught before reaching American shores are treated well and provided with food, drink and a place to sleep—but then they are repatriated to their homeland where they must return to their former lives, as well as face the wrath of their government. If they are lucky, someday they may have a second shot at the dangerous sea crossing.

Only those exiles who reach US shores undiscovered are permitted to remain and seek asylum as political refugees in the land of the free.

The strained relations between the US and Cuba go back to the Cuban revolution of January 1, 1959. On that day Castro and his rebels led the revolution that overthrew the corrupt, American-backed government of Fulgencio Batista. Ever since, tens of thousands of Cubans who grew disillusioned by Castro’s failed economic, social and political programs have been attempting the dangerous sea crossing to the nearby Florida coastline. They sneak out in makeshift boats that are often not seaworthy. The slightest wind or rough seas can cause them to capsize.

Many, many of these refugees paid with their lives for their desperate gamble for freedom.

This group of Cubans meeting in the cellar, like their predecessors, knew well what dangers awaited them. And, like their predecessors, they were determined to take the risk anyway. If they could just reach the Florida coast without being confronted by the Coast Guard, they would consider themselves the luckiest people ever. All the effort, fear and danger would have paid off.

Ramirez, however, was not willing to lead the dangerous trip for free. Everyone who would be joining the smuggler had saved up their pennies for many years to pay off the guide who would hopefully lead them safely to the land of their dreams. Most Cuban smugglers are not professionals with experience at braving the sea and running past border security. They take the chance like everyone else, and they want to be sure that when they arrive they will at least have enough money to start a new life.

It was agreed that on Sunday, November 26, 1999, at 4 AM, they would meet at an isolated beach near Cardenas, a city east of Havana. There, on the northern coast of Cuba, Ramirez would await them with the ship he had built with his own hands—and little else. Once they entered the ship



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