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I was born in the town of San Luis, in the province of Pinar del Rio, the country's westernmost region, about 200 miles to the left Havana. 1992, the year of my birth, marked the beginning of the Cuban Special Period, a decade of economic crisis brought about by the fall of the USSR, Cuba's major energy supplier and trading partner. Consequently, I, and most everyone I knew, lived in poverty. Hunger and boredom, were the dragons of my childhood, which I learned to combat by breaking into people's backyards and fields, and stealing their fruit. In this endeavor, I had the help of my younger brother, and of ten other children near my age. Due to the scarcity of cars and the bad conditions of roads, walking is the most common way to move around in Cuba, and because of the heat, it is incredibly travelers on foot to knock on one's door at any time during the day and ask for a glass of water. It is considered incredibly rude, and of very bad luck, to refuse such a request. My friends and I learned to use this to our advantage. I would have four or five of the younger children knock on a stranger's door and ask for water, and while the hapless good Samaritan served them each on the front porch, the other children and I would come through his backyard, and pillage his mangoes and oranges. Petty fruit burglary became a most rewarding game for us, and with age, we grew bolder and started breaking into backyards guarded by dogs or napping grandpas. We also developed a reputation, and eventually could no longer trick people with the old water trick, forcing us to rely ever more on stealth and athleticism. I look with pride to those years now, unlike some of my friends, I was never caught once.

Something I feel I must mention now was that my dad was one of the few people in Cuba that spoke openly against the government. In this aspect, my life was unusual from that of other Cuban children. I would like to add that *everyone* in Cuba talks trash about the government, most just do it quietly in the comfort of their own homes, where it is less likely to get them in trouble. My father however, was part of an opposition group, and was often involved in public demonstrations. Like hunger, police visits were a normal part of everyday life.

Because of his political activities, my father was often away from home. It was therefore my mother who was responsible for raising my brother and me. She was a schoolteacher, and for a time, the main breadwinner, since my dad was not allowed to work. He worked oddjobs whenever he found them. As he became more outspoken, however, she too lost her job, being considered a corrupting influence on her students because him. Life became more difficult once they both lacked a stable source of income. In Cuba, everyone has a rations card, which one presents in stores to obtain food, but the food one can get this way is not enough for proper nutrition, and nearly everyone spends a significant part of their salaries buying extra food illegally. Without steady incomes, only rarely did my parents have enough to do this and we relied on

gifts of food from relatives and friends to eat. Whenever we could, my brother and I would go out into the fields and steal some corn, or gather some peanuts to bring home. Our parents clearly did not approve of this, but on more than one occasion, the things we brought home were the only things we had to eat that night.

It may have been because I was a child, but despite the hunger, the poverty, and the police visits, I was happy then. In fact, I don't think I've ever felt happier than when my brother and I came home in the evening with a sack of food. I am grateful for the many doors life in the US has opened, had I stayed in Cuba, I would have had to choose between renouncing my father, or renouncing any hope of a professional future. I have resources now at my disposal that no one back home has ever had, it is a strange fate that I must now use them to recreate the same feelings I so easily felt when I was a child, and had nothing.